

The UK government must urgently overhaul its EU engagement strategy

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Britain has suffered a number of setbacks in Europe of late, from the passage of financial services regulation it opposed to the recent selection of the next European Commission President. [Anthony Salamone](#) argues that the UK's current approach to the European Union is part of the problem. He suggests the government must develop a new comprehensive EU strategy in order to ensure that Britain's interests are upheld and that the EU develops in a way it can accept.



Last Wednesday, Jean-Claude Juncker was elected President of the European Commission by the European Parliament. Several weeks before, Mr Juncker was nominated to the position by the European Council. The UK government strongly objected to both the candidate himself and the process by which he was chosen (and I have expressed my own [doubts](#) on the procedure). It is one of the first times such an important EU institutional decision was taken over the protestations of a large member state. In the dramatic 26-2 vote (which was called at Britain's insistence), the UK was only joined by Hungary on the losing side.

Despite any claims of valiantly defending the national interest, this outcome was a terrible defeat for Britain. It has left the country in an immensely unfavourable position just at the time when it most needs Europe to be flexible towards it. All is not yet lost, but the UK government must change the way it engages with the EU institutions and its fellow member states. For all the talk of being a singular and incomparable entity, the EU is in many ways just like any other international organisation. Diplomacy and good relations between partners are the keys to success. At the moment, the UK is not performing well at either of these in the European context.

Britain's inadequate EU engagement

The Juncker-affair illustrates the fundamental flaws in Britain's EU approach. First, the UK government waited far too long to engage. Britain opposed the leading candidate (Spitzenkandidaten) procedure from the start (autumn 2013), but Cameron didn't truly react until he began his ill-fated 'Stop Juncker' campaign after the European elections in May 2014. It was plain for all to see that the UK had suddenly woken up to the reality and was scrambling to respond.

Second, Britain appeared excessively confrontational. National leaders do not favour attempts at being strong-armed in a manner which the German Chancellor called contrary to '[the European spirit](#)'. It is questionable whether the prime minister actually did threaten that the UK might be closer to an EU exit if Juncker were nominated, but it nevertheless became the narrative across Europe. Countries which would have supported Britain's position were put off by its apparent hostile attitude to Brussels.

Third, the UK didn't quite seem to know what it was doing. It opposed the Spitzenkandidaten process and Juncker, but the lack of knowledge the government displayed of its partners and EU dynamics was striking. For instance, it didn't appear to realise that Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel would come under great pressure at home in Germany to support the leading candidate process and its 'winner', or that, push came to shove, the Netherlands and Sweden wouldn't rock the boat (no [pun](#) intended) and fall in line with the rest. This absence of applied expertise cost the UK its only chance at building a coalition.

UK interests at risk

The combination of tardiness, abrasiveness and ineptitude do not make for a good EU engagement policy. Britain can and must do better, but the latest evidence suggests the government isn't moving to that point. In his choice for Britain's next European Commissioner, Cameron has named Jonathan Hill, the outgoing Leader of the House of

Lords and by all accounts a competent politician – but someone who has near absolute zero recognition in Europe. It [has been suggested](#) that one of the UK's most successful Commissioners, Lord Cockfield, was similarly unknown at the time of his nomination for the post. However, today's EU is drastically different from that of the 1980s, not least for the fact that current and former prime ministers, foreign ministers and finance ministers are the calibre of appointees most EU countries now choose to represent them in the European Commission.

Britain is seeking a top economic role in the new Commission. The UK government is most interested in the internal market portfolio but a Tory already chairs the internal market committee in the European Parliament. This fact will surely not be lost on the other member states (including Germany), and they will likely not want the UK to take such a dominant presence in the internal market brief across the EU institutions. Further still, when compared against the senior politicians of European and international recognition also seeking the job (combined with Britain's botched attempt at derailing the Spitzenkandidaten), it's hard to see how Lord Hill has much of a chance, unless Juncker or the other member states decide to be magnanimous to Britain.

Other [economic portfolios](#), such as competition or trade, would also suit the government's current focus. One can hope that Lord Hill, provided that he is confirmed with the rest of the Commission by the European Parliament, will indeed do well at whatever role he eventually receives. Even so, it's evident this appointment was predominately based on national politics (avoiding a by-election and placating the Conservatives' Eurosceptic bloc) rather than achieving Britain's EU objectives. It's worth noting that the candidate pool didn't need to be near limited to sitting politicians in Westminster, as outsiders could have easily brought the skills and qualities needed. Perhaps it is telling of the current state of British politics that apparently no senior figure acceptable to the PM even wanted the job.

The consequences of Britain's present approach to the EU have been profound. The UK has been isolated and it has served as the centre for opposition and criticism. It has been made an easy scapegoat for the EU's own institutional shortcomings. As a result, Britain's interests have not been ensured in important EU decisions. This period of failure dates back a number of years, the fiscal compact incident being another memorable episode. No matter how it's spun at home, the 'veto' was not a success at all for the UK – it was a demonstration that, where the UK does not play its hand well, it can be isolated and everyone else will continue on without it.

A comprehensive EU strategy

What new strategy should the UK deploy then? Put simply, it could all be much better for Britain if it focused more on its diplomacy and relations with its partners. The UK is known for its global diplomatic role and extensive experience in international relations. It needs to bring this high level of applied experience (it is often available but not used) to maximise its interests in the EU. First, the UK government should focus on building sustainable coalitions with member states across policy areas in order to multiply its influence. In order to succeed in the EU, it must be seen to be engaged for the long term, paying attention to the details and willing to compromise now in exchange for support later.

Second, it must work cooperatively with the EU institutions. Since they are endowed with more powers than ever, it's essential to develop deep high-level relations with them, rather than leaving contact to technocrats and civil servants alone. Third, it needs to encourage a culture of broader public engagement with the EU and its member states. British business, civil society and citizenry are crucial parts of the UK's relations with the wider EU. These three pillars should form the basis of Britain's comprehensive EU strategy, which should be complemented by elements such as enhanced digital diplomacy and better success in getting more Britons to work for the EU.

In the rest of Europe, the perception is often that the UK government doesn't really care about the EU. Considering its importance to Britain, this is presumably not the case. However, the current portrayal of the UK only paying attention to Europe when it wants something is a powerful one. Both to ensure the country's interests and address this image problem, the government needs to implement the basics of this comprehensive EU strategy.

Even where the UK is hesitant in areas of EU policy direction, it must continue to fully engage with the other

member states and the EU institutions. In order to get anywhere in EU decision making, Britain must be focused on every issue all of the time. This is the only way to make friends and allies and to get deals done. It requires dedication from the highest levels of government – which is unquestionably time-consuming – but the results are much more likely to be positive.

National politicians will of course care about national politics first. However, having a truly constructive, rather than abrasive, relationship with EU partners is essential to getting anything done in Europe. The UK government has potential allies on many issues important to it, including on reforms to how the EU works. Britain, though, is not going to get much of anything if it continues the way it has. The UK must show itself to be a committed and engaged partner (whether or not Britain has an EU referendum) – that is the only way it can hope to ensure its interests in the EU. It just so happens that, if it does so, it's very likely to achieve a Europe it can live with.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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