

A 'Yes' vote in the Scottish referendum may well be a step closer to a Brexit

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/a-step-closer-to-brexit/

8/29/2014

The likelihood of a British exit from the EU seems to be increasing, fundamentally altering the importance of the independence referendum in Scotland, which happens to be the most pro-European area of the UK. [Peter Sutherland](#) comments on David Cameron's repeated missteps regarding the EU, writing that continued membership is going to be one of the major issues at stake in the 2015 general election.



The [referendum on Scottish independence](#), due on September 18, comes at a time of growing opposition in the United Kingdom to remaining in the European Union. This is significant, because Scotland is the strongest base of pro-European sentiment in the UK. For example, [a poll conducted earlier this year](#) determined that if a referendum on continued EU membership had been held in June in the UK as a whole, 47.1 per cent would have voted to leave, with 39.4 per cent voting to remain. But [a poll in February 2014](#) showed that in Scotland, 48.7 per cent would vote for the UK to remain in the EU, with 35.4 per cent voting to leave. Other polls have also shown a consistent and markedly more positive attitude toward the EU in Scotland than in England.

Of course, it is premature to draw any firm conclusions from these figures. The referendum on exiting the EU that prime minister David Cameron has proposed may not take place, regardless of the success (whatever that may mean) of his promised "renegotiation" of the terms of British membership. But, as a result of various ostensibly minor issues, the likelihood of a British exit seems to be increasing – which fundamentally alters the importance of the vote in Scotland.

For example, the proposal of the relatively unknown Jonathan Hill, the leader of the UK House of Lords, as the British member of the new European Commission headed by Jean-Claude Juncker was just the latest in a long series of British EU errors. Cameron's spokesmen said in July that, at his first meeting with the new Commission president, Cameron would seek a prestigious portfolio, such as the internal market, for Hill. Juncker's office coldly replied that important portfolios in the new Commission would go to major political figures, and that Juncker "[does not owe \[Cameron\] anything.](#)"

Given Cameron's opposition to Juncker's candidacy for the Commission presidency, the abuse to which Juncker has been subjected by the British press, and Hill's lack of centrality within British politics, Cameron may be justifiably nervous when Juncker announces his appointments to the new Commission. Juncker, after all, has many senior politicians to accommodate, and their approval by the European Parliament is no minor matter. And, though it was perhaps unsurprising that Cameron should be unenthusiastic about Juncker's candidacy, the vehemence of his opposition was extraordinary.

Cameron no doubt wished to reassure those in his Conservative Party who doubt his eurosceptic zeal. Even so, Cameron's [supposed remark](#) that the UK was more likely to leave the EU if Juncker's candidacy succeeded was strange and disquieting, not least because any renegotiation of the terms of British membership will be carried out primarily with other member states, not with the Commission. Cameron's bid to thwart Juncker's candidacy mirrored his unsuccessful attempt to prevent the adoption of the EU's [fiscal compact](#) in 2012. He overestimated German Chancellor Angela Merkel's willingness and ability to support the British position. Many influential Germans are reluctant to help Cameron in what they regard as his self-created European problem. They will not allow Merkel much latitude here, even if she seeks it.

If Cameron's advisers overestimated the support that they might have received from Merkel and others, they clearly underestimated the power and effectiveness of the European Parliament. For many months, the European

Parliament had made it clear that it had specific ideas about how it would exercise its new powers, granted by the [Treaty of Lisbon](#), over the Commission presidency. But the rapid post-election agreement among the Parliament's major political groups to support Juncker caught Cameron off guard.

Far from enhancing British influence, threats of withdrawal have undermined the Cameron government's credibility and influence within the EU, as colleagues have become disinclined to engage in significant compromises with a UK that may not be a member in two years. Traditionally, EU heads of state and governments try to help one another with their domestic political problems. But there is a growing sense in the European Council that Cameron is abusing this goodwill.

Thus, Cameron's claim that Juncker's election would make it more difficult to ensure the UK's continued EU membership risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. To present Juncker's candidacy as a matter of high political principle, with Cameron heroically but unsuccessfully standing alone against the dark forces of federalism and centralisation, could have only reinforced English feelings of alienation from Europe. That is less likely to be the case in Scotland.

If Cameron returns as prime minister after the general election in 2015, he will face an uphill battle in renegotiating the terms of British EU membership, owing to resistance not only from his European partners, but also from his own Conservative Party, which is close to advocating British withdrawal. Indeed, it is difficult to see how a re-elected Cameron could maintain the Conservative Party's unity without endorsing a "no" vote in the referendum on the outcome of his own renegotiation.

Britain's EU membership will be one of the major issues at stake in next year's election. It would be a tragedy if British voters cast their ballots without fully understanding the European implications of their choice. One thing, however, seems certain: If Scotland votes for independence in September, a referendum within the rump UK on continued EU membership would be even less likely to produce a victory for those who wish to remain.

Note: This article was originally published on [Project Syndicate](#) and is under copyright (Project Syndicate, 2014). It 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.

About the Author

Peter Sutherland is Chairman of the London School of Economics and Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for International Migration and Development. He is former Director General of the World Trade Organization, EU Commissioner for Competition, and Attorney General of Ireland.

