

The UK's main problem in influencing reform in Europe is that it is regarded as a semi-detached member

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A string of moves by the Tory party: withdrawal of British Conservative MEPs from the EPP-ED caucus, opposition to Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission president, demands to overturn freedom of movement, and refusal to pay Britain's recalculated dues, simply reinforces the impression that the British government is less and less interested in the EU and in working constructively within it, writes [Gordon McKechnie](#).



George Osborne appears to have negotiated a solution (for better or worse) to the European Union's demand for prompt payment of €2 billion. But is it really credible that the Prime Minister went to Brussels knowing nothing about a £1.7 billion invoice that was about to be posted through the UK's letterbox? The mechanisms by which EU dues were to be recalculated were known. So were the arcane statistical adjustments to Gross National Income that, once fed into the mechanism, gave rise to the bill.

HM Treasury has a number of teams, known as "spending teams", whose job is to shadow the financial comings and goings of the UK government's spending departments. They have been key to trying to keep the UK's deficit under control. Is there, one has to ask, a similar group of clever civil servants well versed in the ways and means of the European Union that would bring matters like an impending £1.7 billion payment to the attention of ministers? If there is not, or if there is such a unit but it failed to brief ministers in time, that would seem to be an institutional failure of the highest order. A quiet investigation is, no doubt, underway.

There is, however, a possible alternative story here. It is that ministers, and possibly even the Prime Minister himself, *did* know what was coming and for some Machiavellian reason decided to ignore the bombshell until it exploded. In this scenario it matters less to Cameron to be considered an incompetent buffoon in other European capitals than to be seen thumping his outraged fist on the table at yet another unacceptable demand by those unelected bogeymen of Brussels. His problem is that many a Rochester by-election voter swayed by Cameron's fist and rhetoric will see a vote for Messrs Reckless and Farage as a more appropriate response and a more certain route out of the EU and all its nefarious unpleasantness. That way lies a green and pleasant land whose people hold a pint of bitter in its collective hand and dream of an island reincarnated as some sort of latter-day Hong Kong – well, Hong Kong, that is, before China reassumed sovereignty and, of course, without so many Chinese.

Is this the time we should cut ourselves off from the European experiment? From one of the great trading blocs in a world where such blocs are becoming increasingly significant? The EU has made mistakes, of course. The euro remains a prominent and catastrophic mistake. Equally significant is the EU's failure to honour its own principle of subsidiarity – the concept that power should be exercised at as low a level as possible and certainly at a national level rather than a European level wherever that makes sense. Reforms, changes to the practice of subsidiarity and in many other areas, are indeed needed. The mood of the electorate across Europe at the elections earlier this year showed that the *status quo* is no longer tenable – something leaders across the European Union recognised, at least briefly in the immediate aftermath of that election.

How do you best achieve reforms? Is it more effective to seek reform through invective hurled over the walls by an angry (albeit possibly correct) outsider who does not seem to know what goes on within those walls? Or from inside the system using reasoned and well-informed criticism?

The UK's problem in influencing reform in Europe is that Britain is regarded as at best a semi-detached member of the club. Other club members find Britain increasingly difficult to take seriously. I think here of semi-detachment less

in terms of the legitimate opt-outs from Schengen or the euro, than in terms of the prevalent and growing British view of “Europe” as something alien, something that really has very little to do with us except in annoyingly negative ways, something like the undesirable neighbour on the other side of a party wall who loudly plays Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” when you are about to go to sleep. We are not really involved.

Only 4.8 per cent of European civil servants are British, compared to about 10 per cent from each of Italy and France. And it is getting worse: in 2011, 2.39 per cent of applicants for administrative posts were British when the country accounted for 12.38 per cent of the EU’s population. Perhaps it is because Brussels is too far away – 2 hours from St Pancras by train. Perhaps it is because an EU civil service pay package does not compete with the salary opportunities at home. Perhaps it is because Britain is a largely monoglot nation (and increasingly so as the teaching of foreign languages falls in UK schools) – though that does not seem to hinder Irish or Italians who come from countries almost as monolingual as the UK. More likely it is just a lack of interest or even a sense of distaste. After all, at what civilised London dinner party would you confess to being a European civil servant? It’s almost certainly worse than admitting to being an investment banker (and certainly worse paid).

In 2009, David Cameron withdrew British Conservative MEPs from the EPP-ED caucus, the main centre-right grouping in the European Parliament, condemning his party’s representatives there to sit on the fringes of policy and decision making. This year’s blustering on Europe – the ineffectual, last-minute opposition to Jean-Claude Juncker; the implausible demand to overturn the fundamental principle of the free movement of labour by Christmas; the sudden refusal to pay (by 1st December) Britain’s recalculated dues... All this simply reinforces the impression that this British government led by Cameron is less and less interested in the European Union and in working constructively within it. Cameron makes some valid points on European reform. They are points that should – and do – resonate elsewhere in Europe. Yet the manner of his interventions seems intended primarily to demonise the European Union in the eyes of the man on the Clacton omnibus and only secondarily, if at all, to win the argument.

The most important issue in May’s General Election, and throughout the next parliament, will be the UK’s membership of, and proper engagement within, the EU. It will be a debate as defining and as existential as Scotland’s recent independence referendum. And it could even indirectly lead, where that referendum failed, to the break-up of the United Kingdom if Scotland votes to stay in Europe and England votes to depart.

Today it is still unclear what you would get if there is a Conservative (or Conservative-dominated) government after the election. Cameron promises a renegotiation of terms followed by an in-out referendum within a defined time limit. If, however, the negotiating tactics to be deployed are the ones that have been recently on display there does not appear to be too much to hope for. EU reform is an on-going process to be achieved through diligent engagement over the long-term and through all the changing circumstances of life rather than with an irate fist and by a date certain.

UKIP is far clearer. Nigel Farage is straightforward in how he sees the EU’s workings. He is clear that he does not like what he sees. He does not think it capable of mending its ways. A UKIP government (even a UKIP minority government, supported on this issue by dissident Conservatives) would move quickly to exit. The terms of exit, with our European friends taking lessons from the Unionist campaign in the Scottish referendum, might, however, come as something of a shock.

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