

# Growing discontent within the European Union provides an opportunity for Cameron for reform

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Recent surveys suggest that Euroscepticism in Britain is most highly associated with those identifying as English. **Adam Evans** argues, however, that it is important to take a broader view of public attitudes to the EU. Declining levels of confidence in the institutions and policies of the Union and the repositioning of formerly enthusiastic integrationists like the Dutch and Germans appear to offer Cameron a unique opportunity to achieve significant political reform in the EU.



In the wake of the recent IPPR report; [England and its two unions: The anatomy of a nation and its discontents](#), it would be tempting to see Euroscepticism not as a peculiarly British trait, but as an English love affair. While a recent opinion poll has suggested that more Welsh voters would opt to leave (37%) rather than stay (29%) in the European Union were a referendum to be held tomorrow, the most fervent Euroscepticism does seem to be reserved to voters east of Offa's Dyke. Over 50% of respondents to the 2012 Future of England survey declared that they would vote to leave the EU if a referendum were held tomorrow. This is something that poses particularly significant constitutional questions for the Union, particularly when one considers the 2013 Ipsos Mori poll in Scotland which showed 53% of Scots would vote to stay in the EU (it is also worth acknowledging that the Welsh poll mentioned above recorded significant numbers of Don't Knows (14%) and voters who would not vote in a referendum (21%)).

Whilst Euroscepticism appears to have a positive relationship with English identity, diminishing in support among respondents with higher degrees of British identity (either exclusively or as a dual identity), it is important to take a broader view of public attitudes to the European Union at a time of significant crisis for the European project. Spending some time in the Netherlands has led me to realise that on the broader position of reforming the EU, Cameron and the UK government are not isolated.

On first glance, it might appear that this is not the case, the latest [Eurobarometer](#) (an EU wide survey of public opinion), for example, indicated that 58% of EU citizens disagreed with the idea that their respective country's future would be better outside of the European Union. This figure rises to an even more commanding degree of support in the Eurozone (63%) with 28% claiming that their countries would be better off outside. This is a startling figure given the well documented travails afflicting the Euro zone, particularly in the PIIGS (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain). The UK, in comparison to these figures, appears firmly on the sidelines and an outlier, with 54% (almost the mirror image of the EU average) agreeing that their country's future would be better outside the EU.

While it may, therefore, be difficult for many EU nations to conceive of a positive future outside the union, this should not lead us to believe that these nations and citizens are entirely content with how the EU works. Indeed, the very same Eurobarometer, as *The Guardian* has [also noted](#), witnessed levels of public confidence in the European Union at historic lows, even in heartlands such as Italy (where 53% tended to distrust the European Union) and Germany (59%), figures that add new potency to that age old issue of democratic legitimacy within the EU.

However, it is not just groundbreaking degrees of public distrust in the EU that can give reformist Conservative in the United Kingdom some hope of political reform. A recent announcement, that *The Economist* has usefully covered (see [here](#)), by the Dutch government, is of particular significance when one considers the Netherland's traditional place, alongside it's fellow Benelux nations, as an axis of pro-Europeanism. On the 21<sup>st</sup> June 2013 the Dutch government (a grand coalition consisting of the economically right wing Liberal Party, the VVD and a centre-left Labour Party) concluded a review of competencies along the lines that the UK government led by the foreign secretary, William Hague, are currently pursuing.

This review resulted in a declaration of fifty-four policy areas where the Netherlands should be supreme and Brussels should not interfere, alongside a list of competencies where integration would be “crucial.” However, what was of more significance for the UK government and the EU more broadly, was a statement by the Dutch foreign minister Frans Timmermans, that the “time of ‘ever closer union’ is, in every possible way, behind us.”

While this may be politically useful rhetoric in a nation where an increasing level of voters are expressing support not just for polling questions about discontent with the EU, but for those asking about secession from the union (according to a 2013 Gallup Europe poll, 39% of Dutch voters were in favour of leaving the EU), it is nevertheless a historically important repositioning that adds extra impetus to the reformist cause, with David Lidington, the Europe Minister in the UK coalition government, unsurprisingly quick off his feet in his enthusiastic welcome for the Dutch government’s proposals.

While it is important to note that the Dutch government is already a staunch ally for the UK; opposing the financial transaction tax, European control over political finance and harmonisation of taxation rates, Rutte (the VVD Prime Minister) and Timmermans’ intervention should not be underestimated. Alongside this increasingly Eurosceptic turn from the Dutch government, the German magazine, Der Spiegel, has recently highlighted the German Chancellor’s reformist approach to the EU as a marked difference to the more federalist yearnings of her Treasury Minister, Wolfgang Schauble.

Indeed, it is worth noting not only the Cameron-Merkel joint declaration in April this year that Europe “urgently needs” reform to increase competitiveness and flexibility, but a recent interview, again given to Der Spiegel, in which Merkel clearly set out her opposition to the idea of the European Commission President being directly elected and, more significantly for Cameron, her hostility to greater powers for the Commission and Parliament. An interview that Spiegel described as a “bow to the Eurosceptics in the CDU” and can be seen as a direct response to the challenge that a newly formed moderate Eurosceptic party, the AfD (Alternative for Germany) may pose to Merkel’s chances of retaining a majority in the Bundestag elections this year (a particularly acute problem due to the electoral collapse that the FDP have suffered since the 2009 Bundestagswahl).

Whilst exit, at present, may be an English obsession, declining levels of confidence in the institutions and policies of the European Union and the repositioning of formerly enthusiastic integrationists like the Dutch and Germans appear to offer Cameron a unique opportunity to achieve significant political reform in the EU, if he and his government can stay focused enough in the face of UKIP and his backbenchers to achieve it.

*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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