

Brexit debates to shake the Continent

On June 23 Britain will go to the polls and cast the vote on the referendum whether she should remain in the EU or leave it.

Since the referendum date was officially announced, numerous debates of very sound, lively and engaging nature have been displayed particularly in the Capital, on top of those organised by the mainstream media.

The voters are likely to choose to remain in the EU. Subsequently the Cameron administration will carry out a minor cabinet reshuffle, but the government will stay intact. This will mean Britain can keep hanging on to the back of the ever-moving EU bus whose driver does not know exactly where it is headed and that her position on the institutional bus will be kept largely unchanged for some years to come.

However, all these debates regarding the referendum are attracting enormous attention particularly in Europe. As a result, several EU member countries would launch referendum on issues which are specific to their individual national interests. This should inevitably decelerate the pace of the European integration. It might be the real objective the government wishes to achieve.

Silencing the party's internal opposition

The upcoming referendum follows a pledge by Prime Minister Cameron in January 2013 that 'if the Conservative Party were re-elected in the general election in May 2015, he will renegotiate Britain's EU membership and then put the resulting deal to a referendum by the end of 2017'.

Although Cameron could have postponed the referendum date till 2017, he decided the

time was right. He said that he reformed the EU and announced the date of the referendum on 20 February, the day after he returned from the 2-day EU Summit.

The EU has been suffering from years of stagnant economy, the Euro crisis, the Grexit crisis and so forth. Populism has been on the rise and its drive for further integration has substantially waned.

Even in Germany, the exemplary member of the EU, a Eurosceptic political party, AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), founded in 2013, seeks Germany's exit from the Euro or an orderly disintegration of the single currency. In Britain where Euroscepticism is deeply rooted, the UKIP (UK Independence Party) gained popularity and won a number of seats in the local election in 2013 and European parliament election in the following year. Tory's Eurosceptic members have also become more vocal. This led to the Prime Minister's pledge in order to silence them once and for all and to strengthen the party's unity.

Needless to say, Cameron's decision is based on the presupposition that Brussels would want the UK to stay in the EU and thus it would offer him room for re-negotiation, and that the voters would support the outcome.

The Prime Minister claims that he has won the negotiation with the EU but stopped short of his account. The opposition parties and those on the Leave camp are not really questioning what he actually achieved for the nation. The mainstream media are not raising the issue either. The reason why he hastily set the date could be that he knows

very well that he hardly brought back any substance. Apparently he feels that he has enough ammunition to win good support. The longer he delays, the more scrutinized his case. This looks like his tactic.

Downing Street decided to allow colleagues to speak freely of their opinions. This helps the government distinguish between friends and foes, but such information is probably in the know. Rather, making debates hotter and stimulating anti-Brussels interests in the other EU member states could be what this tactic is meant to instigate.

The Remain camp to prevail

The results of opinion polls show the yes/no vote has been neck and neck, but in a poll of polls compiled by the Financial Times on 25 May the support for the Remain camp increased to 46%, while the Leave camp's support languished at 41%.

Those who want Brexit passionately argue that Britain should take back national sovereignty, independence and democracy. The criticism, that the EU is fundamentally corrupt and that successive UK governments have blamed the EU for failings in their own policies, such as banking crises, immigration, deportation of terrorists to name a few, is quite understandable. Also, the argument, that an independent nation state should be able to negotiate its own trade, border and financial controls to best suit its citizens and long term needs, undeniably stands.

The government, on the other hand, has been running a 'fear' campaign, saying Brexit will cost each household £4,300 a year. This figure looks *conveniently substantial*, and the voters would not take it too seriously. Moreover, former MI5 and MI6 officials recently warned that Brexit will put the

country at risk by not sharing terrorists-related intelligence with the other EU members. They were probably indirectly instructed by Downing Street to release such comments but must have been flabbergasted. Without the intelligence link, Brussels and Paris will be more in trouble, not London!

The mainstream media are hardly criticising about such absurd propaganda and have no teeth. One should pay heed: when a government attempts to justify their policy in the name of national security, its real aim is to control people. The British government is no exception!

However, the Leave camp lacks an unmistakable leading political figure, and while they certainly raise truly important issues, they are rather abstract: they do not seem to be sufficiently persuasive, since they do not present any concrete and clear benefits of Brexit nor any disadvantages of the similar nature to suffer from staying in the EU.

Joergen Oerstroem Moeller, former Danish foreign minister, warns that people's emotion counts just as much as statistic/economic arguments. Denmark, like the UK where anti-EU sentiment is strong, held 4 referendums between 1992 and 2015, and the government proposal was rejected on 3 occasions, despite the initial strong support. The economic arguments the Cameron government adopts could be judged dodgy by the voters and backfire. Opinion polls are not reliable, he adds. In the end, better the devil you know: the voters will favour the status quo. However, a TV debate scheduled two days before the referendum may influence voters, and the pendulum could be swung to the other side. The Prime Minister will probably face very popular Boris Johnson,

the former London mayor. Thus the eventuality of Brexit remains a possibility. If Britain chooses to leave the EU, the currency, equity and bond markets could be substantially sent south in a blink of an eye. It may take down the Euro with it. Suddenly political uncertainty is likely to increase in Westminster, and Cameron may be forced to resign.

Paucity of major disasters

EU-related issues are often confused with a member country's domestic politics. France, for example, rejected the ratification of the EU Constitution in 2005. It was a reflection of the voters' apathy toward the then president Chirac.

In this sense, Cameron can afford to relax: although he lacks charisma and has been pushing unpopular austerity policies, he has committed no serious political errors nor made any critical verbal mistakes. Besides, the Parliamentary opposition parties are not attacking the government collectively.

Back in June 1975, the Wilson government was also faced with the Labour party's split when the Prime Minister launched a referendum on whether or not Britain should stay in the EEC. The Tory party was also divided, but its leader, Margaret Thatcher, ran her remain campaign, and British industry donated a vast amount of money and supported it. The result was an overwhelming yes vote of 67%!

The memories of the last two wars were still vivid among voters 41 years ago, and the Tory's catchphrase, 'To better lose a little sovereignty than a son or a daughter!' seemed to have significant impact on the voters' mind.

Of course, the present situation is far different from those days, but this historical fact may have encouraged Cameron to go for the gamble.

The City is worth defending

Prime Minister Abe recently visited the UK and reiterated his official message to his counterpart that Japan does not want Britain to leave the EU, stating at a press conference that more than a thousand Japanese companies invest in the UK and employ 14,000 workers.

What the government fears most, however, must be that the City loses its position as the leading financial centre in Europe to Frankfurt or Paris. Brexit is likely to undermine it, and the City wants to defend it at all cost.

The City is an independent administrative body and constantly engaged with its powerful lobbying. Its seat is physically secured next to the Speaker in the House of Commons for its messenger, Remembrancer, since the 16th century. Westminster duly takes the City seriously.

TheCityUK, which represents UK's financial industry, points out in its recent analysis, while disclaiming that it does not intend to influence voters' action, that the sector employs 2.2 million people, contributes to 11.8% of GDP and generates £72 bn of trade surplus which is larger than the combined surplus of all other industries.

But raising or emphasising the City's importance is not politically correct, particularly these days, and both it AND the media have been conspicuously quiet during the campaign. Lobbying should remain discreet to be effective, after all.

Debates to shake the Continent

Britain is not a founding member of the EEC nor a member of the Euro, and never will be. And yet, she has been vocal on the issues of the EU budget and understandably been non-committed to the Euro crisis. And Brussels, and France in particular, are fed up with relationship renegotiations with Britain which uses a referendum as a political weapon: she is not even sitting in the EU bus!

German elites who used to seek their country's interests only within the EU are now becoming more confident and self-assertive. Although they may envy free and lively debates on Brexit in the UK, they seem to feel that Britain's membership of the EU is no longer essential as a counter-balance against France.

Whereas Cameron claims a victory on the EU reform and assumes a win at the referendum, Britain's influence within the EU institutions is unlikely to be increased. The fact that her veto power is greatly diminished after the Single European Act became effective in 1987 and Qualified Majority Voting for policy decisions was introduced is a major factor which chipped its sovereignty not a little but significantly. Britain's marginalised position in the EU is undeniable. Britain's marginalised position in the EU was laid bare when Cameron single-handedly vetoed the EU's fiscal union treaty in December 2011. As Mr Wolfgang Kaden, a well-known journalist, points out on Spiegel Online, 'Britain was more of an observer than a contributor and it always *had* one eye on Washington.' (The writer italicised the two verbs)

Besides, while the Euro area's GDP is US\$13.41 trl, the UK's figure is only US\$2.989 trl. Also, her appeal that she is the

one who saved Europe from the Nazis has ceased to be marketable.

Yet, thanks to the US hegemony in the post-war era, the English language has 'conquered' Europe. All those hot, daily Brexit discussions have been reported throughout the world and stimulating debates on what sovereignty is, what democracy is, where national interests are, etc. in the rest of the EU member countries, among others. It is not quantifiable, but the enormity of Britain's quest or propaganda in English from London for her national interests should not be underestimated.

Information or intelligence is enhanced from where it is disseminated. Put it the other way around, those who just receive information or hardly propose anything worth discussing, will be taken lightly. The contrast between a country which always ventures out to new waters and sets out arguable agenda, and Japan which literally placed nothing new on the table at the latest G7 Summit, could not be more salient.

Even if Britain chooses to remain in the EU, even more so in the eventuality of Brexit, the rest of the EU is to launch various referenda on specific issues to pursue their own national interests.

Mr Bohuslav Sobotka, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, has rightly mentioned this risk.

In fact, the movement has already begun: at a recent referendum the Netherland rejected the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, Hungary is to hold one in autumn on the EU's migrant quota, and the Finland's parliament is about to debate its EU/Euro membership.

What one should bear in mind here is that a referendum is, first and foremost, a political show where those in power use tax payers' money to defeat oppositions, and consolidate their position and prolong their reign by running scare campaigns. The reason why the Cameron administration decided to launch the referendum is precisely because it knows that it does not have *overwhelming* support of the people.

Bound by the DNA?

Since the huge number of migrants flowed into Europe last year, every member of the EU has been facing serious social and financial problems. Brussels looks unable to find a solution which satisfies everyone. The Schengen Agreement has already been abolished, practically speaking.

This unexpected chaos is seriously undermining the unity of the EU, and presents Britain a very timely and convenient opportunity to exercise her traditional 'divide and rule' tactic.

The UK has been using and enjoying the special relationship with the US in the post-war era which enabled her to conduct rather cost-effective and smart diplomacies, but the American/dollar hegemony is now clearly on the decline. This is forcing London to look for a new role in the world, but she seems to have not come up with an enduring long-term strategy. The unknown of Donald Trump's policies must be a factor. The referendum should be seen in such a context.

The British establishment must be well aware of the risk that Brexit could isolate their country in the international community. The referendum looks like their political choice after having weighed the pragmatic pros and cons of Brexit.

The past speeches tell that Cameron is actually quite Eurosceptic. He could have felt the need to slow down the EU bus and to buy time for now. If he were her reserved secret agent, he would want to coolly place his order of his favourite drink at a Brussels' bar, saying 'shaken, not stirred!'.

Churchill said, 'We have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe but not of it. We are linked but not combined. We are interested and associated but not absorbed. If Britain must choose between Europe and the open sea, she must always choose the open sea'.

Should this were embedded in the pirates' DNA, the writer wonders what sort of long-term strategies are being conjured up in their minds as the centre of the power is beginning to shift to Eurasia.

June 1, 2016

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