

UK Prime Minister Cameron sets out demands for EU treaty reform

By Chris Marsden
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Prime Minister David Cameron's presentation to the European Union (EU) summit of a list of Britain's reforms served to demonstrate the underlying weakness of his divided government, despite securing a second term in May gifted to it by the Labour Party.

Coming in the midst of Thursday's bitter and acrimonious discussion on EU member states agreeing to take in a few thousand migrants each—and with Cameron exercising the UK “opt-out”—his brief presentation was dismissed by one official as a “commercial break.”

Cameron avoided any detailed presentation to the summit because he knew that this would only confirm the UK's isolation, the depth of opposition from many EU states and therefore exacerbate his domestic difficulties with his party's eurosceptic wing.

Afterwards he attempted to strike an authoritative pose, speaking to the media of launching a “process” three times in just four sentences before purposefully striding off.

He was immediately accused of offering only a “promissory note” after admitting there was no possibility of treaty changes reflecting his wish list prior to the promised in/out referendum on EU membership scheduled for next year.

In reality, Cameron has little or no chance of *ever* securing treaty changes and at best will be offered an extension of UK opt-outs.

His demands have generally met with sharp criticism or overt opposition. Even where there is a desire to help Cameron keep Britain in the EU—such as in Germany where Chancellor Angela Merkel has pledged to “go the extra mile” on his behalf—his insistence on treaty change rather than working within existing arrangements is seen as damaging political opportunism.

Cameron has outlined four demands: exempting the UK from the EU's commitment to “ever closer union” and strengthening the role of national parliaments; safeguarding the position of the UK and eight other non-eurozone states; clamping down on the right of EU migrants to draw state benefits; and ending “red tape” restrictions on business. He toured Europe seeking to drum up support, but generally won it only on questions relating to economic liberalisation—the pro-big business, pro-austerity course pursued throughout Europe and championed by Germany.

When the president of the European Council, Jean-Claude Juncker, was asked by the BBC whether he would agree to Cameron's demands, he replied by asking, “What does he want?”

He stressed that the demand to curb benefits and increasing the role of national parliaments “are matters for national parliaments” not affecting EU treaties.

Martin Schulz, president of the European Parliament, said, “Treaty change will, for sure, be a difficult item,” before asking, “Who is the audience of the prime minister? If it is the Tory group in the parliament we are facing a lot of problems.”

Donald Tusk, the Polish president of the European Council, is seen as a natural ally for Cameron on economic questions and through their mutual alliance with the United States. But he cannot countenance support for demands to curb free movement that would impact heavily on Poles. “There are some British concerns we should consider,” he said, “but only in a way which will be safe for all Europe.”

The most strident opposition to Cameron comes from France, with Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron denouncing what he called an “à la carte” approach to the EU.

“If you speak about treaty change, the answer is no. It

doesn't make sense," he told the BBC on the eve of the summit.

France would consider moves to "adapt the rules" on free-movement, and "Creating more flexibility and more simplicity for all member states. ... But starting to create more simplicity for one member state is just a dismantling."

The main impact of Cameron's initiative in Europe has, in fact, been to encourage Germany and France to proceed with their long desired "two speed" perspective for European integration. The governments of Merkel and President Francois Hollande are both committed to the formation of a core group of countries—signed up to a single currency, common taxation policies and greater political integration—with the UK relegated along with less prosperous eastern and southern European states to an associated trade bloc. Indeed one of the reasons for Germany's hardline stance towards Greece—up to and including forcing it out of the Eurozone—is that such a core could not be created with bankrupt Athens as a member.

The dominant sections of big business in the UK recognise that such a development could be disastrous for the UK, economically and politically, especially given the insistence by Washington that Britain is only useful as an ally within the EU and acting as a counterweight to Germany.

At home, the eurosceptic wing of the Tory Party has the support of the lobby group, Business for Britain, but this is funded by the *Daily Telegraph* and is a distinctly minority position.

The *Financial Times* quoted Sir Mike Rake, chairman of BT, president of the CBI employers' group and a member of the advisory council for Business for New Europe, responding that businesses "of all sizes and sectors" believe that EU membership is overwhelmingly in Britain's interests. "Of course the EU is far from perfect," he said. "However, making wildly unrealistic demands while threatening to leave is not the way to reach a workable agreement."

According to the *International Business Times*, Dr. Gregor Irwin, chief economist at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 2008 to 2013 and now chief economist at business strategy group Global Counsel, also warned, "If the UK leaves we will face years of uncertainty and acrimonious negotiation over Britain's future relationship with Europe. The effects

will be most profound in the UK, but felt by businesses and households everywhere."

In an extraordinary intervention Wednesday, immediately prior to the summit, the Queen chose a state visit to Germany to warn of the dangers of division in Europe. Speaking at the Bellevue Palace, home of Germany's President Joachim Gauck, she said: "In our lives, Mr. President, we have seen the worst but also the best of our continent. ... We know that division in Europe is dangerous and that we must guard against it in the West as well as in the East of our continent."

Gauck replied: "A united Europe, a strong European Union, represents stability, peace and freedom—for us all."

Despite this warning—evoking two world wars that tore Europe asunder—and Gauck's platitudes, the very next day saw Cameron embark on a course that could end in Brexit (British exit from the EU) and Greece facing the prospect of becoming the first state to be forced out of the EU.

The EU at all times acts as a political instrument for imposing austerity on the working class and as an economic power-bloc, serving primarily the interests of German and French imperialism. It is a bloc from which British imperialism, still the fourth largest economy in the world and one of Europe's larger military powers, faces a growing risk of marginalisation or even exclusion.

However this ends up, national antagonisms within Europe are everywhere becoming more acute, while the social polarisation between the corporate super-rich and the mass of working people worsens—together posing the very real prospect of the disintegration of the EU.

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