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# **IS BRITAIN LEAVING THE EU?**

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## Is Britain Leaving the EU ?

Andrew Geddes\*

Is Britain heading towards the EU exit? It seems that many in Britain hope so. It's probably fair to say that there those are in other member states that would not lament a British exit. But how did we get to this situation? Is Britain really going to leave the EU?

At first glance, exit seems unlikely. The leaders of the three main political parties all support membership, but, at the same time, none of them actually goes so far as to articulate a positive vision of Britain's EU role. There is no powerful, pro-EU voice in British politics.

Prime Minister Cameron is a eurosceptic and leads a eurosceptic party. His 'this far and no further' approach to the EU places Britain in the EU slow lane with a 'referendum lock' on further developments.

The atmosphere on the Conservative backbenches is febrile. Although they are probably wrong, some Conservative MPs think that Cameron would have won in 2010 if he had focused on Europe and immigration as key campaign themes. They want the Conservative Party to be much more vocal in its euroscepticism. Cameron thinks that this will erode not strengthen the Party's electoral support.

Some may recall the 1990s when the EU issue tore apart the Conservative Party. The key difference now is that the Conservatives are not divided on the EU. The main difference is of the degree of euroscepticism. A good number of Conservatives - possibly around 100 MPs- want to see Britain leave the EU. The more 'positive' vision of is of a substantial repatriation of powers in areas such as social policy and justice and home affairs.

It is this more 'positive' vision that reflects the Conservative stance in the coalition government with Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats. A thorough review of Britain's relations with the EU is currently being conducted to report in 2014. This will form the basis for a renegotiation with the renegotiated terms put to a referendum after the next general election, assuming that the Conservatives are still in government. Less clear is why other member states would accept a renegotiation driven by domestic political concerns in one member state. Assuming that some kind of renegotiation is possible, a Conservative government or coalition with a strong Conservative element elected in 2015 would hold a referendum in 2017.

Labour leader Ed Miliband has little to say on the EU. If past experience is anything to go by, he may well adopt an 'us too' approach to key EU issues if he fears being outflanked by the Conservatives. Although Miliband opposed as potentially destabilising Cameron's decision to have a referendum at some point, Labour may well end up mimicking the Conservative position as they did on the Euro the last time they fought a general election in opposition back in 1997.

In Labour's post-2010 defeat *mea culpa*, EU migration has been identified as a key failing of the Labour government between 1997 and 2010. Miliband has argued that the party got it wrong on EU migration. Europe was represented once again as a big part of the problem, not part of the solution.

The junior coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats are an avowedly pro-EU party but have been largely silent on this issue. They have courted enough unpopularity through their actions in government without risking total electoral meltdown through advocacy of a pro-EU stance.

Eurosceptics in the Conservative Party resent the coalition with the Lib Dems. Some think that Cameron should have formed a minority government and then fought a second general election in 2010 or early 2011. The problem with this line of thinking is that if Cameron couldn't win in May 2010 in the context of a deeply unpopular Labour government and a

dramatic economic crisis then it's unlikely that he would have done so a few months later. The British electoral system used to deliver single party governing majorities, but changes in the social and geographic basis of the electoral system now mean that it's extremely difficult for the Conservatives – a southern English party - to form a government on its own.

If there is an exit route from the EU then it is via a referendum. In a future referendum all three main political parties will argue for continued membership, although many in the Conservative Party will align with the UK Independence Party and call for exit. UKIP is now a real force in British politics led by the media savvy and self-consciously politically incorrect MEP, Nigel Farage. The key issue for UKIP voters is their opposition to what they see as mass immigration. This combines with a strident opposition to the EU.

Some Conservatives argue that the Party must do a deal with UKIP, but it is highly unlikely that Cameron will do so. In 2006 he referred to them as 'fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists, mostly'. It's fair to say that UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, is not a huge admirer of David Cameron either.

There is little to suggest that a move to populist right-wing positions on Europe and immigration will deliver a Conservative majority in 2015. The evidence points in the other direction.

If the old rules applied, a cross-party consensus would seem to be a powerful basis for a 'yes' vote to British membership. But do the old rules still apply? British people are eurosceptic and also far less willing to take their cues from their political leaders. Public debate about the EU is overwhelmingly negative.

More profoundly, the chickens may be coming home to roost. Britain's choice for Europe was always conditional and defensive. The EU could in the past be represented as a guarantor of future prosperity. In crisis wracked Europe this is now a difficult case to make.

The eurosceptics seem to have all the best tunes. There is no powerful countervailing pro-EU voice in British politics. Without such a voice, there is now more chance than at any

other point in the 40 years of British membership that the British people would dance to the eurosceptic tune and vote in a referendum to leave the EU.

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