

# No Europe, thanks, we're British

The relationship between the United Kingdom and Europe has always been fraught. As with all long marriages, there are bound to be rough patches and responsibility has to be shared: through some may have put more effort and shown more patience in attempting to consolidate the relationship. But there comes a time...

by Giuseppe  
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**D**oes the Europe of our dreams also speak English? Maybe the most honest answer you'll get from the continental elites is "Yes, we'd all love to speak English, but without the British!"

Let's try to understand the reasons for this widespread anti-British sentiment and set a few facts straight in the process. Or perhaps we should analyse the historical wariness of the British towards the European Union. Ralf Dahrendorf once explained to me that while we continentals were busy trying to make Europe work, the most Europhile of the English were struggling to explain the advantages of EU membership to their fellow countrymen. Hardly the same approach.

Tony Blair may have lost his chance to make the history books when, nearing the end of his term, he couldn't find the resolve or the political mettle to ferry his country into the euro, a choice he personally supported. This was perhaps the zenith of the troubled EU-UK relationship, which has been complicated since day one, when the UK joined the European community on 22 January 1972.

Symbolically, 41 years later to the day, Conservative Party leader and British Prime Min-

ister David Cameron announced that if Europe should continue down a path that is not in the interests of the United Kingdom, he will hold a referendum to decide whether the country should stay in the EU or not after the general election in 2015.

No surprise then when on 2 March 2012 the UK was one of only two countries (along with the Czech Republic) to refuse to sign the binding EU-wide Fiscal Compact, containing the so-called 'golden rules' to balancing national budgets.

Cameron's strategic announcement, perhaps more for the benefit of his electorate at home, does confirm two things. The first is that the current British leadership is pretty meek and incapable of addressing the UK's current needs and the genuine problems it is facing.

If public and private debt are combined, the United Kingdom is one of the most indebted countries in the world. Its overall debt amount to 287% of its GDP, compared with 247% in Italy and a euro zone average of 253%. Britain has the second highest deficit (in relation to its GDP) in Europe: -6.6%, compared with France's -4.5%, the euro zone figure of -3.4% and -2.8% in Italy. Unlike Greece, Portugal and Spain, Britain's debt has shown a worrying tendency to grow. Not even the most pessimistic euro-sceptic would deny that the UK is a major beneficiary of European integration and its single currency: where would the City of London have found a new lease of life without the opportunity to fund economic integration on the continent, thus maintaining its status as the EU's key financial centre?

The second confirmation we glean from the Tory leader's speech is that over the last 20 years, the only European leader who has managed to understand the value of his own leadership is Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. By dragging an entire country along with him – and ignoring opinion polls – Erdogan has achieved much: he has forced his



David Cameron and Angela Merkel at the international meeting on *Learning from each other: New possibilities in the relationship between citizen and state* held in Berlin.

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country to modernise and has imposed some tough decisions.

Leaders in other European countries have not achieved anything similar. Silvio Berlusconi's policies, those of Nicolas Sarkozy and Jose Zapatero, have always played to the gut instincts of public opinion, relinquishing the idea of governing it. Cameron is no exception: it is clear his first priority is to please the English euro-sceptics, in a clumsy attempt at election campaigning for the 2015 vote.

International reaction to his speech has been unanimous. "The European Union wants Great Britain to stay in Europe", was the response from European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, while the United States – through Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Philip Gordon (in London at the time) and soon thereafter through a statement from Barak Obama himself – made it quite clear

that Britain should stay in the EU. Above and beyond these statements, Europe is currently in the midst of a crucial stage of its development. Now is the time to draft its future economic integration and political union. It must set up a banking union within a year while taking quick steps towards a more substantial community budget and a more unified economic policy (the 'Van Rompuy agenda'). Europe would clearly be incomplete without the British. But at such a delicate stage of the integration process no one can afford the luxury of holding back on a federated Europe, if it wants to hold on to a leading role in shaping future history.

The British can wonder about the future of Europe, but should be "very carefully" in doing so, as Cameron himself has stressed, "because it would be a one way ticket, not a return!". **E**