David Cameron is not a visionary, he is an illusionist

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Prime Minister David Cameron is fond of saying that he sees Britain's future in a reformed EU. He postures as a visionary who knows what is best for Europe and for Britain. Hence, his proposal to reform the EU so that it can 'meet the challenges of the twenty-first century' and be fit for continued UK membership. Commentators have already begun to pore over his latest speech at Chatham House on 10 November 2015. Their focus is primarily on tactics and content, which I briefly summarise here.

In relation to tactics, Cameron is stuck in a double bind. He argues that in its present form the European Union is 'too bureaucratic and too undemocratic' and needs to be reformed. He also knows that Brexit is undesirable from every conceivable angle bar the nationalist one to which he does not himself subscribe. The way out is to proclaim EU reform. When it comes to the details of institutional and organisational reform, however, Cameron's speeches, from the Bloomberg speech in January 2013 to his Chatham House speech on 10 November 2015, are silent. Cameron creates the illusion of European reform when his own political ambition is limited to negotiating a 'better deal' with the EU before the promised In/Out referendum by the end of 2017.

But even Cameron's simplified reform project creates a tactical dilemma. If he demands too much from the EU, he risks being brushed off in Brussels. However, if his demands are too trivial, he will be accused of having missed a golden opportunity to bring about fundamental change. Both situations spell trouble with the Europhobes. Damned either way, Cameron cannot win as there is nothing he can do to placate the disgruntled voices on his backbenches. There is an unbridgeable gulf between the demands of 50 rebel Tory MPs ('Brexit') and the practicalities of change in a Union with 27 other Member States.

In his Chatham House speech and letter to the President of the European Council Cameron has now set out four objectives that will frame the UK's renegotiations. (The implications of these objectives from the perspective of the EU are analysed in more detail by Kenneth Armstrong). The demands are not driven by what is needed, but by what he thinks he might attain. One only has to think of the sovereign debt crisis or the refugee and migration crisis on which no proposals or solutions from Cameron are forthcoming. Instead, the focus is on comparatively insignificant issues that affect the UK. This explains the largely 'open-minded' response by most European leaders after the speech. Cameron's demands deal with his politics of the present and come at little direct cost to the individual Member States. For the most part, Cameron's speech and letter continue the themes of special deals, opt-outs, separate protocols in the name of flexibility that have characterised the European landscape since the Maastricht Treaty, and from which the UK has been the chief beneficiary.

Two examples will highlight Cameron's erratic negotiating position. On the one hand, Cameron wants to increase competitiveness and cut 'red tape' which hardly raises eyebrows in Brussels or elsewhere. Commission President Juncker will reflect that it already features as part of the European Commission's Work Programme 2016 and the Better Regulation Package. It should also be remembered that, according to the OECD, the UK's product markets are already the second least regulated in the OECD, and its labour markets resemble the US and Commonwealth markets more than continental markets.

Far more blatant is Cameron's attempt at cherry-picking the four substantive EU freedoms. With one hand, Cameron wants to increase competitiveness by *opening up* the single market for capital, goods, and services. With the other, he wants to *close down* the

single market for workers by placing caps on migration and restricting access to in-work benefits, such as tax credits. Placing 'profits before people' in this way is an area where the EU will be far less sympathetic. It is one thing under the existing treaty regime to cut benefits for EU nationals who are not employed. It is quite another to treat UK and EU workers differently in relation to in-work benefits, such as tax credits and housing allowance, which is one of Cameron's stated aims. That position, expounded in more detail by Floris de Witte, goes against the letter and the spirit of the Treaty. How exactly Treaty change would make the EU less bureaucratic and more democratic in this context is anyone's guess.

These two central demands reveal how 'disappointingly unambitious' (Lord Lawson) Cameron's objectives are. Actually, they are worse than that. The combination of an In/Out referendum, the possibility of Brexit, and the current renegotiation proposals plays into the hands of far-right politicians like Marine Le Pen, who draws inspiration from Cameron 'doing in the UK what I want to do for France'. By not reforming the EU from the centre, and by reaching for low-hanging fruit in the renegotiating process, Cameron marginalises the UK still further from the EU, creating an overall weaker EU.

More worryingly still, Cameron's strategy displays no awareness of the law of unintended consequences. To be sure, his ideas of 'what is best for Britain' might not be shared across the EU. But are his ideas even shared across the countries making up the UK? The unity of the United Kingdom is not guaranteed as long as the Scottish Nationalists are waiting for a hard and fast reason to hold a second independence referendum. Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon anticipates that the UK withdrawing from the EU will give rise to 'unstoppable' public demand for Scottish independence. In trying to get a better deal on EU membership, Cameron may inadvertently take the UK out of the EU and Scotland out of the UK.

Cameron is a leader in Europe who struggles to see beyond his own borders. His speech does not envision 'the case for EU reform'; it labours under that illusion. His proposals do not reflect the high politics of a statesman, but the posturing of a politician without courage or conviction. Setting the bar low for the negotiations will allow Cameron to claim some success. But the stakes couldn't be higher: the future of both the European Union and the United Kingdom lie in the balance. Cameron has not given an ounce of thought to either.

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