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## What should Labour do about an EU referendum?

RICHARD ROSE - 04 SEPTEMBER 2013



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**For most social democratic parties the big challenge is to push the European Union to give greater priority to economic growth and a lesser priority to austerity policies. Membership in the European Union, including the eurozone, is taken as a given. The British Labour Party faces a different set of challenges**

To date the Labour Party's position about an EU referendum has been super-cautious: it is hiding. The first vote on the early July Tory private member's bill to hold an in/out referendum carried [304 to 0](#), because Labour MPs stayed away. Although such evasiveness is understandable, it is unsustainable. British politics will keep the issue on the boil.

Since the Labour Party's acceptance of EU membership is pragmatic rather than ideological, it needs to be pragmatic and confront the national debate that has been started by its opponents. In order to fight for its position, the party must first define what that position is rather than let anti-EU Tories define the debate.

In the European Parliament (EP) election next May, Labour will not be competing for votes with a pro-austerity Conservative government. Instead, it will be competing for first place with the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). In the 2009 EP election, [UKIP finished ahead of Labour](#). UKIP has a clear position: it wants a referendum on British membership and favours withdrawal. The media will therefore keep asking Ed Miliband: What does Labour want?

There are three answers that Labour can give. The first choice, hiding, is not possible in a European Parliament campaign. Giving an evasive answer appears blustering at best and discourages both pro and anti-EU voters.

First, rejecting an EU referendum can be justified by appealing to the traditional theory of representative government, in which Parliament not the people makes the biggest decisions. However, this is inconsistent with Tony Blair's pledge to [hold EU referendums on major issues](#) and with Ed Miliband's [proposal to stop trade union leaders casting votes](#) because they do not necessarily represent their individual members.

Second, Labour MPs should not vote for the bill now before the Commons because it is deficient in two critical respects. Both its timetable and the question proposed are rigid; they fail to take into account uncertainties about what the EU will be like in a few year's time. The Stability Pact threatens Brussels with the problem of what to do about member states that are unable to meet the EU's unrealistic deficit targets. It is also unclear how far David Cameron will go in

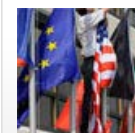
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appeasing his anti-EU MPs before the next British election.

For Labour to oppose an EU referendum on principle would enable the Conservatives to claim that while they trusted the people Labour did not. Reasoned amendments to the current Commons bill can stake out a sustainable Labour position. They can also build bridges with the Liberal Democrats, who have refused to allow the anti-EU bill to become a government measure. If reasoned amendments are defeated by votes of Conservative MPs that would allow Labour to adopt a policy of reasoned abstention from a vote on the current proposal and hope that parliamentary procedure will prevent its adoption before the Parliament ends. Whether the amendments are adopted is less important than the need for Labour to establish a robust position and to do so promptly.

One amendment should propose that instead of requiring a referendum by December, 2017, it should be held during the life of the next fixed-term Parliament, that is, by 2020. The EU reforms that the next British government seeks to negotiate would take time to realise, because EU procedures are slow-moving and require approval by a consensus of member states. Labour can argue that it is in a better position to achieve a consensus than a Conservative government that has no sympathy in Brussels. In the meantime, if an EU decision transferred powers from the UK to Brussels, then the 2011 EU Act would trigger a UK referendum about expanding the EU's influence, a much lesser source of destabilization than withdrawal.

Reform is a broad term embracing measures that would strengthen the EU and those that would repatriate powers to the UK. This mantra is endorsed by an all-party group including two government ministers, Ken Clarke and Danny Alexander, as well as Lord Mandelson. In different ways, this group and David Cameron sometimes appear to endorse a 'less Europe' stance, even though they differ about what the minimum commitment should be.

The bill's proposed referendum question, 'Should the UK be a member of the European Union?', raises a clear issue of principle. The sponsors want out whatever the costs. A reasoned amendment could propose that no later than 2019 the government would lay before Parliament the specific wording of an EU referendum question, reflecting the conditions that then obtained. This wording would split the current Tory alliance of MPs who are anti-EU on principle and those wanting to downsize Britain's commitment. Like the Better Together campaign encouraging Scots to vote against withdrawal from the European Union, EU supporters could follow a [Hilaire Belloc](#) strategy of campaigning with the slogan, 'Keep ahold of Nurse, for fear of finding something worse'.

The question initially proposed by David Cameron, 'Should Britain remain an EU member?', focusses on the status quo. For Labour to endorse this wording now would spotlight how embarrassingly weak the prime minister has become. He would face the dilemma of approving an amendment consistent with his stated position or appeasing his UKIP wing by endorsing an unconditional in/out wording.

British politicians who are ideologically committed to British membership in the European Union with or without popular commitment may resist any form of referendum because it would put British membership at risk. The implications of such a position are either elitist or defeatist, depending on whether the fear is that the people cannot be trusted to express an opinion on a major constitutional issue or that the mass of the British people are irretrievably committed to leaving the EU at all costs. Such pessimism is inconsistent with the experience of other European countries. While every democratic referendum shows that citizens are divided about the issue on

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the ballot, a big majority of national referendums on EU issues are approved. Losers have a choice of giving their consent or marginalizing themselves by being unwilling to accept a popular verdict.

Whether there is a referendum on the EU or not, all British party leaders face a larger issue than continental social democratic parties. A big majority are in smaller European democracies for which Europe is the only multi-national institution in which they have a chance for their voice to be heard, thanks to EU rules favouring consensus between small and large states. By contrast, British prime ministers from Winston Churchill to Tony Blair have envisioned Britain punching above its weight in Washington and in the Commonwealth as well as in Brussels. However, trying to punch above your weight is a sure recipe for being sidelined or flattened. The real need for the next British Prime Minister is to abandon such a three-way swivel-eyed illusion and give a realistic response to the challenge that a former American secretary of state posed in 1962:

**Britain has lost an Empire and has yet to find a role.**

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This is a contribution to Policy Network's work on **The politics of European integration.**

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