

SHOULD BRITAIN BE MORE DEMOCRATIC THAN SWITZERLAND?

Nicola Sturgeon's demand for a strong voice for Scotland in the decision about whether the UK remains a member of the European Union would make the British government more democratic than Switzerland as well as the EU itself, declares Professor Richard Rose of the University of Strathclyde Glasgow. He is an international expert on referendums and holds a grant from the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) to contribute evidence to the EU referendum debate.

At the forthcoming referendum on EU membership, the Scottish government wants voters in all nations of the UK to approve withdrawal from the EU before this can happen. In the leading country for referendums, Switzerland, a constitutional referendum requires a double majority but not unanimous approval of all its federal cantons. A constitutional change is approved if a majority of cantons and a majority of Swiss voters agree. "Giving every partner to an agreement the right to veto agreement applies to amending European Union treaties but not to constitutional amendments in normal democracies", notes Professor Rose.

At the Dublin summit of the British-Irish Council summit today, Scotland's first minister is also asking for a formal forum to be established to discuss the British government's proposals for renegotiating terms of EU membership before a referendum is held. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would participate along with a representative of the United Kingdom government.

The proposal to discuss European affairs internally before negotiating with Brussels respects the EU rule that it only negotiates with a single representative of each member state, whether the UK or a federal state such as Belgium. On issues that are not of constitutional importance devolved governments can and do consult with the UK's representative in Brussels before it enters negotiations with other European states.

"The referendum deliberations are different, because constitutional change is a power reserved to UK institutions and not devolved", explains Professor Rose. Moreover, the commitment of the Scottish National Party first ministers to the EU is opposed to the qualified endorsement that the Conservative government has given UK membership. Downing Street's current strategy is not to propose clear demands for EU change in order to avoid the political embarrassment of having its demands rejected. "As long as it pursues this strategy there is nothing it can discuss in with other parts of UK government", notes Professor Rose.

The Economic and Social Research Council has funded Professor Richard Rose to produce evidence on Choices for a Referendum Act. It is part of its Initiative on the UK and a Changing Europe.