

Humble pie for Cameron's dinner in Brussels



David Cameron has been promising Conservative eurosceptics red meat, that is, the repatriation of important powers to Britain. The menu for David Cameron's pre-Christmas meeting in Brussels with the European Council will not feature rosbif anglais but humble pie. When told why his four demands for returning powers to Britain are off the menu, he will have to confess not having done his homework before writing his letter to Santa Claus.

Any standard undergraduate textbook about how the European Union works would have told him that the way to get something to suit your appetite at an EU meeting is by agreeing a consensus with 27 other national governments with different tastes for European integration.

Although a Council meeting offers a big menu of potential benefits, but it is not a free lunch. Every government has to pay something in return for what it gets. A consensus is arrived at by all the participants finding something palatable in a group lunch but not everything to its taste. Those who do not like the menu can go elsewhere to eat alone, but not rewrite the group's menu.

Initially, the prime minister thought he could get the red meat that Eurosceptics demand by having meals a deux with individual heads of national governments. However, British negotiators sitting at a table with their EU counterparts have been receiving textbook lessons about what is off the menu. For example, as the [European Scrutiny Committee](#) pointed out on Tuesday, British demands requiring a treaty change could not be met until years after the 2017 deadline for a British referendum on EU membership.

The chief dish on the menu for the European Council meeting on Thursday and Friday is unpalatable but essential: dealing with the hundreds of thousands of immigrants and asylum-seekers entering Europe from outside the European Union this year and the terrorists already within the EU. Hors d'oeuvres include what to do about the potential threat to the continent's security from Russia's covert war in Ukraine and the threat of eurozone member state refusing the dish of budget cuts served up by the [European Commission](#) under new eurozone rules.

The prime minister's desires will be discussed but not decided this week. Nor will he press for a firm decision at the weekend, for it would almost certainly be public rejection. His desire for a decision at the February or March meeting could be met by making low-calorie demands or even accepting a platter of vegetarian sausages and hamburgers.

Whether Tory MPs with doubts about Europe will accept this as meat is doubtful. What is certain is that uncompromising Tory MPs will not be fooled and seek to satisfy their taste for red meat by getting their teeth into the prime minister when the House of Commons meets in January.

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