

Interview with MEP Andrew Duff (ALDE, UK)

“There will have to be a referendum in Britain”

By Ophélie Spanneut | Tuesday 08 January 2013

David Cameron is supposed to give a speech in the middle of January on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the UK's entry in the EU. The most fervent Eurosceptics are pushing him to take a firm stand on the UK's place in the EU and to give Brits the choice. Meanwhile, Cameron has said that it would not be in the interest of the UK to leave the EU since the country would have to obey the rules of the single market without having any say about them. Several prominent EU movers and shakers were irritated by this attitude. Europolitics asked Andrew Duff (ALDE, UK) for his take on his country's place in a Union, which he wants to federalise further.

What do you expect from Cameron's upcoming speech?

He will have to try to placate his own party but his own party is extremely nationalistic and he himself is a genuine Eurosceptic. He thinks, I suppose, that it will be a sort of common market plus. It's not a question of having less of the current EU because the current form isn't going to survive the economic crisis. If we can salvage the project, the Union that will come out of the crisis is going to be substantially and qualitatively different from the present EU and it is clearly going to be distinctly a lot more federal so the choice for the Brits, and indeed for everyone else, is: are you part of the federal core? And if you're not part of the federal core, what kind of relationship do you want and what is going to be acceptable to the federal core?

Do you believe that is a question that will be put to referendum?

Yes, because there is going to be a treaty process, a convention, which will open in spring 2015 and it will have to draft a federal treaty and the Brits will be part of that process. And at the conclusion of that negotiation, there will be referendum in Great Britain. And if the Brits say 'no' in a referendum – which they will, probably – they will be blocking the treaty for everyone else. [...] Cameron is going to say, I'm certain, that there is not going to be a referendum now. But there will have to be one at the end of the treaty amendment process.

Are these manoeuvres a strategy to reinforce his position with European partners?

It isn't an idle threat. There will have to be a referendum in Britain.

You suggested an associate member status for the UK...

No, I said that we ought to include, for several reasons, in the treaty amendments a different status – a class of associate membership. And it isn't only for possible British reasons. But for Turkey, Serbia, Norway... they can all have different reasons for opting out. So it would be an option for the Brits. And I hope they don't take it. Because I want the Brits to be in the federal core. But you have to include an option for them not to be in the federal core. Not also to be on the outside of the Union completely. So if you like it's a safety valve. I think if that option is excluded then the only option is to be either in the federal core or out completely and if the Brits have that choice they will be out completely.

The Tory party mainly criticises EU social and working legislations but on the contrary it's a sector where harmonisation is quite weak.

Clearly the single market has got social and labour law consequences. And we're not in any sense imposing anything on the UK anyway because they are part of the legislative process of the EU.

Euroscepticism no longer only exists in the confines of the Tory party, Labour is making an increasing number of demands relative to the contribution to the EU budget. What can the Lib Dems, who are traditionally more pro-European, do?

I think nothing, I think we are trapped. The Lib Dem ministers are trapped by the Tories. It's very difficult.

You asked to tie the 2014 elections to the future of Europe by kicking off a Constitutional Convention. Concretely, what are you calling for?

The federalists are going to publish a draft treaty in the course of 2013, probably in June. That will be a provocation to the political parties and to the institutions. I mean the Commission is not apparently intent to publish its own proposals before the spring of next year, 2014. Which is too late to influence the whole campaign, the elections. And the prime ministers and the European Council decided to put off any discussions of these matters until December 2014. And of course we understand that there's the Bundestag elections in September of this year, so it makes it a problem for Merkel to comment on this. But we can't continually postpone the politics of the EU or suspend the politics of the EU just because there's a national parliamentary election.

What will the ALDE do?

We have to get our candidates in place by the autumn of this year because the purpose of this change is to deepen the quality and substance of the electoral campaign for the European Parliament so we've got to get ourselves organised in advance.

Aren't you worried that the institution roles will be decided by a global agreement between the member states?

In the end there will have to be an agreement of course but the Parliament and the political parties, if the political parties can agree, is in a far more powerful position than we were before. We have to make the most of this opportunity.