



Transcript of audio recording on the subject of EU reform

First I'll start with two things that we won't do.

We won't go down the road that Prime Minister Cameron is proposing to do should he win the next general election, which in my view is two rounds of blackmail. The first round of blackmail: he wants to say to other EU countries, 'Change the EU in this way and that way, or else we're off' — seeking changes that they would probably not wish to concede if he weren't actually threatening them in that way.

Then after that, he will turn round to the British people and say, 'You have a choice between this version of Europe' — maybe what we have now minus the social chapter, or a few other opt-outs, or whatever — 'or no Europe!'. And at that point he'll say, of course, 'No Europe, leaving Europe, would be an economic catastrophe. You'd better vote for what I've negotiated'. And the choice will be between Cameron's Europe or no Europe. The status quo won't be on the ballot paper. A different set of reforms won't be on the ballot paper. It's a way for him to try and get endorsement — or it would be, if he were to be in that position — of what his version of Europe is.

The second thing we're not doing is proposing a referendum. A referendum now, when there's no treaty changes on the table — just 'Should we stay in the European Union?' — seems to us to be a distraction from the real issues facing this country. We don't suddenly out of the blue have referenda on our membership of NATO, the UN, the OECD or anything else that we belong to. On the contrary, if we were to promise that now, it would mean a referendum was a racing certainty in the coming years, and that may well damage inward investment as we speak — as we've heard, by the way, from a number of companies already on the fringe of this conference.

And if you promise a referendum, you have to deliver it. So the first year or two of a Labour government, whatever else you want to do, you can put on hold. You have to have all hands on deck. We've seen from Scotland how you can win referendums, yes, but you need all hands on deck to do so. Everything else is on hold for two years. And God help you if you lose it! Because then you spend the rest of your term of office negotiating exit from the EU, and simultaneously trying to negotiate new trade agreements with virtually every other country in the world, to replace the ones you currently have via the EU; and negotiating just as little Britain, by itself, without the clout of the EU behind you. I don't think the Labour party wants that to be its task in government. We have other, better things to do.

But among those things will, of course, be looking at reforms to the European Union. We've got the outline of a few headlines; we will work more on it in the run-up to the general election, so what I'm saying now is my view of what those reforms should be.

First, I think it should focus on policy change, not treaty change. Treaty change is difficult: you need unanimity of every other national government, followed by national ratification in every other country. Nor is it necessary: the treaties offer considerable flexibilities now, and many safeguards (which were negotiated during the last Labour government, by the way) to allay people's fears that we are creating some sort of centralised superstate. So I think the focus should be on policy change — policies that could be improved and changed.

It's also not a one-off, that you can define what you want to achieve in, say, 2015, negotiate it all in 2016, and have it approved some way in 2017, which is what the government is proposing for its ideas. Reform is actually a non-stop in the EU. That's what we do, day in, day out at European level. It's 28 interdependent countries negotiating together to solve common problems, to look at the common rules for the common market and adjust them. Most EU legislation nowadays is not legislating in new fields, it's amending, adjusting, or even repealing existing EU legislation. Gone are the years when the EU moves into new policy areas. It's about managing the existing competences, and day in, day out, year after year, that's what we do. So reform is a process, not an event.

What ideas could we do? Well, obviously, we want to (as well) deepen the single market in energy, in digital etc, but not create a race to the bottom. A common market does need some common rules to function properly, and to protect the environment, consumers, workers. So we would go for that deepening, but not a sort of deregulation that would create a race to the bottom.

Yes, we want to revise the EU budget. Revising doesn't necessarily mean simply cutting, but shifting the pattern of expenditure, to areas that focus on growth, and to areas where spending at EU level can save you money at national level, through economies of scale, avoiding duplication, and so on — such as on research programmes.

Further reform of the CAP. It's been reformed considerably, but the current system of linking farm payments to the size of farms, with no cap on that, means very large farm owners, land owners, get subsidy simply for owning the land, in some cases.

Trade. Trade deals with other countries afford huge opportunities. The TTIP is the most controversial one at the moment. We are for TTIP, but we are against some of the ideas that have been proposed to be part of it, which give cause to concern. I don't think some of those are very likely in the end to be in it, actually, but we need to be aware of the potential flies in the ointment there.

But many reforms — and I could go through a long list, but I'm sure we're running out of time — I'll just point out that some reforms can be delivered at national level. You don't need to change EU legislation at all. You can deal with most of the concerns about migration by adjusting the rules at national level, rather than European legislation, and you certainly don't need to change the treaty to repeal the right of free circulation.

A stronger role for the national parliament, so that ministers, before they go off to Brussels, appear before the relevant committee — as they do in the Nordic countries — to say 'This is what's on the agenda, this is my position'; and they can shape the minister's position before he or she goes to Brussels, not hear about it afterwards. You can do that nationally, you don't need European rules to do so.

And my final point is: avoid red herrings. The proposal that we should amend the treaties' declaratory preamble that refers to an ever-closer union would require maximum political effort for little real significant return. It's a declaratory preamble with no direct effect. And the full text, by the way, is 'an ever-closer union among the peoples' — not the states — 'of Europe, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity' — in other words, as decentralised as possible — 'with decisions taken as close as possible to the citizens'. It's a pretty balanced text. And if you've got a big hang-up about declaratory texts and preambles, well I wouldn't waste the effort in trying to change that.

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