

The UK Election: A European game changer

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EU and British flags. [Shutterstock]

Whoever wins the election, neither the Scottish nor the European questions will disappear from the UK political agenda, writes Dr Malanie Sully.

Dr Melanie Sully, a British-born political scientist, is head of the Vienna-based Institute for Go-Governance.

A [more detailed version](#) of this text has been published by the Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE – Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik).

This year, Britain celebrates 750 years of parliament and is rightly proud of strong historical roots that have withstood the test of time. Yet new challenges confront UK democracy on two key issues: Scotland and Europe.

- The Scottish question is far from solved, and a second independence referendum cannot be ruled out.
- The European exit referendum will be a chip on the bargaining table of any deals to form a government. An agreement could be worked out after some haggling on the modalities of the vote.
- Unlike in Germany or Austria, the UK parliament is wound up during and just after the campaign. There are no Members of Parliament (MPs), no committees, no scrutiny of European Union business and no sittings in the Upper House where EU business is also conducted. This hiatus in the work of a national parliament could be addressed.

The Scottish Question

Following the referendum in Scotland last September, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has become increasingly popular and now look set to annihilate Labour north of the border. Ed Miliband will likely emerge as the head of an “English party”^[1] but the future status of the Scottish MPs and whether they should vote on “English” laws will be a hard nut to crack.

The SNP’s default negotiating position is to get rid of the nuclear Trident submarines and fight economic austerity. It could support a minority government, but could also steer clear of a coalition. According to rules on the funding of parliamentary parties, only those in opposition can claim public money. The party will seek to consolidate its success, and is unlikely to bring down any government offering more powers for Edinburgh.

The European Question

If Cameron heads a government after the election, it is likely an in/out referendum will feature in the so-called Queens speech at the end of May. EU leaders then, at their June summit, will have to do some hard thinking on how to respond. Cameron is on record as saying that, unlike the loss of Scotland, exiting from the EU would not be a cause for heartbreak.^[2]

The Liberal Democrats support an in/out referendum should a treaty change involve transfers of sovereignty to Brussels. They want to cut “unnecessary spending” by reducing the proportion of the EU budget dedicated to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and favour scrapping Strasbourg as a seat of the European Parliament. Further the party wants to tighten up on benefits given to migrants and aims to block “unwanted” EU legislation.

The Labour Party rejects a referendum except in cases where major powers are to be transferred which it concedes is unlikely at present. Should such a referendum be held it is not clear what would then happen if the people voted “No”. This could be seen as a vote to exit or at the least lead to a blockade in the EU. In any case there is already a law stipulating the need for a referendum in the event of a major transfer of competencies or the introduction of the Euro or Schengen.

Labour wants reforms regarding EU migrants, who would have to wait two years before claiming benefits, and on the EU budget as well as the way money is spent on the CAP. Its position on migrants could well strain party unity. Labour’s shadow foreign minister, Douglas Alexander, gave a keynote policy speech earlier this year devoting much time to the Middle East, Asia and Africa skirting around the EU. Instead he called for stronger national parliaments, described the European Parliament as ineffective and toyed with the idea of using a red card in the legislative process.^[3]

Whilst housing, the health service and other domestic issues are of more importance to voters, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) cites EU migrants as the source of many problems. Its leader, Nigel Farage, if elected will swop his seat in the European Parliament to put his case in London. In any referendum Farage will seek to exclude EU citizens living in Britain from voting.

The Welsh and Scottish Nationalists have made it clear they want a veto in any referendum, so they “will not be dragged out of the EU against their will”. In addition the SNP wants a greater voice for Scotland in the EU on fisheries and farming.

The Greens currently with one seat in parliament also support a referendum but at the same time want more powers for local communities and are ardent supporters of the free movement of persons.

Conclusion

This election could be followed by lengthy negotiations between parties jostling for position in a new multilateral power game. Whatever the pre-election rhetoric neither the Scottish nor the European questions will disappear and indeed their fate may even become intertwined in deals leading to further referenda.

[1] See Melanie Sully, “Scotland Post-Referendum: the paradoxical model”, 26.3. 2015, the Institute of Federalism, Innsbruck <http://www.foederalismus.at/blog/scotland-post-referendum--the-paradoxical-model> 41.php

[2] BBC Radio “Today” interview, 30.9. 2014.

[3] On the record speech at Chatham House, London, 2.2. 2015.

[Vienna Institute for Go-Governance](#) | [Dr Melanie Sully](#)

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