

Associate membership – dead or just sleeping?

The deal on which we will be voting on June 23rd has been exposed on this website and elsewhere as lacking in substance and entirely conditional on the signing of some future EU treaty – in other words, not worth the paper it is printed on as things stand.

Only a few months ago, it looked like Mr Cameron was going to return from Brussels with at least a commitment to a new treaty formalising the UK's status as leader of the EU's Second Division. It became clear by February, however, that the blueprint for this treaty, the Fundamental Law of the European Union, was being kept on the back burner for the time being and was essentially irrelevant as far as our referendum was concerned. Furthermore, both Angela Merkel and France's President Hollande stated that there was no plan for a new treaty – indeed Frau Merkel went as far as to say that “on the question of amending treaties, we do not know if we ever will have a change of them.”

Obviously, it is the hope of everyone at CIB that our country will vote to leave the EU in June, but if we don't, one hint has recently appeared suggesting that a new treaty may be back on the agenda at some point in the future.

William Hague, writing in the Daily Telegraph, discusses Turkey's relationship with the EU. Hague has been a long-standing supporter of full Turkish membership, but not only does he acknowledge that other EU member states are considerably less enthusiastic than he is, but he admits that Turkey's *“authoritarian direction means that it cannot be a full member of the European Union, and that continued pursuit of that goal, for the time being at least, will achieve nothing.”*

Hague therefore proposes *"a kind of associate membership. This could involve Turkish membership of the single market and participation in Europe's trade deals with the rest of the world, but without full freedom of movement of people. It could be based on co-operation in foreign affairs but no linking of criminal justice systems. Like Britain, Turkey would not be committed to 'ever-closer union', and there would be no question of joining the euro."*

He then makes the obvious point that associate membership is not yet on offer, but is he right in saying that "the EU...would be frightened to create it"? Hardly. The two-tier Europe of the Fundamental Law enjoys the support of a number of ardent EU federalists including the UK's own Andrew Duff, a former Lib Dem MEP. This proposal was doing the rounds in 2014 and 2015 and even its recent quiescence does not imply that the EU has suddenly become running scared of the idea. At some point, by some means or other, the Eurozone will want to forge ahead with closer integration will inevitably be on the table and whatever Merkel or Hollande may say, the Fundamental Law looks like the obvious starting point.

Hague's article is headed "Will Turkey's EU relationship be a model for sceptical Britain?" which suggests that he is fully familiar with the Fundamental Law. It is possible that other non-EU member states such as Norway and Switzerland could be offered associate membership too.

Hague may just be putting forward his own ideas, but clearly some accommodation will have to be made for Turkey and the prospect of such treaty proposals being dusted down in a few years' time would, of course, give us a second bite at the cherry. Norway, Iceland and Switzerland are all blessed with well-organised independence movements and are unlikely to take kindly to any attempt to shoehorn them into the EU, even if accompanied by a threat to wind up the EEA, which an unanimous vote by the EU member states could bring about. The EFTA countries will most likely react strongly to such bullying;

indeed, earlier this month, the Swiss Parliament finally withdrew its application to join the EU – admittedly only a symbolic gesture as Swiss membership has essentially been void since 1992 anyway.

Whatever form this new treaty takes, however, it would be hard for any future UK government to avoid offering us a referendum and, working in conjunction with the other non-EU countries, we could well, given a longer timespan, persuade the electorate to reject it, showing how much better life is outside of the EU which could well lead to a renewed opportunity to put UK withdrawal back on the agenda.

This, of course, is hypothetical. Our objective is to secure a “leave” vote on June 23rd, rendering Hague’s speculations irrelevant, but those of us who have campaigned all these years for withdrawal are not going to go away if Dave’s cut and run campaign succeeds in scaring the electorate into staying in. He might win this battle (although hopefully he won’t) but we will win the war.

Photo by Chadica 