

Greek worries return as support grows for referendums elsewhere in the EU

Compared with the high drama of last year when Yannis Varoufakis, the Greek finance minister and Jeroen Dijsselbloem, the President of the Euro group, came close to a punch-up at a Eurozone ministers' meeting in the run-up to a deal over the country's debt, Greece has not been hitting the headlines to anything like the same degree – yet.

However, its intractable debt problem has not gone away. On the face of it, things look a bit better. Compared with the corresponding period in 2015, more tax has been collected while government expenditure has not risen very much. The country is therefore running a healthy fiscal surplus.

But at what cost? The anti-austerity Syriza-led government of Alexis Tsipras has been utterly humiliated. A report in the *Guardian* paints a bleak picture of the mood in the country after the Greek Parliament approved the toughest austerity measures to date – €5.4 billion in savings, meaning pension cuts and further strains on the already creaking Greek health service. Greek government debt still stood at a whopping 176.9% of GDP at the end of 2015, slightly down on 180.1% a year earlier, but still unsustainably high in spite of years of punishing austerity measures. ““It can't go on for ever,” said Stergiou, a student interviewed by the *Guardian's* reporter. “Greeks are running out of stamina, they are running out of endurance.”

This speech by Steven Woolfe MEP on the same subject is worth listening to. The statistics he spells out are quite frightening. His proposal, that Greece should leave the EU, may sound far-fetched, but in view of the widespread public

anger that a party elected on a ticket of hope has now become as unpopular as its predecessors, nothing is impossible.

Greece isn't alone with its problems. A Maltese bank, Nemea Bank, has been placed in administration. Admittedly, it is only one of 24 banks in operation in this small country, but nonetheless a further sign that beneath positive money figures for the Eurozone as a whole, all is not well in several peripheral countries.

Furthermore, it's not only people in financially troubled countries who are becoming increasingly unhappy with the EU. David Cameron's decision to call a referendum on UK membership has let a very unwelcome cat out of the bag as far as the EU is concerned. Writing in the Daily Telegraph, Ambrose Evans-Pritchard analyses a MORI opinion poll showing how widespread the demand for similar referendums is becoming in other countries. Over 50% of the electorate in both France and Italy support such a move and were the Italians to agree to such a referendum, it could be quite a close run thing.

What is more, only a minority of those surveyed expected the UK economy to suffer if we left.

The thought of a "domino effect" has always worried the EU's élite. However, the response of Jean- Claude Juncker, the Commission President, indicates just how out of touch these people are from the real world. With David Cameron clearly in mind, he said:

"Too many politicians are listening exclusively to their national opinion. And if you are listening to your national opinion you are not developing what should be a common European sense and a feeling of the need to put together efforts. We have too many part-time Europeans."

More Europe has always been the EU's usual answer to any problems. Even Mats Persson, the former director of Open Europe who is now advising David Cameron, recognises the

folly of this approach. "If European voters always face the choice between 'more Europe' and 'no Europe', then sooner or later, they will pick the latter", he said.

Lord Lawson said a while ago that the EU was past its sell-by date. One of the many government scare stories currently doing the rounds is that Brexit would pose problems for the EU. However, if Lord Lawson is correct, it could in fact create an opportunity. The EU has no divine right to eternal life. If withdrawal precipitates its demise in a piecemeal but orderly way, this may be preferable to the sort of sudden collapse that marked the end of Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union.

If we believe that our country deserves something better than miserable subjection to an unelected supranational bureaucracy, why should not our European neighbours seek a better future too?