

# The Italians take us back to basics

"We want you to stay in the club, but you can't change the rules." Only a few days after Sweden's Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt said he was prepared to go the "extra mile" to address the UK's concerns about the direction of the EU, a very different message has been coming out of Italy.

Romano Prodi, a former Italian Prime Minister who was president of the European Commission from 1999 to 2004, was pretty blunt in his recent comments to Radio 4's Today programme: "If you don't want to be part of an evolving group you stay out, that is your choice. My preference is that you stay in, but ... I also think that in the global world if we don't stick together we simply disappear."

He was then asked if he was looking to the UK, if it stays in, to embrace the principle of ever-closer union and replied, "Yes, because otherwise we disappear from the world stage." He emphasised that he believed the UK to be an important player in Europe, but "I think...that you cannot stop Europe."

The current Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, took a similar line when he addressed the European Parliament earlier this week. While claiming that "Europe without the UK would not just be less rich; it would be less Europe, less itself", he then went on to say that "We either recover our true identity or we'll miss the meaning of being together." The word "together" cropped up again later in the speech and there is no doubt that like Prodi, Renzi was implying "ever-close union." Nothing has changed, then, since he ousted Enrico Letta, who insisted a few months before his resignation that, "we need integrated governance."

These comments show that David Cameron's talk of

renegotiation, repatriation of a few powers and a “special relationship” for the UK within the EU faces formidable obstacles from some important member states. The bottom line is that the European project – the construction of a federal superstate in which national parliaments are reduced to little more than talking shops – is very much alive and kicking on the Continent. On the wall of the visitor’s centre in the European Parliament, you can read these words:- “National sovereignty is the root cause of the most crying evils of our times...The only final remedy for this supreme and catastrophic evil of our time is a federal union of the peoples.” The vast majority of us in the UK have always regarded such sentiments as complete nonsense. We have a long and proud history as a successful nation state and do not share the Italians’ lack of confidence that only by the surrender of sovereignty can we play any meaningful role in the world of the 21st century. Nor are we misty-eyed romantics looking back nostalgically to a bygone age. Self-government remains the norm in the rest of the world outside Europe and some of the most successful nation states in the world are considerably smaller than the UK – or Italy for that matter.

So in spite of all the talk about restrictions on immigration, free trade, creating a more competitive and less regulated economy and so on, with a referendum on membership looking increasingly likely, the Italians have done us a favour by taking us back to basics. The European project always was and always will be primarily about political unity and the end of national self-government. During any referendum campaign it is a point that will need making over and over again. While the Italians (and indeed, the Belgians) have suffered such lousy domestic politicians over the years that they have been quite happy to sub-contract the running of their country to the EU, our history is different. We’ve had to suffer some pretty rotten rulers over the centuries from Edward II to Edward Heath, but have done very well as an independent, self-governing country and can continue to do so in the years to

come.

John Petley