

Cameron's diplomatic defeatism delivers a hammer blow to the UK's influence

Written by Emma Reynolds

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EMMA REYNOLDS, DEC 21 2011

The British Prime Minister's late night walkout from the recent European Summit demonstrated incompetence and weakness, rather than a 'bulldog spirit'.

Within hours of David Cameron's exit, the government spin machine whirled into action, boldly declaring that he had exercised a so-called "veto" to protect Britain's interests. The Prime Minister was given a hero's welcome by his anti-European backbenchers and the eurosceptic British tabloid press. In one rather desperate attempt to defend his actions, the Prime Minister declared that he had kept the UK out of the euro and that our budget would not be overseen by Brussels.

Cameron didn't exercise a veto, because he failed to stop anything and failed to secure any safeguards. This was not a triumph – it was diplomatic defeatism. In contrast, British Prime Minister, John Major used a veto at the Maastricht treaty summit in the early 1990s. He secured an opt-out from the single currency in return which the last Labour administration used to full effect.

The truth is that the Prime Minister spectacularly mishandled the negotiations. Anyone with any grasp of the dynamics of European negotiations knows that presenting a list of demands at 2.30am in the morning with scant preparation was never going to be successful.

Worryingly, the Foreign Office was bypassed by the Treasury. George Osborne is this government's chief strategist and is therefore more concerned about the domestic political impact of decisions rather than what it means for the UK's role in Europe and the world. The Permanent British Representative to the EU, the incredibly experienced and astute Kim Darroch, apparently wasn't informed of the British negotiating position until a few hours before the summit.

None of the other 26 EU states' ambassadors to the UK were aware of British demands. Reports from Washington suggest that the US was also surprised. The American Treasury Secretary, Tim Geithner, had spent the days in the run up to the summit in meetings in Brussels. A rational act from a country worried about the impact of the eurozone crisis on its economy. Britain has a world class diplomatic service. The decision not to deploy them by David Cameron was as deliberate as it was foolish.

Rumour has it that David Cameron and George Osborne kept their wish list secret for fear that their eurosceptic backbenchers might find out and make additional demands. Yet another demonstration of Cameron spending more time and energy worrying about keeping the Conservative party happy than preparing for the summit. He now needs to lead, not follow, his party.

Moreover, the Prime Minister's claims to have protected the City ring hollow. The government has been unable to identify a single piece of financial regulation that his actions have prevented. The penny also started to drop with newspapers who had originally welcomed his walkout. On 13 December, the Daily Telegraph noted in its editorial that it is still unclear whether threats to the City have really been deflected.

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Many businesses were nervous about the effects of Cameron's walkout. Leading figures such as John Cridland, head of the CBI, have called on the government to redouble its efforts to ensure that the UK is not put at an economic disadvantage in the aftermath of the walk out. Smaller like-minded member states are also concerned about Britain's isolation. Traditionally, the UK has been an ally in advocating a truly open single market. As Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg stated last week; unless the UK stands tall in Europe, it won't stand tall in Washington. Furthermore, our global influence in the emerging economies – Brazil, China and India – is also at risk by being at the sidelines.

Last week, the Prime Minister's tone started to change and the multilingual Deputy Prime Minister started to put his linguistic talents to some use. The government gave up its petulant demands that the other 26 member states, congregating without Britain present, shouldn't use the EU buildings for their meetings.

The Chancellor recently said that the inexorable logic of monetary union was fiscal union. Any deepening of the eurozone crisis would have disastrous consequences for jobs, business and banks in the UK. The political decision to walk away from discussions about this threat to Britain's prosperity was the wrong decision at the wrong time.

We are fortunate that the German Chancellor prefers to have Britain on board to counterbalance French protectionist instincts. But the coalition government's rash behaviour has set the UK back decades in terms of our influence in the EU and the world.

In sum, David Cameron needs to start to put British national interest before his party's interest. Angela Merkel has now left the door open for the British government to rebuild alliances and regain our position in Europe. It is in the British national interest that the government embraces that opportunity.

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