



THE QUIET FRENCHMAN: WHY FRANÇOIS HOLLANDE IS STAYING SILENT ON BREXIT

By Andrew Glencross



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European heads of state and government meet in Brussels 18-19 February 2016 to discuss the [terms of a proposed renegotiation of Britain's relationship with the EU](#). The UK's future hangs on these talks. [Success or failure in getting a deal will sway the evenly divided and poorly-informed British public](#) in the forthcoming referendum on whether to stay in the EU. But one voice is strangely absent in this debate. On the issue of Britain's renegotiation and referendum, French President François Hollande is quiet to the point of mutism. This self-imposed silence can only be explained by the inward turn of French politics, which itself reflects a loss of confidence and status within the EU as well as the domestic preoccupation with security. As a result, the French government is content to let other EU leaders take responsibility for responding to Cameron's demands.

Yet history suggests that France should play a leading role in the Brexit drama. After all, it was President de Gaulle who in the 1960s twice vetoed the UK's application to join the then European Economic Community. His successor, Georges Pompidou, reversed this decision, but nevertheless insisted on holding a national referendum to settle the matter of enlarging the Community. So in 1972 it was French citizens who had the final say on approving Britain's admission to the club: [they voted 68% in favour](#).

On a strategic level, UK withdrawal from the EU has a number of important ramifications, many of them potentially favourable to French interests. France's permanent UN Security Council seat could gain a new legitimacy as the voice of the EU on the international stage. The absence of a British presence in the EU's decision-making bodies would make trade and regulation policy more protectionist, [as a recent study has shown](#), in line with the instincts of French governments of both left and right. Lastly, a British departure would make the Franco-German tandem once again the be-all and end-all of European integration. Brexit could in fact breathe new life into this stalled alliance by creating momentum for a new EU initiative as a show of defiance to British Euroscepticism. France has the advantage here as the most plausible plan for further integration involves its long-standing goal of enhancing economic governance, which until now has met with staunch German opposition.

Of course, these are not necessarily good reasons for France to break ranks and agitate openly for British withdrawal. What they do constitute, however, are important bargaining chips that appeal to a domestic audience and which in turn can be instrumentalized to remind Britons of what is at stake. But France is not playing this game. President Hollande at most has warned David Cameron that unilateral concessions are off the table and demanded clarification over the topics under negotiation. Tellingly, the President's new year message did not even mention the topic of Europe once, concentrating instead on combating terrorism and lowering unemployment.

The only notable pro-Brexit outburst to date has come from former [Prime Minister Michel Rocard](#). More typical though is the position of leading newspaper *Le Monde*. It used the 200th anniversary of Waterloo to publish an English-language op-ed aimed at [persuading UK voters to stay in the EU and avoid their own epic defeat](#).

The most decisive interventions on Britain's negotiating demands have come instead from other quarters of the EU. Newly-elected Polish premier Beata Szydlo – no EU sycophant – is the [leading voice opposing Cameron's proposals to reduce intra-EU migration by limiting welfare entitlements](#) available to recently-arrived workers. Donald Tusk, the European Council President, who chairs the negotiations, has confirmed that there is no consensus to overhaul the associated principle of free movement within the EU. In the background, unsurprisingly, lies the guiding hand of the German Chancellor who publicly supports the British government only to the extent of approving of proposals linked to increasing EU competitiveness.

There is certainly no party affinity between Hollande, a socialist, and the Conservative British Prime Minister. But the French President's reticence to discuss Brexit cannot be attributed to ideological hostility. Rather, the cause lies in the lack of an overarching vision for guiding the future course of the EU. This strategic failure stems from twin economic and political weakness.

A disastrous combination of anemic growth, rising public debt and high structural unemployment prevents France from counterbalancing Germany's leadership on EU economic policy. The same conditions that undermine diplomatic clout abroad have sapped the French electorate's confidence in mainstream political parties. All the more so given the security threat posed by the [Islamist radicalization of second-generation North African immigrants](#) – part of a much larger cohort of young people with limited economic opportunities. Consequently, Hollande – who was party secretary when the Socialists tore themselves apart during the doomed 2005 referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty – is terrified at the prospect of politicizing EU matters. His major goal during the renegotiations is thus purely negative: to avoid a new treaty at all costs because he would have to sell it to his voters during the electoral cycle for the 2017 presidential contest.

The one party unafraid to debate the future of the EU and whether integration best serves French interests is Marine Le Pen's Front National. Her party seeks to make political capital out of the fact that Hollande is unprepared to engage with Euroscepticism. Indeed, the far right actively praises the British government's approach to the EU and advocates emulating the renegotiation and referendum tactic in order to reverse changes – Schengen and the Euro chiefly – they argue have been detrimental to France.

Hence the UK is not the only country in which Euroscepticism has tied the party of government into knots. Whereas Cameron agreed to let supporters of the EU and its critics fight it out, Hollande has opted for a policy of discretion. Taking the sting out of the EU question domestically is a necessarily evil for the French president, even if it comes at the expense of influencing the direction where Europe is heading.