

Should Great Britain Stay In The European Union?

By Doug Bandow February 4, 2013

The U.S. has become a caricature of itself. Like when the Obama administration lectured the British government on why it should remain in the European Union.

Throughout its existence the United Kingdom has enjoyed an identity separate from Europe. After World War II, the European Union began as a more rudimentary continental Common Market and Britain joined late due to the antipathy of French President Charles de Gaulle.

But the marriage was never entirely happy, with many Britons uncomfortable about surrendering their decision-making authority to a growing bureaucracy in Brussels.

This dissatisfaction grew faster as the EU turned into a debt union. Brussels is demanding control over national budgets even of states which, like the U.K., had not joined the eurozone. The United Kingdom Independence Party is gaining in popularity and the ruling Conservative Party is talking about repatriating power from Brussels and even leaving the EU. Prime Minister David Cameron announced plans to hold a referendum on the latter issue.

Creating a continental European market of 27 countries has generated enormous economic benefits. But in recent years the EU has emphasized intrusive, nanny-state regulation over free markets.

Moreover, in a desperate attempt to preserve the eurozone (to which only 17 nations belong) Brussels has been draining wealth from and abrogating the sovereignty of more successful economies. Only Britons can decide whether the costs of EU membership are worth the benefits.

At least, one would think only Britons can decide. But that doesn't take into account what Washingtonians think. Specifically those in the Bush and Obama administrations.

In 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice distinguished her trip to Europe by promoting Turkish membership in the EU. In 2009, President Obama made much the same case during his visit to Europe. For instance, he told the EU-U.S. summit that "Moving forward toward Turkish membership in the EU would be an important signal of your commitment to this agenda" of treating "Muslims as our friends."

No surprise, neither of these lobbying campaigns went over well among Europeans. Nigel Farage, head of UKIP, said:

"Barack Obama should remember that while he's been elected president he's been elected president of the United States only."

Indeed, it is incredibly presumptuous for Washington to urge members of a club of which it is not a member to accept another state for membership. Imagine Prime Minister Cameron traveling to Mexico City and Ottawa to declare that it is in the U.K.'s interest for the U.S. to make Mexico and Canada America's 51st and 52nd states. The reaction in Washington would be less than warm.

Yet now the Obama administration is offering its opinion unbidden in another controversy: the U.K. shouldn't leave the EU. Philip Gordon of the State Department recently visited London, explaining that "We have a growing relationship with the EU, which has an increasing voice in the world, and we want to see a strong British voice in it. That is in America's interests."

Moreover Gordon disdained the expected referendum, since such votes "have often turned countries inward." He worried that "The more the EU reflects on its internal debate the less it is able to be unified."

It was an astonishing performance which did not win him any friends in London. Member of Parliament Peter Bone said Gordon should "butt out" since the issue of Britain 's EU membership had "nothing to do with the Americans." However, Washington doubled down with a phone call from Obama to Prime Minister Cameron on the same subject.

U.K. officials understand the momentous nature of the decision which they face. Their obligation is to act in their people's interest. After all, the latter are the ones who have to live with an in-out decision.

Even worse was Gordon's dismissal of the prospective referendum. When states such as California allow their people to vote on almost everything, it is absurd for an American official to lecture a democratic state — the system which actually birthed the U.S. — against being, well, democratic.

At least Rice and Obama suggested their position was good for both Turkey and Europe. Gordon simply declared that British participation was in " America 's interests," as if that was London 's concern.

Gordon did admit that "What's in the British interest is for the British people and the British Government to decide." It's just that they should decide the way Washington wants, in Washington's interest.

The U.S. will remain the world's most important power for years, if not decades. But Washington's ability to compel will diminish far faster. American officials should eat a little humble pie before dealing with the rest of the world.

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