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An end to zombie politics 5: Europe [1]

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How readily the Zombie metaphor applies to the politics of Europe: eighteen years of unapproved accounts, eternal squabbles between federalists and anti-federalists; the Euro project itself - intended to unify but achieving the opposite. But none of this matters for this piece, confined to the Zombie character of British responses to the European dream and the nightmare it has become. Instead, I will explain why the government must not ruin its negotiating stance by essentially promising to put its weight behind staying in the EU regardless of the success of negotiations, as I laid out in greater detail in a recent report. [3]

UKIP?s success last Thursday (2 May) and Lord Lawson?s piece in Tuesday's *Times* (7 May) blow the cobwebs off an issue kicked into touch for three months by January?s referendum promise. Lawson's article points out that referenda can sometimes be red herrings. Sometimes, as in 1975, they are a device to shut down discussion. On this occasion they could be more of the same. Alternatively they can act as a way for the political class to reconcile themselves to giving up on a favourite project. I?m getting that the current government warms more to the former approach: thus the bonkers ideas floated over the past week.

On the one hand they've considered doing absolutely nothing. This would look magisterial, if an administration bumping along the bottom of the electoral cycle could pull the stunt off; however in the event it will look weak.

On the other hand policymakers have mulled publishing a bill setting out the referendum terms. This scheme would also be as weak as water, vulnerable to disabling amendment when eventually put to Parliament. Similarly, the wheeze of a 'mandate' or 'backing' referendum coinciding with the EU elections next year adds nothing to January?s promise. Both of these are transparent tactics, most likely to irritate voters who deserve to be taken more seriously.

Worst of all is their inherently zombie nature in flinching from the contradictions inherent in the so-called in-out referendum. These stem from the convention that Her Majesty's Government commits itself ex ante to campaign for the renegotiated outcome. It may be that anything less would court accusations of

unsportsmanlike behaviour from the other side - our negotiating counterparties in Europe. Such a commitment, however, greatly weakens the UK?s bargaining hand, particularly if following the current plan of linking to a timetable. The other side can simply wait out our negotiators, offer meaningless concessions, or prevail upon the UK to offer further referenda till the electorate sees sense and votes in the EU's preferred direction, as seen previously in France, Ireland and elsewhere ? if it is a given that the government will put its weight behind an in vote regardless of the result.

If the government wishes to offer a referendum in good faith, let it put forward a proposal which actually makes sense. It may not get through Parliament, but it will show willing and serve as a clear line in the sand. This would be a bill to bind UK to one and only one referendum regardless of the state of negotiations at the time of a stated deadline. Setting aside party politics, if such a bill were passed it would be more likely than not to strengthen UK negotiators? hands; it could pave the way for early negotiations if wanted; and it would relieve the post-2015 election government of the nutty ex ante obligation to campaign in favour of the outcome.

The arguments against are trifling: of course it might not get through parliament (and if it did would not bind a future Parliament), but the very attempt sets the agenda both domestically and overseas, going some way to throwing holy water on the zombie hordes of EU politics.

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