

November 7, 2011 9:15 pm

Our pro-Europeans must prepare for a plebiscite

By Philip Stephens

Greece is burning and Britain's Conservatives are carrying a torch for Athenian democracy. The people of Greece must have their say about whether to stay in the euro, cry David Cameron's Tories. And then the British must be given a vote on pulling out of the European Union.

There is nothing altruistic about this feigned solidarity with the Greeks. It presumes a plebiscite would have that beleaguered nation reject the single currency and return to the drachma. While Mr Cameron's government views a break-up of the euro as a threat to prosperity, many in his party see it as an opportunity to speed Britain's departure from Europe.

Thus constrained, the prime minister feels obliged to boast that, unlike, say, Sweden and Poland, Britain will not contribute a single penny to the eurozone bail-out fund. That's not enough for his backbench MPs. They want a bar on any increase in funding of the International Monetary Fund lest it prop up the single currency.

The sceptics' attachment to plebiscites is replete with contradictions. They cast themselves as champions of the sovereignty of Westminster. Yet they want to surrender that sovereignty to plebiscitary decision-making. The Conservative belief in the institutions of democracy is thus sacrificed to populism. Well, up to a point. If the people deserve a say on Europe, why not on the government's austerity programme? Better still, if Tory MPs are so eager to shuffle off responsibility, why not a popular vote to reset their pay and expenses accordingly?

The Tory sceptics are not alone in their cynicism. It is at moments such as this that opposition parties show their character. Do they want to score easy points or do they recognise a chance to uphold their principles as a government-in-waiting? Ed Miliband's Labour, which still styles itself as pro-European, fails the test dismally.

Ed Balls, the shadow chancellor, is not to be outdone when it comes to anti-European populism. Mr Balls has been calling for a global effort to prevent the world economy slipping back into a recession. But an additional British contribution to the IMF? Not a bit of it. The money might be diverted to feckless Greeks and Italians. For their part, Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats have been content to sit on the sidelines. True, Mr Clegg makes the occasional pro-European remark – but not so anyone would notice.

Mr Cameron thought he had banished the demons of anti-Europeanism that laid low his party during the 1990s. Hadn't the prime minister passed a law – a "Sovereignty

Act” no less – that would bar the transfer of further powers to Brussels? Hadn’t he said that, when the time was right, he too would seek to recover some powers now delegated to the Union? Hasn’t he chosen as the new ambassador to Brussels a Treasury official steeped in that institution’s deep hostility to all things European?

Appeasement never works. Mr Cameron’s promises have served only to whet the appetite of backbench MPs. In the chaos in the eurozone, they see Britain’s chance to detach itself from the entire enterprise.

The sceptics do not put it quite like that, of course. They demand instead wholesale renegotiation of the terms of membership. Britain should be exempted from the panoply of single market rules affecting employment laws, social protection or taxation. Fisheries should be the province of national law. And so on.

It is obvious to anyone who thinks about it that these are conditions that the other 26 could not accept. What club allows members to set their own subscription fees and rules? The crisis in the eurozone does promise a more variable Union. That is not to say members will be able to do as they please.

So the choice is in or out. Margaret Thatcher was right when she called referendums the device of demagogues and dictators. But the populist clamour is beginning to look irreversible. Pro-Europeans – and there are still a few – should prepare for a plebiscite.

That means remaking the argument for European engagement from first principles. Pointing out that, as a medium-sized power with a global outlook, Britain’s national interest lies above all in a rules-based international system.

Its prosperity and security are irreversibly bound up with what’s happening elsewhere in the world. Investment and trade are closely integrated with the economies of its European neighbours. There is nothing romantic about membership of the EU. Sometimes it is infuriating. For all its manifest flaws, however, the Union offers Britain the leverage essential to promote its national interests.

Pro-Europeans should take heed on the question of sovereignty. It is shared in Europe, but shared to Britain’s national advantage. Interdependence is the organising fact of today’s world. The complete freedom of action outside Europe sought by the sceptics is nothing more than a mirage. They seek the sovereignty of the man wandering alone in the desert – absolute but worthless.

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4060fe5a-0938-11e1-a20c-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2011 FT and ‘Financial Times’ are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.