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Title: Promising reforms not helpful for winning the debate on EU's future

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Cameron had a tough task to win the referendum on EU membership anyway. Euroscepticism and the longing for the old empire are deeply rooted in England. The worldwide wave of populism and the European and migration crises imposed an extra burden. But Cameron's campaign strategy has made his chances worse. Netherlands can draw lessons from this failure.

Cameron told the British voter that he too was unsatisfied with the EU. Hence, he proposed to renegotiate with the other Member States on a reform. The outcome of this renegotiation would then be presented to the voters in a referendum. But what is there to renegotiate with 27 other Member States? No negotiation result would have convinced the British voter. Often the view is spread that all Member States gain from a modernization of EU. As if States must regain rights from the juggernaut in Brussels. Reality is different: today's Europe is the result of a long process of give and take between Member States. Someone's gain is usually the loss of somebody else. Each Member State wants to pay less and to receive more. Hence, little chance of agreement on one country getting more. And then the hot potato in the Brexit referendum: immigration, the right of citizens from other EU Member States to earn their living in England. Many Englishmen want it to be abolished, however Poland does not. Hence, little chance of significant results on this issue either.

Cameron negotiations were therefore a lost cause even before the start. Precisely for this reason his negotiation-strategy remained shrouded in mystery to observers for several months. And upon returning home, with the outcome of negotiations under the arm, the reaction of the Brexiteers was predictable: he failed. In fact, their response would always have been the same, regardless of the outcome. The predictability of the response of the Brexiteers did not enhance the desire of other member states to meet the British demands. He who is negotiating must not only try to get something, but also be able bring. Cameron had nothing else than to bring than dissatisfied voters. The idea that the satraps from Brussels are the obstacle to reform is incorrect. Leaders of Member States themselves are sitting at the wheel as members of the European Council. Yet they often talk about Europe in the third person, as if others than they are responsible.

The only real alternative is to praise Europe for what it is admired to be in the rest of world. Member States have kept for 60 years a political and legal system running that settled internal disputed, first between six and now between 27 Member States and that enabled them to reach agreements for mutual benefit. That a system with such a diffuse structure as the EU has been able to do this is an incredible achievement. It has created the conditions for the postwar growth of our prosperity. More recently, it brought similar growth to Spain, Portugal and Ireland, and more recently to Poland and the Baltic states. It has made the EU the world's largest economy (larger than the US). EU has been free of any war between its member states over the past 60 years (Yugoslavia is indeed a shame, but was strictly speaking outside the borders of the EU). And it allowed free travel and study in other member states, exactly the point why the young generation of Englishmen now run against the referendum outcome.

A common market is not created by the abolition of rules. Instead, it is achieved by a hard-won compromise on common rules to let that market function properly and by a European Court of Justice which settles disputes in interpretation of these rules. Such a system looks like all political systems. It looks just like a larger version of Dutch politics. Who is happy with the functioning of the House? Why is the Senate still not abolished? In Europe, it is no different: the intermediate result of 60 years of tug of war is a monster, but that it exists is a miracle of the world and it has yielded great results.

Despite these successes, there is much discontent in Europe. However, the rise of populism is not a European phenomenon in particular, as the rise of Donald Trump shows. The EU is just a scapegoat, wrongly so. The real problem of the middle class in Europe and the US is the rise of first China and later India. These countries - together comprising one third of the world's population - demand their share of global GDP. Unfortunately, this happens mainly at the expense of the European and American middle class. That makes the electorate of Europe and the US feel uncomfortable, which is understandingly. An effective policy response cushions the private risks of job loss, for example through social security and a broader indexation of pensions.

Following the Brexit result, the Dutch Prime Minister Rutte said that he too criticizes Europe. It is the same mistake strategy as Cameron used: talk about Europe in the third person. But there is no reason for Rutte to do so. As a member of the European Council, he has achieved a lot: prosperity, peace and freedom to travel and study in the EU. He can justly be proud of this. And indeed, politics in Brussels look a bit ugly. But who cares.