

## **Interview by President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy**

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**On January 1st 40 years ago, the United Kingdom joined what has since become the European Union. It has been a membership characterised by ambivalence, ups and downs, perhaps never more so than at present when traditional British semi-detachment from the EU is combining with eurozone integration to make the English Channel seem ever wider. In this connection:**

### **Has British membership been good for Europe?**

Every member country brings its own unique contribution to our Union of diversity. But Britain's contribution is greater, I think, than it sometimes realises itself. It has been crucial in building the EU's centrepiece, the single European market, now the largest market in the world, and the common rules for the common market that are necessary for it to function. British expertise in the fields of foreign policy, finance, and trade shape the EU's policies in these fields. It has led the way on climate change and development aid. It has offered us the English language, now in practice the *lingua franca* of Europe.

### **Has EU membership been good for Britain?**

Every country benefits from the peace and stability that the EU helps bring to our continent, as well as from having a structure that enables us all to manage our interdependence and find common solutions to common problems. But Britain, as a trading nation, has a particular interest in the success of this enterprise.

### **What does Britain bring to the EU?**

As I said in response to your first question, a lot. And it does this, not just through ministers, diplomats and MEPs, but through its businesses, NGOs and ordinary citizens.

### **Would the EU be poorer without Britain? Why?**

We would lose a valued and influential member. It would undermine one of the main purposes of the Union, namely to be a framework allowing the countries of Europe to come together in a cooperative structure. We would see a friend walk off into the desert. We would lose the particular British contributions I mentioned in reply to your first question. And we would miss the typical British sense of humour....

## **How would you describe the fundamental problem in the UK's relations with the rest of the EU?**

I sometimes feel that the presentation of Europe in parts of the British media gives a very false picture of what the EU is about, what it does, and how it works. The "problems" are magnified and the solutions -- which we normally find -- unreported.

Britain feels that it is unique -- but so is each and every one of the Member States. None has come into this project in order to lose their character or their identity. The European Union is there to enable us to work together whilst preserving identities -- hence its motto "Unity with Diversity".

Of course, Britain remains outside the euro, and does not therefore participate in the increasingly close cooperation among those who need to manage a common currency. But the bulk of EU decision taking is still at the level of all 27 Member States. That will not change.

## **Germany has often said the EU treaties will need to be reopened to facilitate greater EU/Eurozone integration. David Cameron has said he wants to use that opportunity to negotiate a new settlement with the EU, repatriating powers from Brussels. Is this a good idea? Are you prepared to facilitate that negotiation?**

The treaties allow a considerable degree of flexibility and much can be done without needing to amend them.

Of course, it is perfectly possible to write all kinds of provisions into the treaties, but amending them is a lengthy and cumbersome procedure needing the unanimous agreement of every single member government and ratification according to each country's own constitutional procedures.

The European Union involves constant dialogue on many subjects among Member States, but only occasionally does this require an amendment to the treaties.

Overall, EU competences concern subjects on which member states have by common agreement -- duly ratified by each of them -- decided that it is in our collective best interests to work together, because of our interdependence or because of economies of scale or because of the leverage that it brings at world level. If I look at our modern globalised world, I do not see any of those factors diminishing.

## **Should Britain be allowed to "cherry-pick" the bits of being in the club that it likes and ditching the bits it does not? Would this create a risky precedent for others?**

If every Member State were able to cherry pick those parts of existing policies that they most like, and opt-out of those that they least like, the Union in general, and the single market in particular, would soon unravel. Working together across different fields inevitably involves give and take, the sum of which is positive.

**Is the rest of the EU getting fed up with British demands, veto threats, difficulties?**

All Member States can, and do, have particular requests and needs that are always taken into consideration as part of our deliberations. I do not expect any Member State to seek to undermine the fundamentals of our cooperative system in Europe. The EU, like any political system and every level of government, has its faults and can make mistakes. Our common challenge is to correct any mistakes, and ensure that they do not happen again in the future. We have to focus on the essence and not on the details or particular incidents.

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