



*Dear Simon,*

*David Cameron has announced, in case he is re-elected, to hold the long-promised referendum of EU membership by 2017. How likely is it that this referendum actually takes place? And if it does, is it possible to predict its outcome?*

For many citizens from the continent, the question of EU membership is perhaps the most pressing aspect of the general election. Unfortunately, this election is unlikely to provide a resolution.

A whole series of hurdles stand in front of any referendum.

Firstly, the Tories would have to win the election outright: any coalition would automatically require some bargaining on this issue.

Then, since Cameron promised he would call the referendum on a membership under renegotiated terms, he would have to get the support of a majority of EU member states to open such a renegotiation of the treaty, which looks very unlikely. Either the negotiations would have to deal with very minor points and rather meaningless, or they would open up fundamental debates about the nature of the Union (especially on the principle of free movement) that could drag on for years. Only once those negotiations had finished could a referendum sensibly be held: if they were still open, organising a decisive vote would be unlikely to help the UK's case with its partners.

And against all of this would be the fact that most British people don't consider the EU to be a very important issue. Which means that Cameron would be using a huge amount of political capital to deal with this, for little obvious benefit, whatever the result.

And even if the referendum did happen, then it won't solve the question of Britain's relationship with the EU. If Britain was to stay, would it be satisfied or ask for further reform? If it was to leave, then years of further negotiation on the exact modalities would be needed. And you could imagine that whoever lost the referendum would carry on fighting for their cause.

Right now, all the indications are that a vote would support continued membership in the EU, but we may take a very long time for that to be demonstrated in fact.

Talk soon,

*Simon*

