

UK referendum and French community

London is France's sixth biggest city in terms of population. Between 300,000 and 400,000 French citizens live in the British capital, according to the French Consulate. More than in Bordeaux, Nantes or Strasbourg.

This statement was, in spring 2012, published by many British media, including the BBC and the *Daily Mail*. A year later - 14 May 2013 - David Cameron published a draft bill guaranteeing that an 'in-out' referendum on Great Britain's membership of the European Union will be held by 2017.

A recent Eurosceptic surge among the Prime Minister's own party is to relate to the electoral success of Nigel Farage's UKIP (UK Independent Party) hitting 18% of favourable opinions, according to *The Guardian*. Mr Cameron hoped this would calm the debate and silence the dissident voices.

But the PM seems to favour a renegotiation of Great Britain status to a withdrawal from the EU. Dr Charles Tannock is a Conservative member of the European Parliament. "Repatriating aspects of employment legislation and justice and home affairs is a priority," he said. "If PM Cameron is successful in renegotiating a reasonable return of powers to the UK, the people will probably vote to stay in."

Like many MPs, Dr Tannock reckons that the European Commission deals with too many issues. "The EU has to do less and do it better. MEPs are now responsible for amending and rejecting if necessary 95% of all EU law which is responsible for at least 60% of the UK law."

But Brussels has already said that it will not accept a Europe 'a la carte' which would put at risk the solidarity principle between its members, said Arnaud Vaissié, President of the French Chamber of Commerce in GB.

In a recent press release, he warned against a UK withdrawal from the EU. "David Cameron wants a Europe based on five principles: competitiveness, flexibility, legitimacy, democracy and equality of treatment.

"If Britain was to leave Europe, it would be the loss of a strategic power as well as a loss of economic credibility for both the UK and the EU," said Mr Vaissié.

This opinion has been widely supported by British business leaders such as Richard Branson and Sir Martin Sorrell. On the 20 May, they signed an open letter to *The Independent*, arguing that politicians were putting "politics before economics" and abandoning the national interest in their calls to leave the EU.

And on 29 June, Sir Mike Rake, president of the CBI (Confederation of British Industry, UK's leading business organisation) also insisted that Britain must stay in the EU. For the Conservative Dr Tannock, "there are merits in the EU membership such as consumer protection, access to the single market, fighting environmental pollution and climate changes - where the EU leads the world - , fighting international crime and

terrorism, promoting democracy and human rights globally, and stabilising our neighbourhood."

The neighbours, precisely. In France, like in several European countries, the far-right political parties gain more and more ground. Marine Le Pen, president of the French National Front, has recently paid tribute to Nigel Farage's success. She campaigns for a French withdrawal of the EU, and moreover, a return to the franc.

France's unemployment continues to rise. In May, the official figures showed 3,2 million job seekers. Mr Vaissié recalls that the non-employment rate in the UK is 30% lower. "French people come to the UK and particularly to London with the idea of staying for a long time. They are looking for a new life. They settle down here," he said.

One of them is Amandine, 33. Journalist for the French magazine *ici Londres*, based in South Kensington, she has been living in London for four years. From the South of France, she came to follow her ex-boyfriend.

"I discovered an exciting and open-minded city. My life is here. I don't think I will ever go back to France. I love it for holidays but I could not be happy there," she said.

For many French expatriates, London is not only a city which offers more job and career opportunities. It is the choice of a different life. They love the capital's excitement and diversity... and the British people. A courtesy, kindness and humour they don't seem to find in Paris, for example.

An opinion also shared by Heloise, 27, from Toulon, and in London since January 2011: "I am concerned about Mr Cameron's promise of a referendum. I see myself as a European. And for now, I live here, with no thoughts of returning to France..."

However, it is no need to panic, according to Michael McGough, member of UKIP.

"Firstly, David Cameron must win the next general election. And anyway, a referendum vote 'out' will probably not change anything for the French citizens living in the UK. They will be free to remain here. They even have an MP to represent them I believe.

"If we do get a referendum, though, I shall vote to leave because I wish to restore my country to freedom and independence," he added.

Just the opposite, Nick Raynsford, Labour MP for Greenwich and Woolwich, hopes that the result of the next election will lead to a new government and that - as a consequence - no referendum will be held.

But on 1 July, several senior Tories signified that the bill over a referendum will include the obligation to hold a referendum. "The bill says that any future Foreign Secretary "shall" introduce a parliamentary instrument on a referendum by 2017. That instrument would then be subject to another Commons vote," said *The Telegraph*.

"The Prime Minister proposition for a vote by 2017 is silly," insisted Mr Raynsford.

"David Cameron is prisoner of the hard line of the Tories. Back in the 1990s, they also had huge arguments about the Maastricht Treaty. But we can't seriously have a referendum each time we decide to modify some European rules. It is ridiculous.

"The decision we took to enter the EU in 1975 - on a referendum - was right. In my constituency, I can hear a very strong voice from the business people who think that a withdrawal would be disastrous. One of them is a very successful French pastry chef, Didier Merveilleux. He works with British Airways, the Parliament and Wimbledon.

"However, this debate is a good opportunity to discuss negotiations. But if we were to leave Europe, the main risk would be a domino effect. Unfortunately, because of the financial crisis and what we have done to Greece, Euroscepticism is growing up all around Europe. For that reason, I think a vote 'out' is possible. Also, it is always easier to get people to vote 'no' than 'yes'. A close question of that sort often gives advantage to negative people," Mr Raynsford said.