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BRITISH EXIT FROM EUROPE IS UNLIKELY

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Huge efforts at damage limitation quickly followed in the footsteps of the British Prime Minister's "historic humiliation" -Financial Times dixit- after his failure to stop the appointment of the former Prime Minister of Luxembourg Jean Claude Juncker, to preside the new European Commission. Many European capitals may be exasperated with David Cameron but they recognise that he must be compensated for his defeat.

Cameron became the first leader to be formally outvoted of nearly 40 years of European Council meetings to choose a president for the European Commission. The fact that his sole ally was the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, is a meagre consolation. The German Chancellor's apology, in private to David Cameron about the course events had taken in the run up to the near unanimous vote of European leaders to appoint Jean Claude Juncker underlined how badly both leaders had miscalculated. The German chancellor leads from behind and failed to appreciate the backlash her reluctance to give full support to a member of her own conservative political grouping would provoke among conservatives parties which had topped the European poll and among the press, notably the powerful Bild daily. The British Prime Minister remains impervious to the fact that the German Chancellor does not have European leaders at her beck and call.

Britain's standing in Europe has sunk in recent years as even old allies such as Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden tire of his uncompromising style and permanent threats to pull his country out of Europe. His threat to bring forward the referendum he has promised for 2017 went down like a lead balloon. Churchillian rhetoric sounds increasingly ridiculous, especially in the wake of the House of Commons' refusal to support military intervention in Syria last summer, the first time a head of government decision in favour of military intervention abroad had been denied in well over a century. Nor is the Prime Minister "principled stand" as he sees it reminiscent of the former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. She had, arguably more than any British Prime Minister since Winston Churchill, a global strategy for Britain. Trying to emulate those two giants is not within David Cameron's reach.

Whatever he promises the Tory party's euro sceptics, they come back for more. A majority of Tory MPs now see Europe as some kind of poisonous potion and claim they would like to jump ship. Voters on the other hand might prove far more pragmatic if they are eventually faced with the question of "in" or "out". Minor changes on certain aspects of justice, home affairs and migrant's access to benefits would probably do the trick. Those Tories who wish to leave Europe will have to spell out what exit entails to an electorate which is notably risk-averse. David Cameron's nomination of a calm and thoughtful mainstream politician, Lord Hill, the leader of the House of Lords, to take over as Britain's next European commissioner suggests that Europe is not quite the lost cause it appears to be in the Conservative Party.

Cameron is hamstrung by his growing incapacity to win allies which is essential if he wishes to forge agreements on reforms many of his peers such as the Swedish prime minister and Angela Merkel agree on. He has many like minded friends in Europe but the British seem to have lost the art of deal making in Brussels. He will have to revisit this art if he is not to see his stature as a leader decline in Britain. That stature, along with a growing economy is essential if he is to come out on top in next year's general election. Pretending that Jean Claude Juncker has British destiny in his hands will not wash with the British electorate.

The success of the UKIP party which now has the largest number of British deputies in the European Parliament is unlikely to be repeated at the general election but it adds to the growing number of voices in Britain which argue that the country would be better out of European Union rather than in it. Even US words of caution, voiced more than once by President Barack Obama have failed to disarm many Tory MPs and a broader swathe of public opinion which seems to want to pull in their horns and go it alone. For Washington, a Britain estranged from its own continent is far less useful as a friend. As fears increase of a yes vote at the looming Scottish referendum, Washington will be tempted to turn increasingly to Berlin.

Powerful voices remain in Britain in favour of staying in Europe, not least in the business community and the City. Recently, the German finance minister said that he felt that Britain leaving Europe was unthinkable. His views are shared by the Dutch and Swedish prime ministers and many on the continent who are unhappy with Europe's capacity to choose politicians who are about to be put out to grass to fill a job – president of the Commission, which might be deemed worthy of a younger, more energetic and imaginative politician. Compromise and the promotion of mediocre people such as Catherine Aston are part and parcel of European politics and explain why many people on the continent show no interest let alone enthusiasm in the management of EU affairs. Whatever his merits, Jean Claude Juncker is hardly going to enthuse more European voters, half of whom do not vote and most of whom have never heard of him. The need for economic reform in Europe is plain for all to see. Britain can, if it so chooses – and it probably will, still make an important contribution.