

Brexit: UK-EU deal agreed as Cameron wins most demands

Compromise allows Britain to impose 'emergency brake' on welfare for seven years

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Denis Staunton in Brussels, Suzanne Lynch in Brussels



Britain faces a referendum on its membership of the European Union this summer after David Cameron won most of his renegotiation demands at the end of a two-day summit in Brussels.

The British prime minister will meet his cabinet on Saturday morning and is expected to set the referendum date for June 23rd.

"I believe that this is enough for me to recommend that the United Kingdom vote to remain in the European Union," Mr Cameron said on Friday night.

In a last-minute concession, EU leaders agreed to strengthen an assertion of Britain's opt-out from the principle of "ever-closer union", or further EU political integration.

"We've never liked it, we've never wanted it and today we've carved Britain out of it. Let me put this in simple terms: Britain will never be part of a European superstate," Mr Cameron said.

Some of the prime minister's Conservative allies have made the issue of sovereignty a litmus test for their support for remaining in the EU. The final text also makes clear that some parts of the deal will be enshrined in the EU treaties.

Campaign vigorously

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Describing a decision to leave the EU as "a leap in the dark" Mr Cameron said he would campaign vigorously to keep Britain inside the EU.

As the summit stretched into Friday night, Mr Cameron was still facing strong opposition from central and eastern European leaders on the issue of reducing welfare benefits for citizens of other EU countries living in Britain.

In the end, a compromise was reached, allowing Britain to impose an "emergency brake" on such payments for a period of seven years.

The British prime minister had already conceded that the reduction of in-work benefit payments for EU migrants would not apply to those already living in the country.

But Britain wanted to immediately start indexing the level of child benefits for children living overseas to take account of different standards of living. Under a compromise, the indexation of child benefits, which any member-state may adopt, will apply to all from 2020.

"This puts an end to the idea that people can come to our country and get something for nothing," Mr Cameron said.

Welfare payments

The Government will invoke an EU Treaty protocol in an attempt to exempt Irish citizens working in Britain from the reduction in welfare payments to EU migrants on the basis of the Common Travel Area between the UK and Ireland.

The Common Travel Area is recognised in Protocol 20 of the EU Treaty and Mr Cameron has already suggested that it could allow Britain to exempt Irish citizens from the welfare benefit changes.

The Government will argue that the Common Travel Area is an expression of the web of arrangements between Britain and Ireland on everything from social welfare to voting, which reflect the unique relationship between the two countries.

Speaking just after midnight in Brussels, Taoiseach Enda Kenny welcomed the fact that the indexation of child benefits would be applicable to all countries.

He said that while the issue of reducing child benefit payments had been part of the programme for Government it would be up to the next government to decide whether to implement the child benefit indexation option.

He said that no Irish person living in Britain would be affected by the deal and expressed confidence that the unique Irish connection with Britain would be acknowledged. “We’re happy that Britain fully understands that,” he said.

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