

DEFENDING WITH ALL DIVISIONS



'Europe', or more correctly the European Union, was seen as one of the issues which could cause problems for the coalition government – and even its demise, according to more dramatic predictions.

However, so far there has barely been a whimper about the EU within the coalition. This is not surprising; there are no new big EU treaties to negotiate and the question of joining the euro is effectively dead, following the eurozone crisis.

But this doesn't mean that the EU has gone away – on the contrary. Scratch the surface and you'll find a range of areas where the EU is demanding the coalition's attention. Working time for junior doctors, civil liberties concerns, energy bills, immigration and the future of the City of London are all examples of areas which to a large extent are dependent on what's happening in Brussels, and where the coalition will come under pressure to act.

As far as the 'big' issues are concerned, there are at least three which could test the coalition in Europe, but which also offer opportunities should the coalition see them through.

First, negotiations on the size and shape of the EU budget post-2013 are just around the corner. The UK will come under massive pressure to give up its rebate from the budget – a hugely symbolic issue. Should the government fail to reach a satisfactory deal – involving, for example, less money towards farm subsidies, securing the rebate, or a decrease in the UK's net contribution to the budget – the Tory wing of the government will be less than pleased.

Secondly, the coalition government will face some absolutely key choices in justice and home affairs. Under the Lisbon Treaty, the government must decide before June 2014 whether to opt in to a series of controversial EU police, justice and immigration laws. If they decide to opt in, it means that the European Court of Justice will have the final say over these laws at the expense of national courts. But if it opts out, these laws will no longer apply to the UK from that date.

So, in effect, the choice will be between repatriating powers or handing over more control to the EU – which the coalition has promised not to do. Given that the Tories

The EU might be in the background but it hasn't gone away as an issue for the coalition, says **Mats Persson** – the rebate, justice powers and eurozone reform will soon come to the fore

and the Lib Dems have taken diametrically opposed positions on some of these proposals in the past, for example the powers of Eurojust (the EU body dealing with judicial co-operation) and the controversial European Arrest Warrant, this choice could prove explosive for the coalition.

The third issue is a potential Treaty change. While there's some way to go before EU leaders agree to open up another painful round of Treaty negotiations, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has repeatedly called for such changes to fix the eurozone. This would require unanimity amongst all member states, and therefore the UK's approval. A Treaty change could spell an ideal opportunity for the UK to ask for powers back – along the lines of the original Tory manifesto – in return for allowing the eurozone to restructure. This would not sit well with the prevailing thinking amongst Lib Dems.

Its mind may be elsewhere for now, but the coalition could soon discover that, as ever, no matter how much you try to ignore it, the EU will never quite leave you alone. 🇪🇺



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