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Britain's drift from Europe
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In "A Jangada de Pedra" (The Stone Raft) the Portuguese writer José Saramago imagines Iberia literally breaking off from the rest of Europe. The earth trembles, the Pyrenees split and the peninsula floats across the open Atlantic. The novel dramatises Spanish and Portuguese insecurities about their place in "Europe", a term that they—like Britons—tend to use in the third person.

Uproar breaks out in capitals on the European mainland; the continent's politicians demand that Iberia's leaders do something to halt the process. In one passage, the Portuguese prime minister addresses his country:

"These developments have exposed the serious internal contradiction in the debates among the governments of Europe, to which we no longer belong. […] But instead of supporting us and showing their true humanity and genuine awareness of European culture, those governments decided to make us the scapegoats for their internal problems, with their absurd demands that we arrest the drifting peninsula, although it would have been more fitting and accurate to speak of navigating."

David Cameron will shortly deliver a not-entirely-dissimilar address to the people of the UK. Britain's geopolitical drift from the European continent seems unstoppable: a force of nature. Voters overwhelmingly tell pollsters they want the government to renegotiate the country's membership of the European Union. They want fewer meddlesome rules on bendy bananas, bungs to French farmers and brakes on Britain's liberal market economy.

The prime minister has indulged this view with talk of a "new settlement". As things stand, a minority of voters say they would support continued EU membership in an immediate referendum. But a *majority* say they would if Mr Cameron were to protect Britain's interests by renegotiating the terms. Perhaps half of the Conservative parliamentary party, gathered around the Fresh Start research project, are similarly inclined. A comfortable 'yes' vote in the referendum that the prime minister will almost certainly promise in his speech depends on renegotiation.

And there's the rub. Europe's governments, not unlike those in "A Jangada da Pedra", are deeply concerned at their neighbour's drift. They have their own internal problems: most notably, the euro-zone crisis. They consider Mr Cameron's attempt to steer his country to more distant waters a nuisance (or, in the words of one Merkel ally, "blackmail"). He in turn is irritated at their intransigence, their "absurd demands" that Britons commit wholeheartedly to the European project.

In reality, any renegotiation will be minor and will carry a hefty diplomatic price tag. Even the opt-outs put forward by the Fresh Start group last week are relatively marginal, barely touching the economic and social integration at the core of Britain's EU membership. Yet even these require five treaty changes. The group's leaders talk reassuringly about sympathetic, reform-minded European neighbours (the Germans in particular) but struggle to name one proposal with the clear support of another member state. Their suggested "nuclear option"—British self-exemption from existing EU rules—is unlikely to prove constructive.

Talk of such an option betrays the real difficulty: Westminster struggles to understand the vast political project creaking into life across the English Channel. For Britain, the relationship with the EU is transactional. For those nations at the core of Europe, a sense of shared destiny oils the wheels of compromise. The French-German partnership, reaffirmed today in Berlin, rests on intense, regular dealmaking, a habit honed through cohabitation and coalition-building in domestic politics. It transcends ideological differences (such as those between Angela Merkel and François Hollande) in a way that befuddles Britons. The next burst of political and economic integration, likely to begin in earnest after September's German election, will advance it much further.

Hence the bafflement amongst Britain's neighbours. The notion of outright, near-unilateral demands—a "shopping list" is the term used by the London press—is about as far removed from the agenda in Paris, Berlin and Brussels as it is possible to be. Yet it lies at the heart of Mr Cameron's plan to keep Britain in the EU. Small wonder, then, that the plan looks shaky.

In parts of London tonight a slight smell of rotten eggs hangs in the air; evidence of a fire at a chemical factory in Rouen, in northern France, earlier today. Evidence, too, that the "continent"—still—lies a few dozen miles off the south coast of England. Politically, though, Britain increasingly resembles a stone raft. The content of today's speech may decide whether the institutional partnerships that tether it to the mainland will still be there in five years.