By Matt Aubonnet

David Cameron set the date for the next British referendum on the membership in the European Union for the 23rd of June 2016. As his position is clear about staying in the EU, many high ranked British politicians such as Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London and Michael Gove, the Justice Secretary, will lead a strong campaign to leave the EU. This question of a continued membership in the EU is constantly evolving and has been since the 1970s. Polls are constantly fluctuating on the topic, bringing to light new subjects of debate such as British independence led by UKIP party's Nigel Farage. One of the key debates currently taking place concerns the limitations placed on British sovereignty by its membership of the EU; in particular, it is debates whether these limitations are *significant*, and whether they are *desirable*.

Whilst one side argues Britain's membership of the EU entails an automatic loss of national sovereignty, the other argues that sovereignty is extended and rendered practicable only through Britain's EU membership. This divide in the concept of sovereignty originates from the definitions used by different individuals. Those opposed to the EU tend to view sovereignty in traditional terms as an attribute of states residing in their formal control over certain policy areas. From this perspective, when decision-making is transferred to the European level, sovereignty is automatically reduced. Those more in favour of EU membership tend to view sovereignty as a capacity – that is, as the ability to influence and control outcomes. Because states can no-longer control economic, environmental, strategic and other issues acting alone, the pooling of authority through EU institutions increases the policymaking capacity of states and thereby increases their sovereignty too.

There is also disagreement over the extent to which withdrawal from the EU would bring back sufficient powers and freedoms to the UK such that a return to a traditional model of state sovereignty would be achieved. Proponents of Brexit argue that leaving the EU would return decision-making authority to the British government in a host of areas where its control is presently limited, including immigration policy, economic policy, and in human rights and judicial affairs. The topic of sovereignty is often related to the question of freedom. In the Brexit movement, parliamentary sovereignty is the key to freedom to make its own laws, without any input from foreign institutions like the EU.

Proponents of remaining in the EU caution that the British government would need to continue to place limitations on its actions in these areas if it wanted to maintain its access to the European single market. Britain would therefore be obliged to apply to rules and regulations without the possibility of deciding, and could become a follower rather than a decider, making Britain *less* 'sovereign' than before. They also point out that British sovereignty is already limited by its membership of a host of international organizations and by being signatory to a large number of treaties. Britain's sovereignty and its freedom of maneuver would continue to be constrained by its membership of NATO, the UN, the Council of Europe, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. It would also continue to be bound by treaties guaranteeing the human rights of its citizens, an issue which has become highly politicized during the referendum campaign.

Ultimately, whether a 'Brexit' would help British sovereignty – if this is what is desired – depends upon complex theoretical and political debates. Theoretically, as noted above, it depends on how one understands sovereignty and what benefits are associated with it (basically, authority versus capacity). Politically, the effects of a Brexit depend on the bargaining power of an independent UK relative to the EU and the extent to which the other member-states would allow derogations from the existing *acquis* of accumulated EU law in order for Britain to retain access to the common market.