

EU renegotiation talks open up “civil war” in UK Tory government

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31 December 2015

UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s negotiations over the terms of Britain’s European Union (EU) membership threaten the breakup of his governing Conservative Party.

To appease the sizable Eurosceptic wing of his party, Cameron pledged in the Tories’ general election manifesto to hold an “in-out” referendum on EU membership by the end of 2017--following a renegotiation of the UK’s terms of membership.

Cameron’s initial attempts earlier this month at reaching a deal with EU leaders failed. This was due to hostility, particularly from eastern European member states, to his proposal to restrict EU migrants’ access to the UK’s in-work benefits, such as tax credits, for four years.

Following the talks, the EU set February as a deadline to reach an agreement with the UK, with Cameron stating that a deal was in the offing and hinting at a possible referendum being held in the summer of 2016.

Over the holiday period, it was reported by the *Politico Europe* web site that German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande were “co-ordinating” and prepared to offer Cameron a compromise. The report claimed they would support EU migrants being banned from claiming in-work benefits in the UK for three years, instead of the four demanded by Cameron.

However, Cameron faces more determined opposition within his own party than he does from EU leaders, with any such deal being nowhere near enough to satisfy his vociferously anti-EU faction.

Cameron is still weighing up whether to allow his Cabinet members and MPs a “free vote” in the EU referendum. It is believed that a number of ministers, including Chris Grayling, Theresa Villiers, John Whittingdale, Michael Gove and others such as Home

Secretary Theresa May, are possibly supporting the campaign to leave the EU.

Another minister, and Cameron’s predecessor as party leader, Iain Duncan Smith, could also openly oppose EU membership. Duncan Smith was designated one of the party’s anti-EU “bastards” by Tory former Prime Minister John Major, as he tried to ratify the Maastricht treaty in 1993.

Major of London Boris Johnson, who has made a series of anti-EU statements, is hedging his bets with reports circulating that Cameron is considering offering him the position of Foreign Secretary to retain his support. Johnson said recently, “In an ideal world, I want to stay in a reformed European Union but I think the price of getting out is lower than it’s ever been.”

On December 21, the pro-EU Lord Heseltine warned of a “civil war” in the party if cabinet ministers were allowed to openly campaign to leave the EU in the event that the prime minister secured an agreement with the EU and was calling for a vote to stay. Heseltine said, “To have a civil war within the Conservative Party at that time in the belief that the referendum, having been determined, the participants in the civil war are going to sit round the table and happily smile together I think is rather naive.”

A free vote would mean the “divisions, the divisiveness, the bitterness that would flow would actually, in my view, make the prime minister’s position look very difficult,” Heseltine added. “If they [the anti-EU ministers] feel so strongly they should resign, although it is quite difficult for me to understand how they’re in the cabinet in the first place.”

According to Steve Baker MP, the co-chairman of the Conservatives for Britain group, which is allied to the cross-party Vote Leave campaign, “over half of the

Conservative party is strongly leaning to leave.”

Baker said Cameron had so far only won “inconsequential” reforms regarding EU membership and is demanding a free vote is granted. Baker said, “I think there might be about 130 MPs in total who might lean in favour of voting to remain. That is a minority in the Conservative party and I think that is throughout government as well.”

He later told *Sky News*, “I think it is inevitable that some members of the cabinet will feel they have to resign if they are browbeaten into supporting a deal this flimsy.”

Baker is backed by senior figures including Liam Fox, who served under Cameron as a defence secretary, and Graham Brady, the chair of the influential 1922 committee, which represents backbench Tory MPs.

Writing in the *Sunday Times* December 20, Fox said of the concessions Cameron is seeking, “I do not believe they are a reason to stay in an organisation whose direction of travel is, in my view, against Britain's national interest.

“The renegotiation itself reinforces this view. The fact that a British prime minister has been in effect forced to take the political begging bowl around European capitals in order to make the laws he believes are necessary for Britain is the best possible demonstration of the problem.”

In a comment in the anti-EU *Daily Mail* Sunday , David Davis MP wrote, “As a former Europe Minister, it pains me to say that I have reached a tipping point and concluded that it is in both our best interests and the EU’s best interests that we seek our future in the wider world.”

He warned, “[T]here is one way to guarantee a Conservative civil war and that’s if the party leadership insists that Cabinet Ministers toe the party line throughout the referendum campaign.”

Davis concluded, “This policy will founder under the weight of its own stupidity. If it does not, and Ministers start to resign, this will provide the greatest possible accelerant to the ‘Out’ campaign that it could ever wish for. So expect a quiet climbdown from that particular policy.”

Leading Eurosceptic John Redwood predicted that “half a dozen” cabinet members believe “pretty strongly” that Cameron’s EU deal “won’t be good enough” and will join the Vote Leave campaign.

Speaking to the BBC, he said if the referendum resulted in a vote to leave, Cameron would be forced to resign, “[B]ecause you would need someone who believes in leaving, who could go to France and Germany who could sort it out in an amicable but firm way.”

Cameron is also a hostage to the anti-Europe UK Independence Party, to which several Tory MPs have already defected. He is being dictated to by his anti-EU opponents to an extent that could result in his removal as prime minister and the fall of his government.

Under conditions where no deal that Cameron is able to seal with the EU is likely to satisfy his anti-EU wing, the prime minister is tied to a divisive referendum on membership. This is despite a “Brexit” (British withdrawal from the EU) being opposed by the major European powers, Britain’s main international ally, the United States, China, which the Cameron government is developing close ties to, and a large portion of big business in Britain.



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