

Divisions within UK Tory party deepen over EU membership

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13 January 2016

To avoid damaging resignations from his front bench, Conservative UK prime minister David Cameron plans to grant a free vote to cabinet members in the upcoming referendum on Britain's continued membership in the European Union (EU).

The move was necessitated by estimations that between half and two-thirds (221) of the parliamentary party's 330 MPs support Britain leaving the EU, even though the party's leadership team calculate that when it comes to the crunch only half that number (110) will actively campaign to leave. A recent poll suggested 75 percent of the Tory membership is in favour of a Brexit.

Cameron has again proved himself hostage to the anti-European elements within his cabinet. Chris Grayling, the leader of the House of Commons, and Northern Ireland secretary Theresa Villiers told Cameron December 4 that he must clarify his position. Press reports indicate they threatened to openly defy cabinet responsibility if they did not get their own way, or to resign their positions.

The two cabinet ministers plan to join fellow cabinet member, the former Tory party leader and current work and pensions secretary Iain Duncan Smith and others in campaigning for Britain to leave the EU. In a move that will deeply disappoint them, Foreign Secretary Phillip Hammond said he "can't envisage" campaigning to leave the EU if Cameron recommends Britain should stay in. Last October, he indicated that he might vote to quit.

Grayling and Villiers dressed up their strong-arming of Cameron as a vital democratic move, designed to give British voters both sides of the argument. The right-wing press response to the news of Cameron's decision was ecstatic. The *Daily Mail* proclaimed itself "delighted" that Cameron had heeded their advice,

while columnist Peter Osborne opened his column with "About time too!"

Not only are government ministers to be allowed a free vote, but they will also be able to actively campaign and agitate for a no vote and a British exit from the EU. Cabinet members who do so will effectively be campaigning alongside the extreme right-wing Eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The former trade secretary from Margaret Thatcher's 1980s Tory administrations, Michael Heseltine, had said earlier that such a move would make Cameron a "laughing stock around the world" and would be a "humiliation" for the prime minister.

Cameron has indeed been humiliated. Speaking on Radio Four, another pro-European former minister from the Thatcher period, Ken Clarke, politely described Cameron's decision as "unfortunate," before warning that it threatened to break up the Tory party. Clarke compared the prime minister's predicament to that of Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who also faces a hard-line right-wing opposition in his own shadow cabinet.

Harking back to his own time in the 1980s cabinet, Clarke echoed Heseltine in calling on those ministers who wish for a no vote in the referendum to do the "honourable thing" and resign their positions.

Cameron has written to his ministers, warning, "All ministers should continue to support the position set out in our manifesto and say or do nothing that will undermine the Government's negotiating position."

He urged "ministers on both sides of the debate to treat each other with appropriate respect and courtesy" and to "remain, despite differences on this one issue, a united, harmonious, mutually respectful team."

In reality, a civil war within the party over EU membership is already in full swing. Both sides are

working on the presumption that the referendum will not be held until at least four months after the conclusion of Cameron's negotiations but are already making their positions public. Cameron expects negotiations to be over by February and predicts the referendum will be held sometime in the summer rather than later in the year, as was previously suggested. He hopes that an early vote will cut the ground from under any attempt to swing public opinion away from supporting EU membership.

In the House of Commons, after the free vote announcement, the MP for Shipley, Tory Eurosceptic Philip Davies, suggested during Prime Minister's Question Time that Cameron's EU negotiations were "choreographed" and "nonsense." Cameron angrily responded, "*The whole government is behind me, while you carp and cavil at someone who is getting the job done.*"

Cameron has since then been forced to state that he wishes to continue as prime minister and leader of the Tory party even if the no vote proves victorious. He was asked by the BBC's Andrew Marr on Sunday, "If you lose the referendum, do you stay as prime minister? You can't, can you?"

He replied, "The answer to that is yes." The question on the ballot paper was whether to remain or leave the EU, not "this politician's future or that politician's future."

Such claims are somewhat fanciful. The likelihood of a victorious and emboldened right-wing Eurosceptic wing in the party not immediately calling for Cameron's resignation and his replacement with someone closer to their own views is slim indeed.

One possible contender for the party leadership, London mayor Boris Johnson, is waiting to see which way the wind blows and will opt for whichever side looks like it is winning. Home Secretary Theresa May is also understood to be biding her time and waiting for the outcome of Cameron's attempted renegotiations. But she is likely to join her fellow Eurosceptics and campaign for a no vote.

The *Financial Times* stated that some Tory MPs believe Cameron will resign if he loses the referendum, rather than renegotiate Britain's EU exit, before adding that therefore cabinet ministers campaigning for a Brexit are also effectively campaigning for the ousting of Cameron.

Daily Mail column, Peter I. Osborne pointed out that Cameron has said before that he will not serve as prime minister past 2020, and so "the EU referendum offers the perfect chance for those who want to succeed him to make their pitch. These are not decisions that can be put off much longer."

Cameron provoked an angry response from his critics after he told BBC One's "Andrew Marr Show" that a Brexit was "not the right answer" and by suggesting the government was not even planning for the possibility of a vote to leave the EU. "I think there is a huge prize for Britain. If we can deal with the things that drive us up the wall about Europe, we can get the best of both worlds and secure our economic future inside this valuable market."

Senior anti-EU Tory MP David Davis said it was "disgraceful, astonishing" not to have a Brexit plan, while others complained that they were gagged while Cameron and other pro-EU MPs were able to campaign for their position freely.



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