

Divisions over Europe tear through UK Conservative Party

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Bitter divisions within the ruling Conservatives over Europe reached breaking point over the weekend. A number of leading Tory euro-sceptics supporting the campaign to leave the EU in the June 23 referendum on UK membership made unprecedented attacks on Prime Minister David Cameron.

On Sunday, MP Nadine Dorries, speaking to ITV's Peston on Sunday, said she wanted Cameron to step down as party leader as he "lied profoundly" during the referendum campaign. This was "really at the heart of why Conservative MPs have been so angered. There are many issues about which David Cameron has told outright lies and the trust because of that has gone in both him and [Chancellor] George Osborne."

Under Tory rules, in order to trigger a no confidence vote in a party leader, 50 MPs have to write letters to the chairman of the Conservative Party's backbench 1922 committee. Dorries declared, "My letter's already in. If the Remain camp wins by a large majority, let's say 60:40, then David Cameron might just survive. But if Remain win by a narrow majority or if Leave—as I certainly hope, I think—will win, he's toast within days."

Dorries was backed by another backbench MP, Andrew Bridgen, who told BBC's Radio 5 Live, "Whether he wins or loses this referendum, David Cameron is probably finished as party leader. If the country votes to leave the EU, he should—and probably will—choose to resign."

Cameron had "infuriated Conservative colleagues so much that if the result is a vote for Remain, he will almost certainly face a vote of no confidence."

Bridgen had not yet sent a letter to the 1922 Committee but warned, "There will easily be 50 MPs who will write letters ... We will have to have a new leader and he or she will need to go to the country to

get a fresh mandate and a bigger majority. We could be looking at a general election before ... the autumn."

On Monday, Bill Cash, chair of parliament's European Scrutiny committee, said in an interview with the euro-sceptic *Daily Telegraph* that the Remain campaign have "been engaged in monumentally misleading propaganda" before warning they only had "a very, very short time in which to correct all this."

He added, "I am certainly considering it [a letter to the 1922 Committee] ... My

powerful warning to them is get your act together, make sure that you put voters first and the country first."

Sir Gerald Howarth, a former defence minister under Cameron, said, "Either they [Remain] change the tone of their campaign to recognise the profound and deep-seated patriotism that we feel or they will reap the whirlwind."

The Sun cited an unnamed Tory MP who said Cameron's opponents wanted to "stab the PM [prime minister] in the front" so they "can see the expression on his face".

A letter was issued to Cameron by Cabinet Minister Michael Gove and former London Mayor Boris Johnson, both leadership contenders, stressing that the prime minister had failed to meet his manifesto commitment to reduce net migration to the UK. Gisela Stuart, the Labour MP and co-chairman of the official Vote Leave campaign, also signed. This was in reference to last week's figures showing net migration to Britain stood at 330,000 last year.

Seeking to whip up hysteria among the most anti-immigrant layers within the parliamentary party and wider Tory base, the letter stated, "Last year 270,000 people came to this country from the EU. Net migration overall was 184,000. That means we are adding a

population the size of Oxford to the UK every year just from EU migration. This puts particular strain on public services.”

Last week, the Leave campaign acknowledged that the remainder of their campaign would be exclusively centred on the issue of immigration. The letter underscored this, reading, “We are particularly concerned about the impact of free movement in the future on public services.” Increases in school class sizes and National Health Service waiting lists would be inevitable “if we don’t tackle free movement” of EU citizens coming from Southern Europe “to escape unemployment and austerity.”

A Leave vote was necessary in order to “ensure that the public can vote for those who determine Britain’s immigration policy.”

While those who have openly called for the removal of Cameron are confined to a few backbenchers, the party is split almost down the middle. According to the *Daily Mail*, “[O]ne MP said he believed at least 20 letters had been sent to the Tory 1922 backbench committee calling for a no-confidence vote in the Prime Minister.”

Almost half the parliamentary party are committed to the Leave campaign. Of 330 Tory MPs, 142 have declared for Leave, while a majority, 172, support Remain. Sixteen MPs have not yet declared. To remove Cameron, assuming 50 MPs signed a letter for a vote of confidence, it would take 165 MPs to oppose him remaining leader. However, as one “senior well-placed Tory MP” said to the *Times*, with a vote of confidence in Cameron, “The intention would be to wound and in so doing to hasten his exit.”

With the referendum only three weeks away, several Tory supporting newspapers expressed opposition to efforts to remove Cameron that could lead to new elections. On Sunday, the *Telegraph* in an editorial, “Conservatives should focus on the referendum campaign, not plot against David Cameron”, commented, “The Conservative capacity for self-harm over the issue of Europe should never be underestimated.” Describing the anti-EU faction, it stated, “Many of those who seem keen to see the Prime Minister depart were hostile to his leadership long before the referendum.”

The *Times*, owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, headlined a front-page article, “I dare you to

depounce me, Cameron tells rebels.”

The piece reported, “Cameron is to reject demands from Tory rebels that he should set a date for his departure from No 10.” Summing up the crisis it noted, “The party’s civil war threatens to effectively put his leadership on the ballot paper on June 23.”

Murdoch’s *Sun* tabloid, said that Sunday “was supposed to be the day that the Leave campaign rammed home their vital message on immigration. Instead a series of bizarre outbursts by egomaniac Tory backbenchers blew the Out camp off course yesterday and allowed the story to become one of Conservative Party splits.”

It continued, “The Brexit camp needs to focus on confronting the scare stories and falsehoods of the Remainers” and “not be distracted from holding the PM’s feet to the fire over what EU membership means for Britain’s out-of-control immigration numbers.”

On Monday, Cameron and the opposition Labour Party closed ranks. The Tories are reliant on Labour and its trade union backers to deliver the votes of millions of their members and supporters for Remain. Cameron spoke alongside Sadiq Khan, Labour’s newly elected Mayor of London. Remain “has brought together this extraordinary coalition Labour, Liberal, Conservative, Green, business, trade union, NGO—all together knowing this is the right answer,” he said.

Remain are in no way a progressive force in comparison with Leave. They represent the dominant sections of the ruling elite who view membership of the EU as in the best interests of British capital. Khan said the economic case for remaining was “crystal clear,” while stressing, “There is a patriotic case as well”. Cameron and Khan launched a five-point “guarantee card,” pledging Remain would secure full access to the EU’s single market, protect workers’ rights, keep the European Arrest Warrant system, keep a special status in Europe for the UK, and ensure stability.



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