

Cameron/Farage debate on EU dominated by anti-immigrant rhetoric

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Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage took part in a question-and-answer session before a live TV audience Tuesday, on the upcoming referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU).

Typifying the use of the referendum campaign to shift politics sharply to the right, virtually the whole event was centred on the issue of immigration.

Cameron leads the Remain campaign, promising to implement the deal he negotiated with the EU that includes denying European migrants the right to claim in-work welfare benefits, restrictions on child benefits for EU migrants to the rate of their home country and a defence of the financial swindlers in the City of London.

This is deemed by the Leave campaign to be a betrayal of Cameron's pledge to oppose the free movement of EU citizens and to cut net immigration to fewer than 100,000 a year. Farage is part of the Grassroots Out organisation, which lost to Vote Leave—run by senior Tories Boris Johnson and Michael Gove—to be designated as the official campaign. But with divisions over Europe splitting the Tory Party, Cameron has refused to debate with Johnson and Gove, saying in May, “I don't want too many blue on blue conflicts.” Under conditions in which Cameron's days in office are considered numbered, whatever the result of the referendum, such a debate would take on the character of a party leadership debate.

To avoid this, Cameron agreed to be pitted against Farage, who is not an MP, but only then on the basis that they did not appear together but answered questions separately from an audience.

Politically, however, Farage stands in the same trench as Johnson and Gove. As the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its statement calling for an active boycott,

“The referendum is the outcome of a manoeuvre by Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013 to prevent a further haemorrhaging of support for the Tories in favour of the United Kingdom Independence Party, even as Cameron sought to utilise UKIP's anti-immigrant xenophobia to push official politics further to the right.”

To this end, UKIP, which has just one MP, has been the beneficiary of years of promotion in ruling circles. Farage is a regular on the current affairs programmes of UK TV channels and was afforded a referendum campaign diary by the anti-EU *Daily Express*.

Farage answered questions first for 30 minutes. Adopting a populist pose, the former commodity stockbroker presented the Leave case as one directed against a pro-EU “status quo”. He sought to justify anti-immigrant measures by blaming migrants for the collapse in wages and destruction of health care and housing suffered by millions over the last decade.

One audience member denounced Farage for his most recent scaremongering, suggesting that a Remain vote would lead to women in Britain being subjected to sexual assaults by foreigners he claimed had happened in Cologne, Germany, in the New Year.

Farage said, “I am used to being demonised because I have taken on the establishment.” When she replied that it was he who was “demonising migrants”, Farage boasted of how positions pioneered by UKIP had been embraced more broadly: “When I first suggested we should have an Australian-style points system, you'd think I'd said something dreadful. And now I'm pleased to say lots of people are saying it.”

Holding up his passport, Farage said border controls were “our only chance to get a grip on this issue.” He added, “In no other system in the world do we have free movement of people along with free movement of

goods.”

In answer to an observation that remaining in the EU would make the economy more competitive, Farage replied, “There is more to this country than just being competitive”. It was “wrong” to have “opened up our doors to nearly half a billion people and to flood our labour market.”

He added, “It is wrong, wrong, wrong that for average decent families in this country their living standards have fallen by 10 percent over the course of the last few years and it’s about time as a society not just about the GDP figures, not just about the rich getting richer, but about ordinary decent Britons who have had a rotten time.”

As well as supposedly driving down wages, Farage claimed that rising migration would lead in an increase in the UK population to 80 million, adding, “We need to build a new house every *four* minutes night and day just to cope with the current numbers.”

Referencing the EU’s continent-wide austerity programme, he said, “Just look at what they’ve done to Greece and those Mediterranean countries. The migrant crisis is not just leading to divided countries but dividing within countries leading to a whole new brand of politics.”

Farage could make these incendiary statements without fear of being contradicted. The last thing Cameron can do is to point out that it is his government, including Johnson and Gove, which has, like Labour before it, spent years deliberately smashing up wages and conditions and gutting public services. Or to point out that he and Farage and company are equally intent on imposing greater attacks in future, whether inside or outside the EU.

Cameron also faced hostile questions, but ones carefully selected to continue the anti-migrant theme. A 40-year-old Asian Tory voter was chosen to state that Cameron had failed for allowing “uncontrolled immigration”. As a result, “The place where I grew up was once a lovely area but it is now a no-go zone. ... I have no GP [doctor] as they are all full in my area, I can’t get on the housing ladder and have three kids in one room.”

Another audience member, a businessman, said Cameron had been “humiliated” by the EU in his renegotiation of Britain’s terms, as he had not been able to restrict freedom of movement in the EU. He had

difficulty recruiting skilled workers from outside the EU, whereas an unskilled worker from the EU “could just walk in here.”

The Remain campaign has nothing remotely progressive to offer in response. Indeed, they too have assiduously cultivated anti-migrant sentiment for years to divert blame for the consequences of their austerity measures. Cameron himself referred to the refugees and asylum seekers who are living in appalling conditions in camps in Calais, northern France, and who have been subject to brutal attacks by French riot police, as a “swarm of people.”

Cameron replied that “There are good ways of controlling immigration and there are bad ways of controlling immigration. A good way is saying people can come here...but they have to pay in before they can get out [receive welfare benefits]. And when it comes to immigration from outside the EU—which of course is more than half—we do put a limit on the numbers for economic reasons.”

The campaign to remain in the EU was “deeply patriotic,” he declared.



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