

Cameron confirms Cabinet members can campaign for either side in referendum

Yesterday's announcement that David Cameron would allow cabinet members to campaign either for or against leaving the EU in the forthcoming referendum has been widely expected for some time.

While such a move was opposed by, among others, Ken Clarke, the veteran Europhile former cabinet minister, it was apparent that the Prime Minister had no choice as any insistence on a collective Cabinet line would have triggered a significant number of resignations.

The press has had a field day speculating on which side of the divide the various ministers will take, but this is to overstate their importance. When it comes to the referendum date, Conservative Cabinet ministers will only have one vote, just like the rest of us.

Furthermore, trying to second-guess the intentions of these men and women is a pretty pointless exercise at this stage. We can take it as read that Cameron will achieve little of substance but his "British Model" – associate membership – will be bulled up with all the shine that can possibly be given to it and sold as a brilliant piece of negotiation.

It may well be that, at this point, many of the likely Cabinet "leavers" (at least, likely in the eyes of the Press) will fall into line and support the Prime Minister. A few, like the Stanleys at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, may delay their decision until the last minute to ensure they end up on the winning side. Perhaps one of two may campaign consistently for withdrawal from the moment Cameron announces the conclusions of his renegotiations. While such ministers may be

able to make a useful contribution to the campaign, their impact will be much less than one might think from reading today's newspapers.

Ultimately, if the "Leave" campaign is to prevail, it must not place too much reliance on politicians at all. Readers who have been following John Ashworth's excellent series of articles on this website will have observed how it has been government ministers and their accomplices in the Civil Service who have sold the livelihoods of thousands of UK fishermen for a mess of European pottage. Are we to assume that those connected with fisheries are an atypical, isolated bunch of traitorous rogues in contrast to everyone dealing with other aspects of our membership of the EU whose behaviour has been consistently angelic throughout? Of course not.

Selling the "Leave" campaign as the people's revolt against our unscrupulous leaders may have considerable mileage given the low level of trust in politicians these days. This, of course, does not preclude honourable, decent MPs and MEPs playing an active role, but their willingness not to hog the limelight during the campaign will be a pretty reliable indicator of their suitability for high office in the immediate post-independence era.

Let us be clear:- withdrawal will deliver a massive shock to the political system – perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make significant, beneficial changes to the way in which we are governed. If ordinary people can be seen to have engineered a great victory in the referendum, they will have created a momentum that will not easily be dissipated the day Article 50 is invoked. We will not want a repeat of the disgraceful behaviour of those politicians who led us blindfold into the EEC in 1973. Better mechanisms need to be put in place for us to hold them to account. Unfortunately, the one group of people with the potential to dampen down enthusiasm for reform are politicians themselves, along with their accomplices in Whitehall. They cannot be allowed to do

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