Paul Stocker
Brexit or BrexIn: Britain Decides its European Fate

Following the conclusion of David Cameron's EU 'renegotiation' deal at the EU summit in Brussels on February 19, he announced a day later that the referendum is to be held on June 23 - marking the effective beginning of the campaign which will settle the 'Brexit' question. We have been here before. In 1975, Britain had a referendum on the then-called 'European Community' which was won by the 'In' camp by a whopping 35% margin. It will not be so straightforward this time, however, and the pro-EU side need to hit the ground running in highlighting the dangers of Brexit, but more so, the positives of BrexIn.

How did we get here? It is difficult not to come to the conclusion that the question of Europe has remained the defining issue for the Conservative Party for the last three decades, and the referendum reflects the final reckoning of this debate – albeit one which the whole country could become the victim of. Cameron has tied himself in knots over the Europe question ever since he became Conservative Party leader over a decade ago. As have all Tory leaders who have succeeded the Tories' Eurosceptic-in-chief, Margaret Thatcher (William Hague's anti-EU themed general election campaign in 2001 was a disaster). Cameron's own view has continued to be pragmatic – a rare commodity in British politics these days – that Britain is, on the whole, better off within the EU than out. Yet he has faced assaults since he became Prime Minister in 2010; both from EU-hating backbench MPs within the Tory Party, critical of his coalition with the pro-EU Liberal Democrats, as well as the generally Eurosceptic party membership. Furthermore, the rise of UKIP cannot be ignored. His decision to offer a referendum in the first place, was undoubtedly influenced by the misguided assumption that UKIP posed a threat to Tory seats in the 2015 General Election. For the man who upon becoming Tory leader pledged to stop the party 'banging on about Europe', he has not only failed – he has failed spectacularly.

The pro-Brexit camp received a huge boost on Sunday following the announcement from Mayor of London Boris Johnson that he supports Britain's exit from Europe. Over the last few months, the 'out' camp has been nothing less than shambolic. Rival organisations all supporting Brexit (the Conservative 'Vote Leave', UKIP's 'Leave.EU' and the cross-party 'Grassroots Out' to name just a few) have had more squabbles between one another than with the 'In' camp. They have also lacked a figurehead. UKIP leader Nigel Farage – too polarising. Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith – a failed Tory leader and loathed by vast swathes of the country for his welfare reforms. Respect Party Leader George Galloway – politically to the left of Lenin and better known for impersonating a cat whilst dressed in a leotard on Celebrity Big Brother over a decade ago. Johnson (as well as the cerebral Justice Secretary Michael Gove, who also announced support for Brexit on Saturday) will thus likely play the defining role for the 'Out' camp and is a major coup for them. Yet, aside from the gaining of a popular politician who is likely to play an important role in the referendum – it will nevertheless be a debate about what the late Eurosceptic and socialist firebrand Tony Benn called the 'ishoos' (that's issues to you and me). In terms of the issues, the 'Out' camp has it all to do.

Most importantly, the 'Out' camp will have to spell out, and quickly, what a post-EU Britain will look like to the electorate with more than vague and misleading notions of 'independence', 'control' or 'sovereignty'. Presenting Brexit as what Donald Rumsfeld would call a 'known unknown' is possibly the 'In' camp's strongest card, and has already been utilised by David Cameron, who said on Monday that leaving the EU was a 'leap in the dark'. Thus, pro-Brexiters will have to agree amongst themselves a post-Brexit vision for Britain in the world. This is their biggest hurdle, given the range of ideological persuasions within the Out group. Daniel Hannan, Tory MEP, envisages some kind of imperial renaissance for Britain who can finally return to

trading with their former-colonies. Never mind that the Prime Minister of economic juggernaut India has hinted that Indian-British economic ties may in fact suffer should Britain leave the EU. UKIP imagine that Britain can maintain full access to the EU's single market, comply with security arrangements which suit Britain and do away with those they don't like, exempt Britain from the free movement of people, protect British industry from EU competition and force France to hand over all their champagne (I made that last one up). Basically, they want to have their fruit cake and eat it, and then eat it again. Left-wing Eurosceptics, such as George Galloway, have been considerably more vague in terms of conceptualising a post-Brexit Britain. They have offered little as to how Brexit would advance social justice in the UK, arguing somewhat unconvincingly, that leaving the EU would 'deliver true democracy to British voters' and break away from the EU's alleged neo-liberal economic consensus. Given that the left will play only a minor role for the Brexiters I don't envisage much change.

The 'Out' camp's success ultimately depends on this crucial issue of the plausibility of their post-Brexit vision. It should be a relatively easy task for the pro-EU side to pick holes in their arguments and generally terrify people into voting for the safer option to stay. Yet this is not what they should do. 'Europhiles', as we are pejoratively called by Nigel Farage's mob, have a golden opportunity to promote the positives of EU membership to the public. The benefits in terms of trade, foreign policy, security, combatting climate change and a peaceful continent are all powerful arguments in themselves which, if deployed correctly, far outweigh the power of scaremongering. The pro-EU side must not descend into 'Project Fear' – a term used by pro-Independence Scots to describe the 'Better Together' campaign – which warned of unparalleled misery, dystopia and destruction in the event of Scottish independence.

The good news is all this is perfectly achievable, and I, for one, am looking forward to the debate Britain has needed for decades to finally decide its fate within the EU.