

POLITICO

David Cameron unleashes ‘project fear’

Downing Street will put the prime minister front-and-center in a big-spending referendum campaign.

By

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David Cameron delivers a speech on the European Union to workers and guests at the headquarters of O2 | Pool image by Hannah McKay/Getty

LONDON — British voters will never love the European Union. But maybe they can be terrified into voting not to leave it.

As a four-month media blitz kicked off this week, instilling fear into Britons if they decide to break with mainland Europe was Downing Street's strategy for defeating the Brexit camp. In speeches and interviews, David Cameron and his allies bluntly warned of shock to the economy and the job market and terrorist attacks if Britain leaves.

The tabloids have dubbed the campaign "Project Fear."

It's a re-run of the playbook that prevailed in the Scottish independence vote two years ago.

This time, the stakes are even higher and Cameron himself will be front-and-center of the campaign, using television appearances, interviews and social media to convince 45 million voters that a Brexit vote is too much of a gamble, whatever their reservations about Brussels.

Key advisers include Chancellor George Osborne and Downing Street's communications strategist Craig Oliver, who both worked on the Scottish campaign. Joining them in Project Fear 2 is Jim Messina, a former campaign strategist for Barack Obama, who helped Cameron win a majority in last year's general elections.

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The prime minister's camp suffered an early blow, with Tory heavyweights Boris Johnson and Michael Gove throwing their support behind Brexit. Cameron kicked off his campaign to keep Britain in the EU on the defensive, after the conservative media pilloried his deal with Brussels. But his allies are confident he will rebound, if they keep making the argument that leaving the European Union would be a gamble not worth taking.

No. 10's media strategy over the next few months, according to a senior official, is

to “keep making the case with the PM, who is seen by many millions on TV.”

In speeches and interviews in recent days, Cameron has reiterated the same handful of soundbites.

A vote to leave is a “leap in the dark.” Britain is “safer, stronger, better” staying in. The deal with Brussels, while not perfect, ended the prospect of European migrants getting “something for nothing,” by taking money from the British state before they’ve worked there. Remaining in the EU, without being part of its two failing treaties, Schengen and the euro, mean Britain getting the “best of both worlds.”

Reinforcing that message this week were a couple of coordinated open letters from prominent figures, a staple of British election campaigns. A letter from a group of powerful chief executives warned of the potential economic consequences of a Brexit vote. In a separate letter to the Daily Telegraph, former military chiefs warned of security threats from Russia to ISIL.

“In a dangerous world, [EU membership] helps us to safeguard our people, our prosperity and our way of life,” they said.

TV campaign

The prime minister will personally be much more involved in this campaign than he was in the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, when he took a back seat rather than risk provoking a backlash among Scottish voters disgruntled at the Westminster leadership. This time, Cameron — a former public relations man — will lead from the front, throwing the full weight of his office, and his personal authority, behind the campaign.

He is an effective campaigner, his supporters say, and his ability to connect with voters is stronger than he is given credit for. They cite his undisputed achievements: He defied predictions last May and led Conservatives to their first outright majority in a general election since the early 1990s. He has won referendum campaigns twice before.

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The focus of the media strategy will be the main TV channels, such as the BBC and ITV.

Downing Street, influenced by Oliver, a former senior BBC journalist, regards the broadcasters as by far the most important media outlet shaping public opinion; their nightly news bulletins reach millions of people every night. Unlike the newspapers, TV networks are legally obliged to be impartial. Viewers of their news bulletins will get a less hostile take on Cameron’s comments than readers of some of the print media. (That works to the other side’s advantage, too.)

Hours after returning from Brussels last weekend, Cameron appeared on the Andrew Marr Show, the BBC’s main Sunday morning current affairs TV program, which is closely watched by London media and political elites. In the coming weeks, his team will use the broadcasters to also get their message far beyond the Westminster bubble, to voters who don’t pay much attention to the day-to-day cut-and-thrust of politics. In the run-up to the general election, for example, he appeared several times on Good Morning Britain, a lightweight, magazine-style breakfast show on ITV, the main commercially-funded network.

Televised debates will also feature heavily in the campaign.

The BBC is planning three live programs in the run-up to the vote: a debate on May 19 in Glasgow, aimed at young voters “who are traditionally alienated by conventional political coverage;” a special edition of its weekly Question Time Q&A show on June 19, with one senior figure from each side of the In-Out referendum debate; and a live debate at London’s Wembley Arena two days before the vote, billed by the public broadcaster as “BBC’s biggest ever campaign event.”



London Mayor Boris Johnson is supporting the Out campaign | Niklas Halle'n/AFP/Getty

There was a huge row between the political parties before the general election last year about the format of these debates. Cameron, running ahead of the other leaders in approval ratings, thought he had little to gain from agreeing to a head-to-head on TV with his main opponents.

In the end, he agreed to take part in one conventional leaders debate, but his other live appearances were restricted to question-and-answer sessions with presenters and a studio audience, rather than a direct confrontation on stage with his main opponents. Pundits criticized the prime minister as “out of touch” and “running scared,” but insisting that the debates be held on his terms did not hurt him on the day of the vote.

‘Weird leap’

Print media is a more of a problem for Cameron.

The Guardian and the Financial Times will likely urge their readers in editorials to Remain, but, unlike previous votes in recent years, much of the influential right-wing press has so far lined up against him. Coverage of his deal with Brussels in the Times, the Sun, the Telegraph, the Daily Mail, and the Daily Express was scathing.



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"Who do EU think you're kidding Mr Cameron?" said the front page headline in the Sun after his initial agreement with European Council President Donald Tusk was revealed.

With their readerships declining, it is arguable just how much influence these newspapers still have over voters' decisions. They still sell millions of copies a day and often drive the broadcasters' news agenda, putting Cameron's camp in a bind: they can't simply write them off as implacably Euroskeptic, and have them relentlessly attack him day-after-day for the next few months.

"It's not a combination you want to be up against," John Rentoul, a columnist for the Independent newspaper, said in an interview.

Fortunately for the prime minister, the right-wing press is not a uniform block and most, for all their reservations about the EU, are still biddable. Despite their bluster about Brussels, most of them haven't yet committed explicitly to Brexit. (The Daily Express is an exception.)

Recent editorials have seemed as concerned about making the campaign a genuine contest as they have about its actual outcome. It may be that, after all the bluster and rhetoric, several of the conservative papers end up urging their readers to vote to stay.

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Rupert Murdoch's Times and Sun will be worth watching. Murdoch is instinctively anti-EU, but would also weigh up what Brexit would mean for his European businesses. A report in the Mail on Sunday last year claimed he agreed privately with ministers that his newspaper would not support Brexit. In a tweet in response to that story, Murdoch described the Mail on Sunday's claim as a "weird leap," but did not deny it.

Cameron will also use less obvious media channels to reach voters. In the general election campaign last year, he gave a video interview to *Heat*, a gossip women's magazine, in which he discussed multi-tasking, his fear of rats and the Kardashians. He was widely mocked by the Westminster-Fleet Street establishment. He also did a live-streamed Q&A with BuzzFeed, which was hailed as novel for a British leader.

Big spender

The campaign will also involve aggressive use of social media.

The Conservatives made extensive use of Facebook in the run-up to last year's general election, spending more than £1 million on likes and advertisements targeting voters. British political strategists have followed the social media strategy deployed by their American counterparts in presidential campaigns, targeting swing voters on Facebook and using Twitter to galvanize supporters, rally volunteers and engage key journalists.



Rupert Murdoch is instinctively anti-EU, but would also weigh up what Brexit would mean for his European businesses | Adrian Sanchez-Gonzalez/AFP/Getty

Social media is “rocketing up in importance to political parties,” said Carl Miller, research director at the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at the think tank Demos.

Voters are likely to face a barrage of emails, leaflets, billboards and online video advertisements from the campaign groups in the next few months.

“It would be fair to say it will be the biggest-spending referendum campaign ever

[in the U.K.],” Benedict Pringle, a commentator on political advertising, said in an interview.

Under referendum rules, the campaign advertising will be done through the official campaign group, Britain Stronger In Europe. Officially designated groups are entitled to spend up to £7 million on the campaign and are granted a set amount of free advertising time on TV.

Britain Stronger in Europe has not waited for the campaign to officially begin to start trying to reach voters, Pringle points out. It has already run several video advertisements online, including one that resembles the type of attack ads common in American campaigns, using the opposition’s own statements against them.

Judging by other campaigns recently, the rhetoric will get rancorous and the blows will get personal.

In the lead-up to the vote on reforming the electoral system in 2011, Cameron’s side mercilessly singled out Nick Clegg, the leading figure arguing for change, even though he was Cameron’s deputy prime minister and close ally.

Before the general election last year, the Conservatives relentlessly attacked Ed Miliband’s credibility. A Tory poster showing a tiny Miliband peering out from the suit pocket of the Scottish nationalist Alex Salmond, playing on voters’ concerns that a victory for Labour could give the Scottish National Party more influence in Westminster, was one of the most enduring and effective images during the campaign.



David Cameron
@David_Cameron

Follow

Alex Salmond with Ed Miliband in his pocket. The frightening prospect we must avoid.

9:41 AM - 9 Mar 2015

756 568

Expect this campaign to highlight divisive figures on the Leave side, such as Nigel Farage and George Galloway. London Mayor Boris Johnson may be harder to discredit, because of his national popularity, but Cameron's allies are convinced that they can poke holes in his credibility by highlighting his flip-flopping on Europe, persuading voters of his personal ambitions to take over Cameron's job, mocking his cartoonish antics, and questioning his governing skills.

It's not a simple question of choosing between "yes" and "no," they will warn voters.

They will try to frame the debate as a question: Who do you trust with the nation's future? The chancellor of the Exchequer, the governor of the Bank of England, and the country's military and business leaders — or a group of eccentrics?