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What was David Cameron Thinking? Thoughts of a British Prime Minister Regarding Brexit

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Abstract

The aim of my research is to examine what David Cameron, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, was thinking all the way through the process of the UK's secession from the European Union: why he made certain decisions and what influenced him. In order to do that, I use speeches, parliamentary debates, and memoirs, including several interviews with the former PM. The research methodology primarily uses the tools of discourse analysis: I examine the semantic elements, words, sentences and other characteristics of the political discourse, paying attention to the strategic structure of speech modes.

By interpreting his political thinking and analysing his speeches, I wish to examine the impact of this leading politician on his own party's and the electorate's views on the EU. Understanding this can help to interpret the relationship between Britain and Europe, and perhaps in part, give an answer as to why the British chose to continue outside the Union. Based on this, we can also try to assess what this relationship will look like in the future.

Keywords: David Cameron, United Kingdom, Brexit, European Union, political discourse

Introduction

"The choice is in your hands. But my recommendation is clear. I believe that Britain will be safer, stronger and better off by remaining in a reformed European Union." These are the words of David Cameron, then British Prime Minister, right before the Brexit referendum of 2016. The result of which was that the majority of the population of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland decided on June 23, 2016, that they should not continue to be a member of the European Union.

Although this referendum took place almost six years ago, Brexit – as it became widely known – remains an extremely interesting and widely debated issue to this day: there are numerous attempts to explain the outcome of the referendum, giving different reasons for why the British decided to leave the EU. Experts are trying to uncover the factors leading to Brexit and calculate its long-term consequences – this is the aim of my research as well. In order to do that, in my essay, I am examining the role of one very important person in all of this: Prime Minister David Cameron, who promised in his so-called Bloomberg Speech on January 23, 2013, an in/out referendum by 2017 and who put this into his party's

2015 election manifesto as well; while in the same speech, he promised to renegotiate his country's position within the EU and having done so, lead the Remain campaign.

David Cameron, at first sight, seemed to be a committed supporter of European integration, although, like almost all British Prime Ministers, he envisioned the future of the United Kingdom in a reformed Union. Nevertheless, in the 2015 elections, he promised to call a referendum that would allow his country to withdraw; and even though the government had negotiated until the last minute with European leaders to block the exit, the referendum was held in 2016. After losing the vote, Cameron immediately resigned, claiming that although he had governed the country for six years, he felt he should not be the one to drive Britain out of the EU.

The aim of my research is to examine what David Cameron was thinking all the way through this process: why he made those decisions and what influenced him. Therefore, I strive to explore his ideas on the European Union, understanding to what extent he was a Europhile or a Eurosceptic and how he communicated these ideas to the public. In order to fully comprehend his beliefs, I not only take into consideration his arguments made during the referendum campaign but also from his early years in politics, as a young adviser and later, party leader. In my opinion, it is important to analyse the political thought of Cameron, and how his political communication affected his fellow party members and the electorate, since his actions had a huge impact on the relationship between Britain and the continent.

Thus, I examined speeches, parliamentary debates, memoirs, and several interviews with the former PM, using the tools of political discourse analysis: I examined the semantic elements, words, sentences, and other characteristics of the political discourse, paying attention to the strategic structure of speech modes. By interpreting his political thinking and analysing his speeches, I wish to examine the impact of this leading politician on his own party's and the electorate's views on the Union.

Research Methodology: Political Discourse Analysis

There is an essential relationship between language and politics, the significance of which has already been recognized by the ancient Greeks and Romans, who were using rhetoric: Cicero was one of the first to realize how powerful a political weapon it can be, if used well. Political discourse analysis is focused on this important relationship, analysing the language and the

discursive dimensions of a political text, or political communication in order to understand how rhetoric is used as a political weapon (Dunmire, 2012, p. 735).

The most important development in this field happened during the 20th century, after the so-called linguistic turn, when humanities and social sciences started to focus on the relations between language and language users. With that, numerous theories were formed on the relationship between language and politics, both by linguists and social scientists, but also by political scientists. One of the earliest theories was written in 1975 by David Bell, who, in his article *Power, influence, and authority: an essay on political linguistics*, argues that these key terms of politics – that are in the title of his work – refer to different linguistic modes of interaction, that have the aim of pursuing a certain political goal or effect (Bell, 1975, p. IX). A few years later, in 1978, Kenneth Hudson, in his book, *The language of modern politics*, further developed this idea and wrote that language "should be understood as a strategic resource whereby politicians gain and hold power" (Dunmire, 2012, p. 736).

At the end of the century, Paul Chilton and Christina Schaffner in their book *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, claimed that "politics cannot be conducted without language, and it is probably the case that the use of language in the constitution of social groups leads to what we call 'politics' in a broad sense" (Chilton & Schaffner, 1997, p. 206). That is what Murray Edelman insisted on as well, already in 1964, saying on the very first page of his book *The symbolic uses of politics*, that "political language is political reality" (Edelman, 1964, p. 1). Teun A. van Dijk, one of the founders of Critical Discourse Studies, stated at the same time that because of this, political discourse analysis "should be able to answer genuine and relevant political questions" (Dijk, 1997, pp. 11-12).

I have based my research on the above-mentioned idea of van Dijk, using the methodology of political discourse analysis based on the work of two British authors, Isabela and Norman Fairclough. Theirs is a fairly new idea developed at the beginning of the 2010s and described in their book, published in 2012, *Political Discourse Analysis: A method for advanced students*. Their most important statement is that political discourse is a way of political argumentation, something to argue for or against some kind of political action, and that leads to making a certain decision. According to them, politics is mainly about deciding how to react to certain situations and circumstances and deciding what kind of policies should be pursued (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 1).

As a result, they put practical argumentation at the center of political discourse analysis.

Using their methods, political texts should be analysed as a whole, concentrating on what action it urges the reader or listener to do and what argument it brings forward to convince them. They claim that there is a practical argumentation in every text that aims to make people choose between alternative outcomes; thus, they all have the main basic structure: there is a question of which alternative to choose, then an argument, listing everything that could affect the decision and finally, they give an answer as well. In the last part, they also explain why the reader/listener should choose their alternative, listing both the advantages of their choice and the disadvantages of the alternative. As a conclusion, the creator of the political discourse uses the text and communication as a political weapon, in order to convince others that their alternative is the best solution to the emerging problem, and also to make them act accordingly (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).

I adapted this method to the political communication of David Cameron, striving to understand what alternative he was arguing for and how he wished to convince the readers/listeners of the advantages of his choice in order to influence their decision. However, first of all, let us take a look at the life, career path, and general thinking of the former Prime Minister, in order to get to know his personality and character.

David Cameron, the Conservative Party Leader

David William Donald Cameron was born on October 9, 1966, as the third child of a quite wealthy family. As a result, he had, by his own admission, a rather privileged childhood – a privilege that was not only material but also deriving from the love of his parents and the warmth of the Cameron household. During his early years, he was taught to respect others, understand responsibility, and be hard-working (Cameron, 2019, pp. 16-17). As Michael Ashcroft and Isabel Oakeshott put it in their biography, "Cameron's childhood could hardly have been better designed to produce a happy, secure and well-balanced character" (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 17).

Before he turned eight, Cameron was sent to a boarding school called Heatherdown, where he received an old-fashioned, British-elite-style education. His academic performance was acceptable, but neither the teachers nor his parents thought it would be enough for Eton, the most well-known private institution in Britain. In spite of this, he still managed to get in, which became

essential later on in his life: both the education he received and the connections he made there were of utmost importance for his political career.

On the other hand, he seemed rather uninterested in politics at this time, a fact that has only changed during his final years at Oxford University. Even though he had a strong opinion on every issue and the ability to explain complex ideas understandably and clearly – thus, he had the capabilities of a good politician – he was not at all motivated to become one (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 63). Consequently, he did not join any political group in Oxford, which could have been an easy way into the Conservative Party (CP), but he had taken a detour before ending up working with the Tories. Finally, in 1988 he became an employee of the Conservative Research Department as a young post-graduate and started climbing the ranks of the party.

After the elections of 1992, where he got the attention of several important actors in British politics, he became a special adviser for Chancellor Norman Lamont; thus, he started working in the Treasury. That has always been a huge opportunity for the talented young, and David Cameron certainly made use of it. Although he did not become a member of the British parliament until 2001, he applied for his first seat just two years after starting work with Lamont. Following the loss of several seats between 1994 and 2000, he finally found his constituency and went into parliament in 2001 as an MP for Witney.

Cameron's star rose fast in British politics: by the end of 2005, he was the leader of the Conservative Party, persuading enough voters to switch back to the Conservatives to win the 2010 national elections. Although the CP did not get enough votes to have an outright majority, it was enough to form a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, and Cameron was bold enough to make that move. The CP was back in government after 1992, and this was not only because of their manifesto and promises, but thanks to David Cameron himself. His personality gained the Conservatives a great number of votes: he was a net attractor of support to his party, as he was seen as the best possible Prime Minister by the electorate (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 582). This was also true for the 2015 elections when – even to the surprise of many CP members – the Conservatives were able to form a majority government without their coalition partners, and Cameron became Prime Minister once more.

Generally speaking, David Cameron is a confident, charming, intelligent person who has the ability to convince voters to lean his way. We also know he was very efficient, with excellent political judgement – but what were his true political beliefs?

His family and his upbringing were quite conservative: the Cameron children had to strictly obey the rules and go to church every weekend with their parents. The most important value he brought from his childhood was the importance of family, which he stuck to throughout his political career. However, we cannot say the same about his religiousness, as it has been widely debated just how religious Cameron really was: he talked openly about his Christianity and going to church as an adult, but as he put it, he is a ‘racked-with-doubt-and-scepticism’ type of believer. This became obvious as the relationship of the Prime Minister and the Church of England became strained over Cameron’s social liberalist stand on certain issues, such as gay marriage (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 402).

He was also an ardent royalist from very early on. As he wrote in his memoirs, *For the Record*, he could not explain why he has been so passionate about the monarchy as someone who believes that "a person's future should be determined by their talent and hard work, not by the accident of their birth." Still, he believed the royal family is deeply rooted in British history, representing the most important values of the nation: duty, tradition, and stoicism, and by doing so, it provides stability for the country (Cameron, 2019, p. 369). Partly because of this, Cameron was rather committed to keeping the Union – of the United Kingdom – together. This became clear during the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, when, unlike his usual behaviour, even the PM could not stay calm as the polls were showing the ‘yes’ vote to be ahead. As Ashcroft and Oakeshott wrote, he would not have been able to "tell the Queen that he had managed to go one further than Lord North, who lost the North American colonies, and lost the United Kingdom itself" (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 482). His approach to foreign policy was also somewhat linked to this: he is a patriotic British who could not accept the idea that Britain was facing inevitable decline and felt proud of Britain's role in the world. He also claimed to take on foreign policy challenges as a liberal conservative: he wanted it to be practical, hard-headed, and realistic (Cameron, 2019, p. 145).

On the other hand, Cameron was unlike most other Conservatives: according to Ian Birrell, a British journalist, "He seemed very comfortable in the modern world, which I found refreshing and unusual" (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 187). Cameron also described himself as a liberal conservative in the sense that he did not wish to influence how people choose to live their lives, as long as their choices do not offend others (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 201).

All things considered, we could say that David Cameron is mostly a conservative, but that does not automatically mean he agreed on everything with his own party. For decades, one of the most important characteristics of a Conservative¹ has been the – at least – critical attitude towards Europe and the European Union. Thus, let us have a look at what Cameron thought about this quintessential issue before the Brexit referendum.

Cameron on the EU

The young politician's first closer encounter with the European Union took place in 1992 when he was still a political adviser to the Chancellor. In September, on the so-called Black Wednesday, Britain had to officially withdraw from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM)² – that was a huge trauma for the British. Even though Cameron could handle the situation calmly, it was a defining moment for his future stand on the single currency of the EU: he wrote later about the ERM crisis that it "proved one incontrovertible fact – if you fix your exchange rate, or join a single currency, you give up the ability to set your own interest rates to suit your own domestic circumstances," something, he believed to be a fundamental error, thus, he would never support his country joining the Eurozone (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 105). As Cameron puts it, it was during this time, while he was serving in the Treasury, that he became a Eurorealist, to which he stuck later on as well. For him, this meant he was not anti-European, since he believed membership of the EU was

¹ The word conservative can be used both as an adjective and as a noun. On the one hand, as a noun, it is written with an initial capital letter: in this case, it refers to the Conservative Party of the United Kingdom, or a member of the party. On the other hand, as an adjective, it has to be written with a small c: in this case, it refers to a person who is opposing any kind of change. However, there is a third option as well, which is the ideology itself: that is somewhere in-between the two, although it is often written with a big C. Despite that fact, for easier understanding, I am going to use it with a small initial letter in my essay.

Thus, this means that one does not have to be a Conservative in order to be a conservative. Obviously, people who become members of the Party are usually in some respect conservative: they are in favour of conserving the structures of British politics and society, the Monarchy, the titles, the Union etc., and they stand for traditional and religious values. On the other hand, the Conservative Party of the UK has been the party of the Empire since Benjamin Disraeli's premiership in the 19th century, believing in imperialism, which is not exactly conservative, but still an important part of being a Conservative, just as being Eurosceptic to some extent became after the 1970s.

² The ERM was originally set up in order to stabilise exchange rates and help the monetary stability of Europe before the introduction of the single currency, the euro. This began with the irrevocable and definitive fixing of exchange rates that the UK could not maintain. ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Exchange_rate_mechanism_\(ERM\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Exchange_rate_mechanism_(ERM)))

necessary for trade and cooperation, but on the other hand, he considered the political aspects of the Union unwelcome in Britain (Cameron, 2019, p. 42).

Entering the Conservative Party with these thoughts in his head, his ideas seemed quite fitting for the mostly Eurosceptic party. However, the extent of scepticism varied among members, and on this scale, compared to others, Cameron was quite easy on the EU: for instance, in his first election campaign as a candidate, he argued against the rise of a European federal state, but at the same time for continued EU membership (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 149).

When he became party leader in 2005, his opinion did not change, although he preferred not talking at all about the EU, since he claimed "banging on about Europe" would be the old Tory way, and this was the modernising CP that he wished to reform. Still, one of his first actions was to withdraw the Tory MEPs from the European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament, the reason for which, according to Cameron, was that the EPP wanted more integration and more political union, while the CP wanted less of both. Nonetheless, after this symbolic act, he hardly ever spoke again about Europe, in accordance with his moderniser Tory politics. Thus, during his first years in office, all his colleagues, MPs, as well as journalists have been trying to clarify just how Eurosceptic he really was, taking a look at his writings and speeches from before 2005. A private conversation from 1997 was dug up in which Cameron wrote that he should be described as a Eurosceptic "on the basis that I oppose the single currency and any further transfer of sovereignty from the UK to the EU" (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 490). At the beginning of the new century, he also kept writing about his antipathy to the euro, but not against the whole institution. One of the Conservative MPs, Nicholas Soames, claimed he had no doubt about Cameron being a Eurosceptic, as he was "immensely irritated" and "frustrated by it in every way," but also did not believe him to be a "Get Out man" (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 492). In other words, he was a conservative, believing that change should be slow and measured, not revolutionary and rapid, and that made him choose the status quo rather than make reckless decisions.

This is obviously quite far from promising an in/out referendum on the European Union, so how did the Bloomberg Speech of 2013 come about? The idea of a referendum was not new for Britain and especially for the Conservative Party: Eurosceptic MPs were causing trouble for party leaders even when Cameron was only a university student, arguing for a referendum on the EU. David Cameron himself also supported the idea of holding a referendum in

2007, before Tony Blair signed the so-called "constitution of the EU," the Lisbon Treaty. The then-governing Labour Party promised such a vote before accepting the treaty but never gave it, which fuelled the anger of Conservative MPs. Cameron, on the other hand, did not wish to make Europe the central topic neither for his party, nor of the 2010 elections, thus in the Conservative manifesto, they only promised a referendum lock: that is, a pledge to hold a referendum on any future EU treaty before signing it. The young party leader was hoping this would be enough to placate his MPs.

Clearly, it was not. No matter how David Cameron tried to avoid the topic of the EU, he was still kept under pressure by his own party members, as well as the UK Independence Party (UKIP), that has just started to gain ground in the early 2010s. Moreover, the international situation was not working for the PM either: what became a defining issue for Cameron was the Eurozone crisis³ that climaxed during the beginning of his premiership. As he put it in his memoir, if he was sceptical about the EU, he "had always been deeply sceptical about the euro," especially after the ERM incident (Cameron, 2019, p. 322). However, his original revulsion of the common currency could not have been an important enough issue for wanting reforms, as Britain was not a member of the Eurozone, nor did it wish to become one. The main problem emerged from the UK having to help out countries suffering from the Eurozone crisis, and while treaties were bent for these countries, Cameron did not get the reforms he was arguing for. Quoting him: "Whenever there was pressure to transfer powers to Brussels, the lawyers always found a way, but when I wanted to take powers back, those same lawyers always opposed it" (Cameron, 2019, p. 326). Thus, during the crisis, Cameron claimed to become even more disillusioned about the way the EU worked, but also more convinced that for the sake of their national interest, they had to remain a member at the table where the most important decisions were made. In other words, he was still not prepared to have an in/out referendum in the middle of an economic crisis, nor to ask the British people whether they wanted their government to renegotiate the terms of British membership – especially when he was actually in Brussels doing so. Yet, the crisis taught him the lesson that the Conservative Party became basically ungovernable on European questions, while Britain's position in the EU was increasingly

³ "The European sovereign debt crisis was a period when several European countries experienced the collapse of financial institutions, high government debt, and rapidly rising bond yield spreads in government securities." It began in 2008 with the collapse of Iceland's banking system and peaked between 2010 and 2012 (<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/e/european-sovereign-debt-crisis.asp>).

unsustainable (Cameron, 2019, p. 339). And that is – as early as January 2012 – when the idea of a referendum on Britain's position in the EU first came up.

It was followed soon after, in February 2013, by the Bloomberg Speech, where Cameron finally promised to have an in/out referendum. As he wrote in his memoirs, that was one of the biggest decisions of his life, one that he made after months of careful consideration, arguing, and planning – thus, not at all in haste. He also claimed to perfectly know what he was doing: he did not make this promise, because he thought he was not going to win the 2015 elections and would not have to deliver on it. The PM confessed already in October 2012 that "This is very, very difficult and very dangerous." as they could end up losing the referendum and actually leaving the EU (Cameron, 2019, p. 398). However, he felt it was the right thing to do: British people were promised to have a say on their future, and previous governments failed to deliver on that promise – he did not intend to make the same mistake. Cameron also claimed this to be the most likely way for Britain to stay in the EU: he believed that if they stalled the referendum, the later they held it, the bigger the chance that British people would vote to leave. Thus, he had several reasons that could justify the idea of an in/out referendum; still, what he considered the most important was his belief that because of the euro crisis, trust in the EU among the British population fell dramatically. This could be seen in the attraction of UKIP to numerous Tory voters as well – so all in all, he felt he was responding to the Euroscepticism of the population, not only his own party's (Cameron, 2019, p. 407). The PM also claimed to share much of the dissatisfaction of the CP and of voters, as he felt that the democratic deficit of the EU became almost intolerable – even though he believed they were better off staying in.

The latter, in my opinion, can be quite clear for anyone who heard David Cameron's Bloomberg Speech. The PM opens the speech by stating how the Union has stopped European countries from going to war with one another again after the Second World War; thus, one of its main purposes – maintaining security – has already been fulfilled by the EU. Now, he continues, the most important reason for it is to secure prosperity, and he agrees that in order to do that, the EU needs to be reformed; however, they must give it a chance to change before deciding to leave. Cameron also says he is not a British isolationist; he would never want the UK to "pull up the drawbridge and retreat from the world," and he states that he wants a relationship between the UK and Europe that keeps them in it. He sums up his stance on Europe perfectly in this speech as he says: "For us, the European Union is a means to an end – prosperity, stability, the anchor of freedom and democracy both within Europe and beyond

her shores – not an end in itself" (Shipman, 2017, p. 11). In his final remarks, he adds that, of course, Great Britain could survive on its own, but the question is whether that is in their best national interest. David Cameron's answer for that in 2013, as well as in 2016, is that no, their national interest is not leaving, but staying within a flexible, adaptable, and open European Union, remaining at the table where decisions are made (David Cameron Full Speech: Britain and Europe - January 23, 2013, 2013). At the same time as promising a referendum, he also pledged to try and renegotiate Britain's position within the EU – in order to have this kind of Union – before the vote, which should take place by the end of 2017. Thus the timeline was set: the Prime Minister had four years to reach an agreement with the other Member States and ask for the opinion of British voters on whether he did a good enough job.

In his speech, Cameron outlined what a reformed EU should look like in his vision, stating what changes he would argue for in the following years, during the renegotiations. He defined five principles that should characterise a future Europe:

- competitiveness, the core of which is the Single Market, but according to the PM, it should be broadened, and bureaucracy needed to be cut in order to do so;
- more flexibility in order to accommodate the diversity of EU Member States – he believed the EU should acknowledge once and for all that not all members have the same goals;
- sovereignty: power must be able to flow back to national parliaments and Member States, not always away from them;
- greater role to national parliaments, providing more democratic accountability;
- fairness, meaning all rules should apply fairly to those who are not part of something, for example, the Schengen-zone or the Eurozone (David Cameron Full Speech: Britain and Europe - January 23, 2013, 2013).

The following years however, especially 2014 and 2015, made Cameron's position even more difficult: when a year after the Bloomberg Speech, Jean-Claude Juncker was elected President of the European Commission, the PM admitted he did not believe it unthinkable that even he would recommend not staying in the EU, and coordinate an exit. He believed Juncker to have been the wrong candidate, with the wrong views at the wrong time; thus, he did not

support his election – together with many other leaders of EU Member States. And Cameron had his reasons for doing so: after Juncker was elected, British newspapers appeared with titles such as "Britain Nears EU Exit" and "One Step Closer to Quitting Europe" (Cameron, 2019, p. 518). Then, in 2015 came another huge issue, one that Cameron might not have taken seriously enough: the anti-immigration sentiment in his country, amplified by the 2015 migration crisis⁴. The PM at that time saw it only as an obstacle to his renegotiation because EU leaders had to deal with the crisis instead of the reforms he was arguing for, but he failed to understand how the handling of the crisis affected the British population. For him, it seemed to be a justification of his belief that they needed to sit at the table where decisions were made in order to stay strong; while it made most of the British people even more anti-EU. Where, with the free movement of people, Cameron saw a possibility for British people to live, study and work in other EU countries and a necessity for schools, universities, hospitals, and businesses to have EU workers, the population saw a burden and threat.

When the renegotiations started at the end of the same year, Cameron confessed he was worried that "what was negotiable was not sellable and what was sellable was not negotiable," (Cameron, 2019, p. 623) and while claiming that his strategy was to keep the UK in the EU, he also added he ruled nothing out if the negotiations do not go as planned. He intended to "try to correct the things that British people don't like about the EU," especially the move towards a political union, the excessive regulations, and the lack of control over immigration (Cameron, 2019, p. 627). Naturally, there were difficult moments during the negotiations, the most challenging coming in February 2016 that jeopardised the whole referendum, as, after a particularly hard day, Cameron claimed: "Frankly, after a day and a half of talks with these people, even I want to leave the EU. I'm getting nowhere, I might have to walk away" (Shipman, 2017, p. 116). Finally, just a few months before the vote, they reached an agreement, after which the British Prime Minister stood in front of the cameras and said the following: "I do not love Brussels, I love Britain. I am the first to say that there are still many ways in which Europe needs to improve [...] and I will never say that our country could not survive outside Europe. [...] That is not the question in this referendum. The question is, will we be safer, stronger and better off working together in a reformed Europe or out on our own," adding that with the

⁴ In 2015, more than one million migrants and refugees crossed into Europe, sparking a crisis as countries struggled to cope with the influx, and creating division in the EU over how best to deal with resettling people (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>)

renegotiations, he strongly believes they got the best of both worlds; thus, he is campaigning for Remain. (EU referendum: "The choice is in your hands" David Cameron - BBC News, 2016).

As he wrote in his memoirs, he honestly believed it was a good deal that could have made it possible for the UK to thrive within the EU and he believed all the soft Eurosceptics of the CP would see it the same way (Cameron, 2019, p. 645). As it is now obvious, they did not.

The Referendum Campaign

Even though David Cameron was aware of the EU's unpopularity in his country, he was still convinced up until the last minute that he could win this referendum – at the same time, he knew that the campaign would be bloody and dark. He also added that even if they win, it could be a Pyrrhic victory as it could tear up his own party in the meantime, the avoidance of which was one of his initial aims by holding a referendum. However, when he was asked in March 2016, he claimed he quite enjoys campaigning because "the arguments are very strong," and asked about their chances in June, he said: "I think it will be OK. I think it is going to be bloody hard work and very close, and it could go wrong. So it's not much better than 50-50" (Cameron, 2019, p. 659). Even if he really believed in the second part, to the public he did not show it: the PM seemed quite confident in his stance in the following months.

Cameron and his team, using their experience from the Scottish independence referendum⁵ and the 2015 national elections, aimed at designing a campaign that focused on the economic risks of leaving the EU, and during the campaign the PM was working quite hard on delivering this message. They decided on this strategy since they honestly believed that if it comes down to a fight between immigration and the economy, the economic argument would win. As Craig Oliver, Cameron's Director of Politics and Communication, wrote it: "We already know that there has been no election in the last hundred years where people have voted against their direct financial interest." and this became fundamental for their campaigning (Oliver, 2017, p. 114). However, they were also aware that the Remain campaign did not have a good enough answer for immigration other than – as Cameron put it – wrecking their economy is no way to deal with it. Even though the immigration argument worried the Prime

⁵ The Scottish national independence referendum is claimed to have been won by the Conservative government because of economic deterrence: the statement of the Treasury and the Bank of England, ruling out a currency union after a Scottish independence might have saved the referendum for Cameron and his team (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 480).

Minister a lot – proven by a late-night email, he wrote to Oliver, in which he confessed that it has "Always been my worry. We shouldn't be asking people to choose between immigration levels they don't want and an EU they don't love." (Oliver, 2017, p. 320) – yet, they kept basically ignoring this issue and hammering the economic facts with all their power. Why? Simply because they were convinced, they had the winning argument.

In almost all of his interviews done during the campaign, the PM strived to explain how they benefit from being a member of the Single Market, especially after the renegotiation: he argued that if they leave the EU and wished to agree on a trade deal, they would have to accept welfare rules that do not apply to them as Member States, thanks to the new agreement he managed to negotiate. Cameron was also certain that the EU would never give Britain a better deal from the outside than the one they already gave them from the inside. Moreover, not only trading with Europe would have to be renegotiated, but new deals would have to be made with each and every third country they have agreements with, which could take up to years and might not be successful in the end or as fruitful as the ones they already had (Cameron warns leaving EU is a “step into the dark” - BBC News, 2016). At the same time, he kept emphasising the costs of leaving a free trade area of 300 million consumers, where the UK had been selling at least half of what they were making: he claimed a Leave vote would mean a decade of economic uncertainty, because of companies leaving the UK and services losing their market. He adds, that there is the possibility that it would only be a shallow recession, however, who would in their right mind, vote for a recession, even a shallow one (David Cameron: Brexit is a risk we can avoid - BBC News, 2016)? The PM genuinely believed these were the strongest, most convincing arguments anybody could put before the public.

On the other hand, exactly the core of the campaign received the greatest criticism, as many claimed emphasising the economic risks gave a too negative tone, focusing too much on what could go wrong, threatening voters. Furthermore, their general approach to the EU was similarly negative, not drawing enough attention to why staying would be good for the British. Cameron also acknowledged this as a problem; however, he explained it with the fact that they kept speaking about the negativities of the EU for such a long time ("banging on about Europe"), it was no use of them trying to emphasise the positive side just a few months before the vote, as it would seem like too big of a U-turn and would diminish their authenticity. Cameron also did not want to speak too positively about the EU at home while he was still negotiating in Brussels, not to affect the outcome; however, when it came to an end, it was

already too late to change the tone for similar reasons. Thus, the Remain campaign kept focusing on the negativity and risks, emphasising the PM's statement that Brexit would be truly a leap in the dark, with unforeseeable consequences, that they cannot support.

Moreover, he claimed that just because he believes it is right to hold a referendum, it does not mean people should not be aware of the potential negative consequences. Although in his memoirs, he admitted he should have done more on mixing the criticisms of the EU with talking of its achievements, that might not have been enough either way since even the PM found it problematic that hardly anyone had much concept of the Union or how it impacts their lives: education was necessary, but there was no time to do that during a referendum campaign. At the same time, the real mistake of the campaign was not how negative it was, but how it focused on facts and reasonable assertions, while the Leave campaign had emotional arguments – that is something David Cameron only realised after losing the vote.

Naturally, the PM also feared the outcome: when Craig Oliver asked him if he had any doubts about holding it, he said, of course, he had since "You could unleash demons of which ye know not" (Oliver, 2017, colophon). That soon became frighteningly realistic. On the other hand, during the campaign, he always seemed rather confident about winning, saying at one of the cabinet meetings: "Look, I feel both depressed and confident about this. Confident because I feel the campaign is going well – and we are really making the argument. Depressed because it's having such an impact on the party" (Oliver, 2017, p.191). Thus, he was more worried about the Conservative Party being torn up in the campaign than about the result of the referendum itself, and this affected his decision-making as well: a lot of them were taken out of fear that otherwise, life would be unnecessarily painful after the referendum. Even the Prime Minister admitted it felt like fighting with his hands tied behind his back in order not to ruin his own party in the meantime: for him, it was important not to allow personal – so-called blue on blue – attacks on leading Tory MPs, thus he continuously stopped his team members from attacking leading figures of the Leave campaign such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove. This did not mean the Remain team would not lead any personal attacks at all; however, they wasted precious time finding a Remain Labour member to do it instead of them (Shipman, 2017, p. 270). However, the PM was righteously fearful: it still felt for many like a civil war was raging within the party ranks – mostly because Leave did not care about hitting his own party members – a fact that did not help the Prime Minister's case. As Philip Johnston, a journalist for the

Telegraph, put it: "It sometimes feels as if we are trapped inside the tortured mind of a party that has been wrestling with its demons for many years and now has succumbed to madness" (Oliver, 2017, p. 192). Which is exactly what David Cameron did not want, in other words, that the referendum would be about the Conservative Party.

At the same time, Cameron also genuinely believed there was no need for fighting his own ranks, as he saw the situation optimistically: he thought Remain would win anyways – and in his defence, the polls were proving him right until the very end. Even though most of the pollsters seemed confused and the exact margins constantly varied, still all of them kept showing that Remain would win – thus, why should he have been worried? Everything was pointing to them winning this referendum up until the very last minute.

Some critics said later that Cameron did not fight hard enough because he took it for granted that his skills as a political campaigner would ensure his victory. In a short video compilation put together by the Financial Times in 2017, David Hannan, Conservative MP, claimed: "I think he made the mistake of thinking that it was in the bag, and therefore not really communicating to the other EU leaders that there was any possibility of a Leave vote." This is supported by the fact – claimed in the same coverage – that according to European diplomats, David Cameron was certain to win the referendum with a margin of 70 to 30% (Inside Brexit: How Britain Lost Europe | FT Features, 2017). In the end, Cameron himself admitted he really was sure about winning because who else would the British people believe in this question – if the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom says the country is better off in the EU and has more influence in the world, surely, they would believe him, no?

Furthermore, in case they do not believe their own PM, they would for sure listen to the words of the leader of the free world, who also stood next to Cameron in this campaign: Barack Obama, then President of the United States, personally visited London in April 2016 supporting Remain by claiming the UK would be "in the back of the queue" in waiting to sign a new trade deal with the US if they leave the EU (Shipman, 2017, p. 231). Unfortunately, nobody in Cameron's team realised how much one word could change the meaning of a statement: it should have been a winning argument, the British PM was right about that, and still, the Leave campaign managed to turn it against them by claiming the words were put into the President's mouth, as an American would never use a word 'queue' instead of a word 'line.'

Critics were right in making a point, as it would not have been the first time the PM was accused of "being caught sleeping at the wheel," thus not putting enough energy into campaigning in a referendum: first in the case of a vote on the voting system of the UK, then later in the one regarding Scottish independence. In both cases, he was warned of "sleepwalking into disaster," and according to critics, Cameron was slow to react to these warnings (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 363). Moreover, in these referendums, he came to his senses just in time to throw himself fully into campaigning mode, winning the argument – that could have made him believe he would be able to do the same the third time as well. On the other hand, most of his colleagues and team members acknowledge that the PM stood at the forefront of the Remain campaign from the very beginning; thus, no one could accuse him of making the same mistake for the third time in a row (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 564). What is more, many thought he was even damaging his own reputation and his future political career by being so upfront during the campaign – but as he had already made clear he would not stand for a third term, there was not much to lose for him, and he acted accordingly.

In the end, even putting himself on the line was not enough: Leave won, and David Cameron immediately resigned, which according to Craig Oliver, was the right decision, as the PM could not be responsible for delivering Brexit when he did not believe in it. Thus, shortly after 8 p.m. on June 24, 2016, the Prime Minister stood in front of Downing Street and said he would steady the ship, but he cannot be the captain who sails to the next port. He said he fought directly and passionately for what he thought and felt, "head, heart and soul," but "the British people have voted to leave the European Union, and their will must be respected" (Shipman, 2017, p. 451).

Cameron told Craig Oliver the weekend after that he felt bad because he failed to fight for something he believed in, but he also thought there was nothing more he could have done (Oliver, 2017, p. 7). When asked three years later in an interview whether he regrets holding the referendum, he still stood by his decision claiming it was the right thing to do. He said the last time people had a say on their position in the EU was 40 years before, which is a rather long time with many changes taking place in the meantime – thus, the British nation deserved the chance to choose, and even though he fundamentally disagrees with Brexit, it was a legitimate choice. Cameron also added that he was 100% on the battlefield fighting for Remain, he could not have done more, but he was also not able to stay on after losing the referendum. That simply did not make

any sense to him (David Cameron on his Regrets over the Referendum | This Morning, 2019).

Of course, it does not mean he does not regret anything: Cameron admitted in the foreword of his memoirs that there are many things he would do differently, from the timing of the vote to the expectations he allowed to build about the renegotiation, even though holding the referendum itself is not among them (Cameron, 2019, p. xvii).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say many things about David Cameron and his communication on European integration. He definitely was not a Europhile, using the usual sceptical arguments and words such as 'sovereignty,' 'democratic deficit,' and 'losing powers' to Brussels. At the same time, he was not a hardliner Eurosceptic either, proven by his word choices, such as 'safer, stronger, better off,' 'prosperity,' and so on. What is more, even though he said negative things about the EU, his communication throughout the campaign was consequential: he supported Remain, trying to convince his party and the electorate about the benefits of staying – but he did not succeed.

As Ashcroft and Oakeshott wrote in their biography, David Cameron might be remembered as the Prime Minister who took the United Kingdom out of the EU by catastrophically mishandling the situation, "attempting to frighten the electorate with spurious claims about the risks of Brexit, and woefully misreading the public mood." He might as well be remembered as the leader whose decisions, in the end, led to the break-up of the UK, as Scotland could have a new independence referendum at any time now (Ashcroft & Oakeshott, 2016, p. 569). However, this would not be fair to the former Prime Minister in any sense.

There are debates, of course, about whether he had to call a referendum or not – I believe the answer is that if he had not done it, someone else would have anyways. The British people were not satisfied with their position within the EU and they were demanding reforms, and David Cameron had to persuade European leaders that the UK was prepared to leave the club, in case they did not get the changes they asked for (Shipman, 2017, p. 15). However, it is also absolutely clear – even then, the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, has supported this argument – that he could not have achieved more during the renegotiations. There was simply no way for the EU to give an emergency break Britain was asking for on immigration, and that was not Cameron's fault. He

was asking for what was deliverable – nothing more, nothing less. At the same time, as Craig Oliver put it, "the closest thing to a law in politics, 'It's the economy, stupid!' turned out to be wrong for the first time in decades," the immigration argument ruling it over (Oliver, 2017, p. 398).

One of the most important factors he did not count was the huge number – nearly three million – of people who did not vote in the 2015 general election because they felt so disillusioned about politics: on the referendum, they voted in great enough numbers, almost all of them for 'out,' to make sure Britain leaves. The Remain campaign was hoping that the large turnout would help their case, but instead, the opposite became true: people who felt betrayed, let down, and ignored for years, went and put their anger onto the ballot paper, voting for Leave, and 'taking back control' even if, for them, it meant over their own lives. The Remain campaign did not speak to them, as they believed these people would continue their habit and not participate in the referendum – thus, they were unable to convince them of the benefits of staying within the EU.

However, not even this was the main reason for losing the vote: the most crucial component is that they were holding the referendum and campaigning in an era when emotions were prioritised over facts, and the opinion of experts could be dismissed as lies of the establishment and the elites. As Cameron's director of communications put it: "If 2016 taught us anything, it is that the power of patriotic and emotional arguments to 'take back control' or 'make America great again' is formidable" (Oliver, 2017, p. vii). Years after the referendum, while writing his memoir, even Cameron acknowledged the mistake he made, writing: "Every trait of this age of populism – the prominence of social media, the emergence of fake news, anti-establishment sentiment, growing unease with globalisation, frustration over the level of immigration – appeared to conspire against our cause. [...] It was that the physics of politics seemed to have changed" (Cameron, 2019, p. 658). A realisation that came about too late.

Thus, the fact is that Prime Minister David Cameron could have thought anything and could have given any sensible reason, but it was not what people were listening to – it was the beginning of a new age in politics – and this is what we have to understand and learn from this referendum – where the rules of political communication have drastically changed and sensible arguments can no longer convince people who have had enough of experts and the establishment. Cameron did not understand and thus could not adhere to these new rules, so he basically had no chance of winning the argument, however popular he was and whatever his real beliefs were.

Craig Oliver's words sum this up perfectly in my opinion. He wrote in his account that "those who called the referendum thought it would result in the air being cleared and the poison drained from the system." but what happened instead – and he quoted an author, Robert Harris – is that "Everything I liked about my country – tolerance, moderation, courtesy, sensibleness, pragmatism, irony – seems to have disappeared" and "that development should worry us all" (Oliver, 2017, p. ii). I believe he is absolutely right, and the consequences and signs of this evolution can be seen today as well, maybe not only in the United Kingdom.

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