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Day of reckoning for wavering Conservative Eurosceptics

Kate Allen and George Parker



Britain's prime minister David Cameron, right, and European Council president Donald Tusk take their seats prior to a meeting in Brussels on Thursday

If David Cameron steps on to the podium outside 10 Downing Street on Friday evening and announces Britain's first European referendum for four decades, he will trigger four months of frantic campaigning — and force his party to confront the spectre that has long haunted it.

Mr Cameron wants to launch his campaign to keep Britain in the EU with “the intensity and ferocity” of a general election battle, according to aides. The announcement will kick off an initial “72 hours of frantic campaigning”, as the Remain camp seek to sway the largely undecided electorate.

The prime minister is expected to announce the date of the referendum within minutes of the cabinet approving the deal he hopes to strike in Brussels. If all goes to plan, this solemn address outside the famous black door would happen on Friday evening, after an emergency cabinet meeting on Friday afternoon.

If talks in Brussels break down, Mr Cameron's campaign plans, including a pro-EU speech on Saturday, would be thrown into turmoil.

Assuming a deal is struck, on Sunday Mr Cameron will use an interview on the BBC's Andrew Marr show to set out an additional proposal to reinforce and [clarify British "sovereignty" in relation to European law](#).

Mr Cameron's team are eager to win an advantage as soon as possible, knowing that Eurosceptic ministers will want to dominate the media at the weekend with denunciations of the prime minister's reforms.

Both sides have a lot to play for. Although the Tory grass roots are regarded as bastions of Euroscepticism, polling data show that more than two-thirds will be heavily swayed by whether they perceive Mr Cameron's renegotiation deal to be a good one.

Even among the most committed activists — those who stood as candidates, sat on party committees or actively canvassed in last year's general election — 65 per cent of Tories surveyed by the Economic and Social Research Council said their referendum vote will "depend on the terms of a negotiation".

Mr Cameron's frequently-repeated phrase "battling for Britain" suggests he knows this. "If we can get a good deal, I'll take that deal but I will not take a deal that does not meet what we need," he insisted when he arrived in Brussels on Thursday.

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Tim Bale, a politics professor at Queen Mary University of London who carried out the ESRC survey, said Conservative supporters are torn "between their widespread Euroscepticism and their loyalty to the party leadership".

Ultimately, Mr Cameron's anticipated message that his renegotiation deal is the best he can achieve "has some force with party members", Mr Bale said. "He is the leader who has won them a general election and is more popular than his party. Leadership still counts for something in the Conservative party."

The ESRC polling figures illustrate the significance of the first few days for both sides in influencing the outcome of the referendum.

The first campaign out of the blocks is likely to be the pro Brexit Grassroots Out group, which has planned a rally in a large Westminster venue for Friday night. It hopes to attract at least one member of the cabinet to declare their support for Brexit at the event.

But most ministers are expected to wait a little longer.

Boris Johnson, a Daily Telegraph columnist, is rumoured to be writing an article on Saturday explaining his decision on whether to back Mr Cameron. Even now, [Mr Johnson's mind](#) is not made up about which side to back, his friends say.

A lot depends on whether the prime minister can come up with a sufficiently powerful repatriation of [European legal powers to Britain](#) — an issue Mr Johnson has espoused in recent months.

Although the Remain camp had until recently been quietly confident that the London mayor would come on board at the last minute, Mr Cameron's apparent inability to find an answer to this conundrum is causing problems.

Another figure whose support the In campaigners are becoming less sure of is Michael Gove. Like many of the party's grass roots members he is weighing up his instinctive Euroscepticism and his loyalty to Mr Cameron.

Other potential ministerial Brexit supporters include Chris Grayling, John Whittingdale and Priti Patel. Brexit campaigners expect some of them to state their position in a series of set-piece events choreographed over the weekend.

They also say they hope some ministers will join them on the campaign trail, leafleting and addressing local crowds. "It won't be preaching to the converted," one said. "We want to get straight out to start winning over the undecided."