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David Cameron needs to show he respects Eurosceptic colleagues

Sebastian Payne [Author alerts](#) Jan 11 18:40 [Comment](#)



British Prime Minister David Cameron delivers a speech on 'the future of the European Union and Britain's role within it', in central London, on January 23, 2013. AFP PHOTO / BEN STANSALL

When will Eurosceptic ministers be allowed to speak their minds? Not for a while, according to a letter David Cameron has sent to his Cabinet today. The Prime Minister has set out four rules for ministers who plan to campaign for Brexit — some

of which have caused concern among Eurosceptics in his party.

The Prime Minister has demanded that ministers will “say or do nothing that will undermine the government’s negotiating position”, but he has also said there will be restrictions on what they can say after the new deal has been struck:

“All other EU or EU-related business, including negotiations in or with all EU institutions and other member states, and debates and votes in parliament here on EU business will continue to be subject to the normal rules of collective responsibility and party discipline”.

The civil service machine will also be unavailable to ministers who want to campaign for Brexit:

“It will not be appropriate or permissible for the civil service or individual civil servants to support ministers who oppose the government’s official position by providing briefings or speech material on this matter.”

Europhiles might say these restrictions are fair, given that Mr Cameron is not forcing his ministers to back the government’s position. But Brexit campaigners are still complaining that these rules are putting their side at a disadvantage.

Owen Paterson, a former Cabinet minister and supporter of the Vote Leave campaign, said in a statement this afternoon: “It’s increasingly clear that it’ll be one rule for those who want to stay in the EU at all costs, and another rule for the rest,” adding “it looks like the government is focusing its energies on gearing up the full weight of the Whitehall machine to campaign to keep us in the EU”.

But it’s the Prime Minister’s tone that risks cheesing off Eurosceptics — it is akin to that of an exasperated headmaster, warning naughty school boys that their behaviour is being carefully monitored and they risk expulsion. Given that at least half of his MPs, two thirds of his party and half a dozen ministers are believed to be in favour of Brexit, Mr Cameron should ensure he treats the opposing side with respect. This referendum needs to be a fair fight — no one wants to have another vote in a few years’ time — so Eurosceptics should be given the freedom and platform to make their case.

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