



Quality journalism

For just 16¢ a day you can support the Guardian's independence and our award-winning journalism. Become a supporter from just \$4.99 per month.

theguardian

Let's be brutally honest: this remain campaign is failing

Jackie Ashley

The Brexiters may be cynical and wrong but they are showing some passion. At this rate they'll win

Tuesday 29 March 2016 18.11 BST

This “Project Fear” is now at full throttle. As the Guardian revealed, Vote Leave has resorted to scare tactics that would shame the most shameless tabloid editor - lists of rapes and murders, of human tragedies and individual evils that, because of the free movement of peoples across Europe, it now blames on the European Union itself. No consideration of how restrictions on the movement of criminals have been tightened in recent years, or of the return of terror suspects to the UK by other governments; no context; no thoughtfulness. Just a yowl to spread panic.

And this, let's remember, from Vote Leave, which until recently had regularly been accusing the prime minister and the remain camp of trying to scare people into voting to stay inside the EU. This from an organisation headed by the allegedly fastidious and intellectual Michael Gove. This from the allies of Boris Johnson, who empurples with fury at any suggestion that things might be in any way get tougher after Brexit. “Project Fear” is the snappy, Scotland-originated phrase now used for any argument which presents the negative, rather than the positive: but up to now it hasn't been as raw, direct and shameless as this. Now, at least, we know who's really at it.

But I am beginning to think that Project Fear in its Brexit costume is doing much better

than Project Fear in its remain clothing. In short, it's beginning to look as though we are heading towards the exit. If so, as we return from the Easter break, this is a good moment for reflection.

We have roughly 12 weeks of campaigning to go. A lot can happen. Votes can harden, soften, and skitter from one side to the other in large numbers. We could face all sorts of outside events - from terrorist attacks to new developments in the long migration crisis - that could change things.

All that said, I think it would be wise for those of us in the remain camp to seriously and honestly confront a few home truths. In what follows, I am not going to rely on polling, except to say that it seems pretty close and that Brexit supporters seem more likely to turn out than tepid remainers. There is a passion among those who want out that is not shared by the mumbling stay camp.

Away from the numbers, it seems to me that the anti-EU lobby is making most of the running for most of the time, and is dominating the media coverage. This is partly, I grant you, because most of the newspapers are ideologically hostile to Brussels, and the BBC is paralysed; but there's much more to it than that.

Vote Leave, before it turned hysterical, managed to produce a whole series of arguments and headline-grabbers which the other side has struggled to match. Gove's essay on sovereignty has still not been properly answered. Given that we expected most big businesses would be in favour of staying, Vote Leave has produced an impressive series of business outers. From obvious and unexpected places, Vote Leave keeps finding new voices. What once seemed a weakness - the rivalry of the Tory and Ukip campaigns - is beginning to look like a strength, as different voices reach out to different constituencies.

In contrast, the remain movement has so far been lacklustre, to say the least. Almost everyone seems to have left it to the prime minister. But David Cameron is hardly Mr Popular, and seems to be mimicking his general election behaviour: periodically rolling up his sleeves, and saying he's getting on with it.

The difference is that this campaign is far longer than one for a general election, and - to use his own terminology - our prime minister doesn't exactly sound "pumped up" about the EU. As a lifelong Eurosceptic and somebody who made a point recently of saying that he didn't "love Brussels", that's hardly surprising. But the repetition of the very vague "safer in" message isn't cutting through. It's too bland; frankly too boring. The other side managed to produce new-sounding stories day by day. It is managing the politics better.

The Conservative remain campaign is, however, vigorous and exciting compared with the Labour one. I don't believe for a second that either Jeremy Corbyn or John McDonnell believes passionately in the EU. They are both Bennite-era thinkers who fundamentally see the EU as a capitalist club. They are much more worried about the Brussels-sponsored TTIP (the controversial EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) than about Brexit; and that goes for many of their Momentum supporters as well.

So that leaves us with Alan Johnson, a thoroughly amiable man who has excluded himself from frontline politics. He should be angry and passionate; at meetings every

night; demanding airtime; finding soapbox stunts to interest the cameras; drenching social media with fighting talk. Instead he's calm, quiet, cogent - and losing.

But it's not just about one man. Except for the admirable Yvette Cooper, the big-player Labour politicians who disdain Corbyn, and may hope to be back at the top table if and when he goes, have conspicuously failed to grab the European banner. While stories of plots to destabilise Corbyn multiply by the week, shouldn't all Labour's attention be focused on the urgent issue of Britain's place in Europe? After all, if Brexit happens, Labour will be out of power for much more than just a few years. Yet up until now the whole conversation seems to have been an internal Tory debate. I'd like to hear Chuka Umunna making the business case for Europe, or Tristram Hunt explaining how our universities would be hit by Brexit. What about Liz Kendall exploring the risks to the NHS, or Rachel Reeves talking of the effect on the economy? And where is Hilary Benn, the shadow foreign secretary?

Maybe they're just too depressed. Maybe they think that somehow a victory for Brexit will destabilise Corbyn, and shake things up. It would. They'd wake up to find rump Labour trapped in a UK shorn of Scotland in which the victorious Tory right was in full control of government and party, in vindictive mood, and with no way back for liberal Britishness. So I'd would start the fightback with a simple question: what would Boris's Brexited, Broken Britain actually feel like to live in?

[More comment](#)

Topics

[EU referendum](#) [European Union](#) [Foreign policy](#) [Labour](#) [Conservatives](#)

[Save for later](#) [Article saved](#)

[Reuse this content](#)