

# Michael Gove: the big beast who gives Eurosceptics the leadership they need

Justice secretary has long opposed the EU but his decision to back the leave campaign also stemmed from his battles with Brussels as a minister

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Saturday 20 February 2016 21.35 GMT

Michael Gove isn't much of a traveller. Such is his fear of flying that he felt forced to take pills to get him through the short flight to Nice where he married the *Daily Mail* columnist Sarah Vine in 2001. But although a home bird, the justice secretary is also no little Englander. His at times lyrical, and lengthy, statement on Saturday explaining his "painful" decision to break from his friend David Cameron and support Britain's exit from the European Union, contains just one mention of immigration - and that in the context of the EU's inability to deal with the refugee crisis.

"The European Union, despite the undoubted idealism of its founders and the good intentions of so many leaders, has proved a failure on so many fronts," his statement reads. "The euro has created economic misery for Europe's poorest people. European Union regulation has entrenched mass unemployment. EU immigration policies have encouraged people traffickers and brought desperate refugee camps to our borders. Far from providing security in an uncertain world, the EU's policies have become a source of instability and insecurity."

It is not some homespun, protectionist conservatism that makes 48-year-old Gove support Brexit, friends say; rather, it is an innate radicalism, frustration at the status quo and contempt for the "managerialist" tendency in British politics, causing governments to bumble along without asking fundamental questions about the world they inhabit.

The prime minister on Friday evening suggested that Gove was just "one of those Conservatives who, for many decades, has wanted to leave the European Union".

It is true that Gove has long had concerns about the EU, and has not been afraid to speak out. Indeed, it was he who persuaded Cameron during his leadership battle with the rightwing candidates David Davis and Liam Fox, to show Tory supporters a little Eurosceptic leg by promising to take the Conservatives out of the centrist European People's party group in Brussels.

But it was, a colleague of Gove suggests, while the cabinet minister was sitting in his office in the Department for Education, on the walls of which he had hung pictures of Lenin and Malcolm X, that the itch to back Brexit became overwhelming.

“Everything, from changing guidance on behaviour in schools to changing the exam system, to the whole school building programme, was affected by officials waving EU rules,” the colleague said. “His experience as a minister showed him how little ministers are now in charge and how EU rules destroy sensible reforms, delay everything, and cost taxpayers billions.”

Gove’s statement yesterday went even further: “My colleagues in government know it,” it said. “And the British people ought to know it too: your government is not, ultimately, in control in hundreds of areas that matter.”

In 2012, Gove authorised his friends to brief the *Mail on Sunday* that he wanted out. That was perhaps the bubbling over point of his frustration at the EU’s suffocating grip on the policy levers.

But a leader Gove wrote for the *Times* in 2005 explains why, up until that point - openly in favour of a referendum and keen to reform the political dynamic between Westminster and Brussels - he had been metaphorically simmering.

“In politics there are managers. And there are leaders. Both have their place,” Gove wrote. “Throughout Britain’s membership of the EU, the managerial ethos has been firmly in the ascendant.” If anything is clear about Gove’s record in government, mere management, office-holding, gets his goat.

At the 10am cabinet meeting yesterday, everyone around the table spoke. When it came to Gove’s turn, he told of taking his decision “with a heavy heart”. He later posed with a group of Brexit-supporting volunteers, but it is understood that he is undecided about how large a part he will play in the Leave campaign (although he is in contact with his former special adviser, Dominic Cummings, campaign director for the Vote Leave group).

George Eustice MP, an environment minister who is one of around a dozen other ministers likely to break with David Cameron to back Brexit, said it wasn’t necessarily crucial to have Gove in a leadership role, but that he did offer intellectual credibility. “It is important because Michael is a thinker,” he said. “He considers things from first principles.”

Gove’s statement, touching on familiar themes for those au fait with the former *Times* leader writer’s work, hints at the issues he believes should be key to the campaign to end Britain’s EU membership. “My starting point is simple,” it reads. “I believe that the decisions which govern all our lives, the laws we must all obey and the taxes we must all pay should be decided by people we choose and who we can throw out if we want change.”

He goes on to criticise the burdensome regulation dished out by the EU as symptomatic of “an analogue union in a digital age”.

And he tempts potential supporters with the prospect of taking back the net £8.5bn contribution made by the UK to the EU every year, suggesting that “the money which is squandered on grand parliamentary buildings and bureaucratic follies” could better be invested in “science and technology, schools and apprenticeships”.

Gove adds: “We are the world’s fifth largest economy, with the best armed forces of any nation, more Nobel prizes than any European country and more world-leading universities than any European country.

“Our economy is more dynamic than the eurozone, we have the most attractive capital city on the globe, the greatest ‘soft power’ and global influence of any state, and a leadership role in Nato and the UN. Are we really too small, too weak and too powerless to make a success of self-rule?”

Gove has proved to be a genuine radical in government. Some of his critics have described his radicalism as dangerous and frequently destructive. Certainly Gove has a taste for breaking the mould - the teaching unions can testify to that.

Just don’t expect this restless radical to take to the skies on the Brexit campaign trail. In that sense at least, Michael Gove will have his feet firmly on the ground.

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