

The war drums are beating again - the Tories have begun their battle of Brexit

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Liam Fox's declaration that he is joining the campaign to leave the EU has stirred some big beasts, and could scupper David Cameron's plans

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Liam Fox was once described to me by an ally of the prime minister as “the thinking man’s unthinking man”. Cruel, you might suppose. But the aperçu reflected respect as well as disdain. It is all too easily forgotten that Fox was at one point a plausible contender for the party leadership, as the ambassador from the Tory right to humankind, and punched above his weight as defence secretary before his resignation in October 2011 (over the access granted to his close friend, Adam Werritty).

True, his decision to “end the pretence” and to announce his intention to campaign for withdrawal from the European Union has hardly shaken the timbers of No 10. But it cannot simply be dismissed as the premature intervention of a disgruntled backbencher. When Owen Paterson, the former environment secretary, backed the Vote Leave campaign in October, Downing Street officials shrugged. But, whatever his foes mutter to the contrary, Fox remains a substantial figure, well-versed in political theatre, who knew full well that his declaration of intent in a Sunday Times article would capture and exploit the sense of disappointment coursing through Conservative ranks after the Brussels summit. Cameron’s core demand - a four-year ban on EU migrants to the UK receiving in-work benefits - has scarcely progressed (though the prime minister asserts that his proposal “remains on the table”).

It is not hard to decode Fox’s actions. While his former cabinet colleagues dither, he acts decisively, condemns the spectacle of Cameron trawling Europe with a “political begging bowl”. In a single article - followed by an interview on Sunday’s Andrew Marr Show - Fox has posed a challenge that may change the terms of trade drastically.

To explain: the essence of Cameron’s EU strategy has been to keep the process flexible for as long as possible. His priority after last week’s summit was to declare that a “pathway” garlanded with goodwill had opened up, rather than to enumerate the victories or defeats chalked up for the British delegation.

In this grand project, the true objective is navigational: Cameron wants to persuade biddable waverers that the direction of travel in Brussels is at last sympathetic to Britain. What he calls “renegotiation” is a means to an end - probably a fairly modest end. But it is also an end in itself. It is a public process designed to enable Eurosceptics to campaign for Britain to stay in the EU and not surrender their dignity. The diplomatic process to which Cameron is committed is symbolic before it is substantial.

The trouble is that, all too often, symbols become grittily real, weighed down with emotion, ambition and reanimated rivalry. Fox has taken the abstractions of EU jurisprudence and diplomatic conversations and turned them into flesh and blood. And this the prime minister emphatically does not want to happen - at least, not yet.

For if Fox will definitely campaign to leave, what will Boris Johnson say and do, and when? And would London’s mayor turn down a cabinet job to retain the freedom to campaign as he pleases in the referendum? Theresa May, the home secretary, a politician who sometimes looks as though she might drown in her sense of destiny, has conspicuously declined to rule out heading the campaign for Brexit.

Fox’s prescription will also force Cameron to confront one of the toughest decisions of his career. There are said to be six or seven cabinet members who are minded to campaign for withdrawal: Iain Duncan Smith, Theresa Villiers, Chris Grayling, John Whittingdale, Michael Gove, Priti Patel and Oliver Letwin. Again, this list should be treated with great caution.

In 2012, for example, Gove signalled that he would support withdrawal - but only if the relationship between Britain and the EU remained as it was. As he explained the following year: “My ideal is exactly what the majority of the population think, which is that the present situation is no good, to say that life outside would be perfectly tolerable ... We could contemplate it, there would be certain advantages. But the best deal for Britain and Europe is for Britain to lead the changes that Europe needs.” Which is essentially Cameron’s position. Does that make Gove a Brexit rebel? Hardly.

This illustrates precisely what Cameron was trying to achieve. Not trench warfare between big beasts and celebrity politicians, between those who model themselves on Thatcher, those who model themselves on Churchill, and those who model themselves on both, but a prolonged exercise in compromise and deal-making that steadily recalibrated the instrumentation in Brussels to the advantage of Britain.

As Jeremy Corbyn made very clear indeed in the Commons debate on air-strikes on 2 December, party leaders hate indiscipline, free votes and dissent in public. According to one Downing Street source: “We’ll decide when the deal is done about questions like cabinet collective responsibility.” But how will they handle it when the moment arises? As one cabinet minister who will definitely campaign for Brexit puts it: “I want to carry on working for Dave but this is a colossal moment. I could not remain silent simply to save my own government job.”

In 1970, Jim Callaghan foretold that the referendum on EEC membership was “a little rubber life raft into which the whole party may one day have to climb”. And so it proved in 1975: Callaghan himself, Roy Jenkins and Denis Healey campaigned for a yes vote, while Tony Benn and Michael Foot called for Britain to end its association with the Common Market.

The gravitational pull of a similar arrangement in this referendum will be immense. Cameron will seek an alternative, of course: some cunning means of enforcing his will on the Tory oligarchy. But the temporary suspension of cabinet collective responsibility is the only device available to him that will not ignite the flames of tribal mayhem.

So here the Tories are again, “banging on about Europe”, cathartically, perhaps, but not once and for all, or definitively. Ronald Reagan used to speak of the California Republican party’s unofficial 11th commandment: “Thou shalt not speak ill of another Republican.” As a season of crisis approaches the Tories, they would do well to adapt and adopt this slogan.

Corbyn can’t beat the Conservatives, but the Conservatives, unleashed, unthinking, untamed, might conceivably do the job for him. Fox has changed the European argument with a few well-chosen phrases. The battle of Brexit is no longer just business. As will become ferociously clear in 2016, it all just got exceedingly personal.

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