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Will the EU renegotiation decide the referendum outcome?



The short answer is 'No', because the referendum question is not whether people believe David Cameron's claim to have won a victory in Brussels, but about whether the UK should stay in or leave the European Union.

The Prime Minister's renegotiation of the EU's influence on Britain was intended to win support from Tory MPs for his own default position, to remain in the EU. This is not a positive commitment to Britain having a future in Europe but an easier policy for him to implement than steering Britain's EU exit, the first choice of a hard core of his MPs and of Tory voters.

To appease this anti-EU faction, the Prime Minister committed himself to fight for a package of changes that would return substantial powers to the UK Parliament. By declaring war on the EU as it is he hoped he could avoid a war with his own MPs.

The draft conclusion published yesterday is not like VE Day, for it is far from being an unconditional surrender by the European Union. Nor is it like Munich, a license for a militant force to create an ever closer Union on terms dictated by Brussels and endorsed by an axis of Berlin and Paris. It is a truce designed to soothe anxieties in the City of London and of Lynton Crosby, Downing Street's pollster. It leaves Brussels institutions with virtually the same powers as before.

Given an ambiguous settlement, the Prime Minister can interpret this Rorschach inkblot as evidence of victory, while anti-European MPs can call it a stain on the sovereignty of Parliament. The chairman of the committee of backbench MPs, Graham Brady, has described the package as a mess.

The outcome is not clearcut enough to convince the majority of Tory MPs to come off the fence on Europe. Many are sitting there out of conviction, still holding David Cameron's previously expressed belief that the party should stop banging on about Europe. Others are on the fence out of prudence, because Tory voters in their constituency are divided about Europe. Many will follow Nigel Farage's advice and vote to leave rather than stay in the EU.

Fence-sitting MPs do not accept the Prime Minister's challenge to Cabinet ministers to endorse his position or risk his disfavour by campaigning against it. Instead, they can adopt the position of the Conservative Party organisation, which has responded to pressures from the party's grassroots by announcing it will stay neutral in the referendum and not campaign on either side. Judging by Jeremy Corbyn's behaviour at PM's Question Time on Wednesday, this is also the position of the Labour Party leader.

If the late February meeting of the European Council endorses the renegotiation package, it will be put on the shelf until after a referendum decides whether the UK will be remaining in or leaving the European Union. Only after this principle is settled will the European Commission and Parliament take steps to put the terms of the truce into effect.

If the referendum is decided by people who do or do not want to follow David Cameron's lead, then the majority will vote to leave, since only 36 percent backed his re-election as prime minister at the general election last May. If understanding the details of the renegotiation package are required to vote, the turnout would fall to 10 percent or lower.

The voters who will tip the balance in the referendum expected in June are those who feel they have a civic duty to vote but not to understand how European institutions work. In such circumstances, they can rely on long held views about Europe, whether formed by watching wartime movies on television or working for a firm that trades heavily with other member states.

Those without long-held views can look at current events in Europe from Calais to Ukraine and beyond and decide whether the greater risk for Britain is leaving the EU after decades of membership or remaining in a political Union facing challenges of migration and economic growth that the European Council can only influence with difficulty.

This piece by Professor Richard Rose, [University of Strathclyde Glasgow](#), and commissioning fund awardee from [The UK in a Changing Europe](#) was co-published with the [Telegraph](#).

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