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Cameron's Moment of Truth

Matthew d'Ancona MARCH 8, 2016

LONDON — Less than a year after his unexpected general election victory, Prime Minister David Cameron has undertaken an even greater challenge. Staking his future on the outcome, he is holding a referendum on June 23 to decide whether Britain should stay in the European Union, or leave.

Mr. Cameron is said to be a lucky politician, good in a crisis. But is this a gamble too far?

Not since 1975 have Britain's voters been given a specific say on their country's participation in the union, which has undergone a transformation in the intervening years, evolving from a free-trade pact into an integrated political and economic alliance with many of the features of a superstate. Those who favor Britain's departure, or "Brexit," claim that too much control has been lost to the European Commission in Brussels and the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg.

Like a majority of Conservatives of his generation, Mr. Cameron himself is a euroskeptic, firmly opposed to European federalism. Yet he believes with no less vigor that Britain can have "the best of both worlds," and would suffer economically, diplomatically and strategically outside the union.

As evidence of his determination to strike a sensible balance, the prime minister promised to renegotiate Britain's terms of membership before putting the matter before the electorate. This deal, struck in Brussels on Feb. 19 after more than 30 hours of talks, is considerably better than most of the critics will admit. On a range of issues — Britain's exemption from the goal of "ever closer union," the benefits it must pay to European Union migrants, the position of the City of London, the ability of national parliaments to resist European law — Mr. Cameron won significant concessions.

The Leave camp claims that this so-called special status is flimsy and will lack the status of law until enshrined in a European Union treaty. But as those around Mr. Cameron admit, the fine print of the agreement was never going to be the deciding factor in the referendum.

Inasmuch as such surveys can be relied on after failing to predict the wide margin of Mr. Cameron's victory in last year's general election, opinion polls suggest that 15 to 20 percent of voters are undecided. It is their support that both campaigns must now chase. And that battle became all the more dramatic when Boris Johnson, the charismatic Conservative mayor of London, declared himself a supporter of a Brexit.

Like Mr. Cameron, Mr. Johnson is an upper-middle-class product of England's most famous private school, Eton. But their styles could scarcely be more different.

In his statement to members of Parliament about the deal and referendum, Mr. Cameron made scathing references to Mr. Johnson's position and ambitions. These were ill received by the mayor. Neither man looks in any mood to back down. Whichever side prevails at the ballot box, this particular breach may be irreparable.

Mr. Johnson was only a political friend. But Michael Gove, the highly regarded justice secretary, has been close to Mr. Cameron for years. On the night of the 2010 election, Mr. Gove's wife looked after the Cameron children. Mr. Gove also helped to write most of Mr. Cameron's key speeches. So his decision to champion Britain's exit from the union is a blow to Mr. Cameron personally as well as politically.

Another longtime ally, Michael Howard, a former party leader and now a Conservative peer, has also abandoned the prime minister's camp. On Feb. 25, he wrote in The Daily Telegraph that Mr. Cameron's

quest for a better deal for Britain had “met with failure.” The only step that “might shake Europe’s leaders out of their complacency,” he went on, was “the shock of a vote by the British people to leave.”

So much has been imperiled by this referendum. Membership in the European Union is not the essence of the country’s nationhood, but it gives Britain global punch and secures its economic prosperity. If Britons vote to leave, they will also be voting, in effect, for Mr. Cameron to quit Downing Street, his home of six years. After the distraction of the long referendum campaign, the Conservative Party would then be embroiled in a monthslong leadership contest. This would probably involve a runoff between George Osborne, the chancellor of the Exchequer, and Mr. Johnson, his prospects enhanced by backing the winning side in the referendum.

This would be merely the local consequence. As Britain formalized its withdrawal, it would find its status in the world dropping like a bad stock. Britain’s “special relationship” with the United States would doubtless endure in rhetoric and sentiment. But America would need a new best friend for its negotiations with the European bloc.

Within Britain’s borders, most Scottish voters would be deeply aggrieved at exiting the European Union. One of the first tasks confronting the new prime minister could well be to grant a further referendum on the union of England and Scotland. The last such vote, in September 2014, resulted in a defeat for Scottish independence (by 55 percent to 45 percent), but the Scottish National Party has tightened its political grip since then. A Brexit could then be enough to drive Scotland and England apart — if only to allow the Scots to negotiate continued membership as a distinct nation.

A leadership crisis, the breakup of Britain and a shrinking role on the global stage as a commercial, diplomatic and strategic force: The stakes could hardly be higher. When Mr. Cameron won last year’s general election, he called it the “sweetest victory.” Doubtless it was. But losing the referendum would be the most bitter defeat imaginable.

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