

Project Fear is the legacy of decades of Euroscepticism. Dare Cameron make a positive case for the EU?

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*It is 14 years since Tony Blair extolled the merits of the EU in his landmark Cardiff speech. Since then, writes **Oliver Daddow**, Euroscepticism has gradually come to dominate the political agenda, and the best David Cameron hopes for is a reluctant agreement to Remain from the media. Unless he dares to make the multilateral case for staying in Europe, the politics dubbed 'Project Fear' are bound to dominate the argument.*



On 29 February, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon [made the argument](#) for an 'uplifting' and 'thoroughly positive debate' about the EU across Britain in the build-up to the EU referendum. It was a thinly veiled attack on what has been dubbed David Cameron's '[Project Fear](#)', a rhetorical strategy that worked in the Scotland referendum not by stressing the strengths of his case for the Union, but by hammering away at the known unknowns of the case for independence. In the EU referendum, Project Fear involves the use of scare stories and 'leap in the dark' metaphors to make an essentially negative case for 'Bremain'. Voters are invited to accept the logic of the proposition that although the EU is not perfect, the alternatives are probably worse, and that the entire process of a Brexit could damage the British economy and national security for decades. Put another way: don't risk possible future momentum at a delicate moment in Britain's economic recovery.

Sturgeon cleaves to a different view. Speaking on Cameron's own patch in London, she explained that 'if people are encouraged to and given the opportunity to truly engage in the issues, and realise the potential impact, good or bad, on their own day to day lives, then it is possible to generate a thriving democratic debate that leaves a positive legacy regardless of the outcome of the referendum'. This is a laudable position and one that in theory would work to inform, educate and, perhaps, even entertain the voting public. It may also have a galvanising effect on voter turnout. This is particularly significant for the Remain camp, which Sturgeon is backing, because [research suggests](#) that hardened Eurosceptics in the Leave camp are more likely to register their anti-EU views in June than are those wanting to keep Britain inside the club.

Loss of belief in the European project

Sturgeon's enthusiasm for a positive debate centring on a [solidarist account](#) of the virtues of collective action on common goals in the EU is admirable. However, even at this relatively early stage in proceedings, it does not seem too pessimistic to argue that the First Minister's remarks betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the recent history of the national 'conversation', such as it has been, about the EU in Britain for a number of years – to be precise, in England. There has been an almost total lack of political belief in the European project amongst the political classes for decades. The eurozone crisis has only weakened still further what relatively little support there was for the EU, with the unedifying notion that Britain is now '[shackled to a corpse](#)' gaining traction in UKIP and the Conservative Party. Meanwhile, the most Europhile mainstream UK party, the Liberal Democrats, were all but wiped off the political map in the 2015 election. The Green Party possesses many positive messages about the EU, but struggles to be heard in national debates on a consistent basis. This may change when the Yes campaign gets up and running properly but for now the most obviously Europhile voices in Britain are rarely heard.

All these developments have left the way clear for a maelstrom of much more critical voices to dominate the debate. Large swathes of the English press, especially traditional Conservative-supporting titles such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*, have been turning the British public and politicians off the EU for a years. On European policy, there has developed amongst politicians a climate of fear about Eurosceptical backlashes if they dare admit that

Britain has a hand in the EU's policy-making process. Going that stage further and extolling the virtues of the EU in domestic debates (or even giving the public some basic information to work with) has become equally problematic for them, such is the UK media obsession with British-EU conflicts, stand-offs and red lines that need to be defended against encroachments from 'Brussels'.

The odd exception aside (stand up Mr Blair), UK politicians have found it more convenient for electoral reasons to EU-bash rather than patiently explain to the public the many successes London has had in helping bringing the EU into closer alignment with Britain's national economic and political preferences. The weight of political and media coverage has come to lean **heavily towards the negatives** of membership, not to mention the **myths** about the 'barmy' EU directives that damage daily life in Britain. All very amusing, but they do nothing to inform or educate – quite the reverse. Finding noble EU-enthusiastic messages in what generally has been an ill-informed and poisonous debate for a number of years would, therefore, probably be seen by Conservative politicians on the Bremain side as a leap in the dark blindfolded. Putting a positive case would require Cameron to align himself with a progressive agenda that has been almost entirely absent from his European policy and rhetoric to date.

Seducing the media

It is no surprise that the **first adjustments** the Prime Minister and Chancellor made to their backroom teams after the 2015 election were aimed at enhancing the government's 'spin' operations, with a particular eye on the Europe question and shoring up opinion in the Conservative shires. First, in came journalist Camilla Cavendish to head the Downing Street policy unit. Second, Craig Oliver, an ex-editor of the BBC's *10 O'Clock News*, moved into the newly created role of political and communications director. Third, Mats Persson, director of the pro-reform think-tank Open Europe, was brought in to advise on the renegotiation. At the Treasury, George Osborne hired James Chapman, political editor at the *Daily Mail*, to run his spin operation. The Conservatives, it appears, were intent on governing as Conservatives after the coalition interregnum.

Even without making these changes in government-media relations changes in government, Cameron may be helped out by the fact that **it is by no means certain** that all the traditionally hostile UK press outlets will translate their instinctive hostility towards the EU into giving a firm Brexit steer to readers. For example, as we have seen recently, Rupert Murdoch's favoured opinion-forming outlet in the UK press, the *Sun*, has been one of the most **critical** of the result of Cameron's Brussels deal with the EU, and Murdoch is no great supporter of the Prime Minister personally. Barring another Margaret Thatcher coming along to lead the Conservatives, Murdoch seems to see Cameron as the 'best of a bad lot'. However, the *Sun* could just as easily end up in the Bremain camp as in the Brexit camp, especially if the polls suggest that Bremain will win the day in the referendum. Murdoch likes to be seen to be backing winners, whoever they are, and even if he has to do so with a heavy heart. There is something of a press void waiting to be filled one way or the other, so this is a critical juncture in the debate.



David Cameron visits the BAE Systems factory in Preston to talk about the EU referendum. Photo: [Number10.gov](https://www.number10.gov.uk) via a [Creative Commons 2.0 licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

Yet press support for Brexain is likely to be half-hearted ('there is no credible alternative') and therefore rooted in the same grand narrative as Project Fear. The positive case for the EU in the UK has tended to be advanced on the grounds of jobs/trade plus influence and a bit of security. Gone are the days when a Prime Minister would stand up and extol the virtues of, for example, that most hubristic of all Brussels institutions, the European Commission. Yes, this really did happen. In November 2002 Tony Blair delivered a [speech in Cardiff](#) on the Convention on the Future of Europe. He focussed on the case for major EU reform and for Britain to be at the forefront of the new Europe that was being built under the stewardship of Valéry Giscard D'Estaing. He called for greater self-confidence in Britain to put its case and win in Europe, to engage, to lead, and to stop seeing Europe as something that happens to Britain, but as a process 'we do with others'. Thatcherite in parts, the speech also explained the idea of pooled sovereignty, why common European defence was a good idea, and, remarkably it now seems, urged that 'we should strengthen the Commission to enable it to better carry out Europe's agenda'.

That Nicola Sturgeon in her London speech echoed Blair's commitment to pooled sovereignty 'for mutual advantage' and a Commission-led single market shows the political calculations facing Cameron in the coming months. Make the positive case and risk the wrath of the Conservative Party. Make the negative case and risk turning off the very voters needed to secure a Brexain, thereby possibly hastening the end of the Union in a further Scottish independence referendum. As [political legacies](#) go, that would be seismic. But the bones of a positive case for the EU are there, if Cameron can bear to look outside the narrow confines of Conservative traditions to the multilateral, Europeanist narratives. As has long been the case in British European policy, however, party political calculations are destined be the biggest consideration for the Prime Minister. Much may yet depend on which way majority press opinion falls.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of BrexitVote, nor the LSE.

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