

Ed the brave and logical? The risks and realities in denying a referendum

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The decision by Ed Miliband and Labour to effectively rule out holding a referendum on EU membership in the next parliament is very brave, logical and politically risky.

I can't see that it will directly win him a single new vote and the danger is that it will characterise his party as out of touch with the public and part of a metropolitan/cosmopolitan elite that does not trust the voice of the British people.

It has certainly been an effective bit of messaging with the 'quality' headlines making the new stance very clear:

No referendum on the EU under Labour

● Miliband to reveal today that vote on membership is 'unlikely' in next parliament if party wins power

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Labour has decided not to match David Cameron's pledge to hold a referendum on Europe in the next parlia-

say that a referendum is "unlikely" to be needed in the 2015-20 administration.

In a landmark speech in London, he will declare that a Labour government's top priorities will include the cost-of-living crisis and the

Miliband will strengthen Labour's commitment to an eventual referendum by promising a straight in/out vote if there were a "significant transfer of powers" from the UK to the EU. Until now, Labour has sup-

ported the party and the Tories at next year's general election. The Conservatives are expected to warn voters: "Vote UKIP, get Miliband and no say on Europe."

Labour's move will bring the party into line with the

guarantees a referendum on any treaty involving a "significant transfer of powers" to Brussels. The Liberal Democrats already support an in/out referendum.

Labour's stance was hammered out at a two-hour ses-

Personally, I support this policy, but is it good political communications? I can also see that it might get rid of a political headache for a new Labour government that would plague another Cameron-led administration. But parties don't usually think ahead like that if it means losing the votes that will get you into power in the first place.

It might help solidify support from pro-European Lib Dems who have drifted across to Labour. It might accentuate the pressure on Cameron from his own sceptics and UKIP. But if you are pro-European you would probably have gone with Labour anyway.

I am sure Labour wonks have done their calculations and worked out that voters' positions are relatively fixed at this point, despite the looming Euro elections that might change the atmosphere if UKIP wins handsomely. But even then, it will be the Tories who suffer most at the ballot box and Labour will be left standing as a 'sensible' alternative to Nigel Farage. Other issues such as immigration will be more relevant – after the economy, of course.

At the heart of this is what a very senior New Labour figure said in a seminar at the LSE recently when describing Ed Miliband as a character compared to the two Labour leaders that they both worked for in Downing Street. Ed, he said, is a bit like Tony in that he is own man and a very skilful synthesiser of policy. On the other hand, Ed is, like Gordon, rather too logical and long on detail rather than any dramatic insight into the popular mindset.

So this is one of those moments when the adjective 'brave' takes on its full ambiguity in the political lexicon. It's another example of Ed Miliband's courage in taking a stance at variance with the majority of our Euro-sceptic press. And at the very least, the voter now has a real choice. In that sense, at least, it is a brave and logical political communications move.

Update:

I am delighted that a few days after this article was written, the [FT's Janan Ganesh](#) agreed with its central thesis, albeit in much more detail and with an more intellectually elegant rationale.

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