



Painful choices for the Leave camp

The opening of the official campaign on the EU referendum has been mostly more of the same. Each side trading consequences and perils, questioning the other side's competence or intent. In particular, we've been lacking vision.

The 'vision thing' is an easy one to trash: it sounds too much like Tony Blair, too much of a hostage to fortune. But vision matters: when no one seems to agree about the state we're in, speaking instead of the state we might achieve is essential.

This is particularly true for 'Leave'. Saying that the status quo isn't good will only get you so far, whereas a vision of the brighter, better future might well draw in more people. In particular, for the Leave campaign, having a pre-agreed plan would be of huge benefit to them if they win, not least in the follow-up negotiations with the rest of the EU.

But that's not the case. Leave covers a huge array of ideological and party political positions that barely agree on what's wrong with the EU, let alone what's to be done. Any attempt to push a plan is thus likely to meet with internal resistance, since it will implicitly favour one worldview over another. As such, it might push away as many followers as it attracts.

This configuration makes Michael Gove's speech this week all the more interesting.

Gove is currently Justice Minister and one of the most senior government figures to support Leave: he has a reputation for being very cerebral, as seen with his previous work on education. However, on this occasion, that thoughtfulness seems to have led him to a strange destination.

Gove's argument is that the UK will be able to move out of the EU's control but still maintain full access to its markets. He talks of a free trade area stretching across the European continent, which the UK – by virtue of its size and importance – could almost not help be part of. Moreover, the sheer success of the UK in this new position would start a contagion of democracy and would presage the collapse of the EU itself.

This all suffers a number of problems, as commentators (and Remain) were all too happy to point out. Yes, the UK is a large market for the EU, but not nearly as large as the EU market is to the UK. Coupled to the lack of incentive for other member states to give a generous deal to the UK, this 'Albanian model' looks not

only less appealing but also less likely. And it has a logical problem: how could the UK negotiate access to a market run by an EU that would be falling apart?

If the mechanics of the proposal are dubious, then the politics is less so. This speech has been one of the few big moments so far in the debate, where someone has tried to move things on. The absence of a clear leader of Leave means that there is opportunity for Gove to take up the reins, which might serve him well in the future, especially if he wants a more senior position in government. In addition, Gove's proposal is open enough (or sufficiently lacking detail) that it could serve as an umbrella for many Leavers, at least in the broadest terms.

Gove's speech matters not for its plan, but for its projection of a strong, independent and confident Britain. It taps into many of the themes that Leave have pushed over recent months, about not doing down the UK and about holding up our heads. For many voters that might be enough to convince them that Leave is the 'right thing to do', and we'll work out the details as we go.

However, this doesn't happen in a vacuum. There has been something of a swing towards Remain in the past week or so, which might be down to the government leaflet, or to Barack Obama's strong support for Remain or to the numerous statements about economic uncertainty caused by the potential of Brexit.

While Remain has even less of a vision of the future than Leave – essentially, they're relying on 'it'll be like it is now' – it does not seem to hurt them in the same way.

Thus it falls to Leave to make their case stick better in the coming weeks.