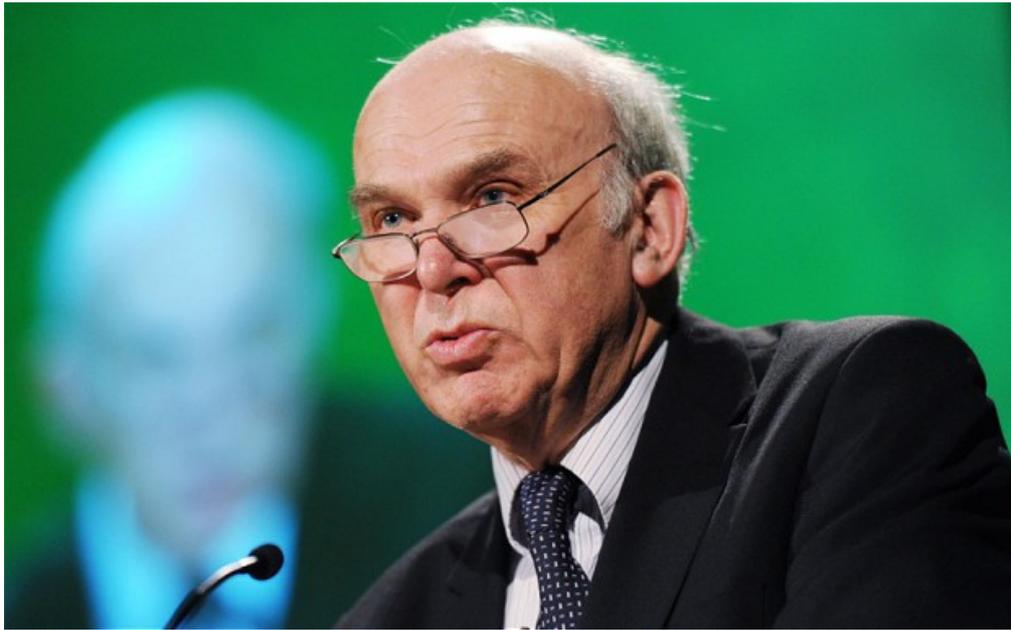


The Telegraph

Vince Cable: Referendum on the EU is 'dangerous'

Tory promise to hold a popular vote on the EU is “actually dangerous”, Lib Dem business secretary tells senior European officials



Vince Cable said: “I think the approach of the Conservatives is actually quite dangerous.” Photo: PA



By [Bruno Waterfield](#), Brussels

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David Cameron’s promise of an EU referendum on a new settlement for Britain in Europe is “dangerous” and “utterly unrealistic”, Vince Cable has told a Brussels audience.

In a speech to senior EU officials on Tuesday, the Liberal Democrat Business Secretary departed from scripted lines on the “digital economy” to launch an attack on his Conservative government partners.

Mr Cable focused his criticism on the two central planks of the Prime Minister's European strategy, a renegotiation of Europe's treaties to bring powers back to Britain followed by a popular vote on EU membership.

“I think the approach of the Conservatives is actually quite dangerous. It is assuming that the other 27 countries will magically agree to British requests. It is raising expectations that changes can be achieved within the EU that will be very difficult to deliver,” he said to the Lisbon Council think-tank.

“We do not think that a referendum is sensible or helpful in anyway. Precipitating a referendum in current conditions, holding out the prospect of major reforms that aren't going to be achieved is dangerous.”

The senior Lib Dem predicted that Britain could win reforms on “excessive bureaucracy” and abuses of benefit tourism by EU migrants but poured scorn on Mr Cameron's plan for root and branch reform.

“I'm sure there will be some changes because other European countries find difficulties,” he said.

“But anybody who is expecting that our relationship with Europe can be fundamentally renegotiated is just being utterly unrealistic.”

Mr Cable said that the referendum was dangerous because it undermined investor confidence for Japanese, Indian and other international companies because they “assume we'll remain members of the EU single market”.

“Once you bring that into question you seriously undermine the confidence of a significant number of our overseas investors,” he said.

Paul Nuttall, the deputy leader of Ukip, said: “It displays a staggering level of arrogance that Cable believes the British public should not be trusted to decide who governs their own country. Ukip wholeheartedly believes that the European question should be settled in a full, free and fair referendum like any true democrat would argue.”

He accused the Conservatives of threatening the future of the EU single market by failing to defend free movement and the immigration of ,many East European nationals into Britain.

“If the single market is to mean anything, politicians have to stand up and be willing to defend freedom of movement. Absolutely fundamental,” he said.

“Unless we can defend this principle we are potentially in considerable difficulties.”

Mr Cable said that a new referendum would very different from the last popular vote on Europe in 1975 because Ukip has “significant allies” in the Conservative Party which has seen “a steady drift to shouting from the outside”.

“This one will be different because the last one involved the centre and the Right arguing against the Left. This one will involve the centre and the Left arguing against the Right,” he said.

Sounding a pessimistic note for the pro-EU camp, Mr Cable noted that, unlike 40 years ago, Europe could not be held up as a beacon to of economic reform and success to British voters.

“[A referendum] takes place under less propitious conditions because in the 1970s it was possible to argue that joining the EU would enhance our economic performance because it was so dynamic. That is not the position today. We’re in a difficult political situation,” he admitted.

The comments signal Mr Cable’s role in establishing clear “red line” differences between the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives ahead of possible coalition talks following May’s general election.

“We’ve have made it very clear that we have a very different position from the Conservatives on this. It is a very deep division,” he said.

“This is a very important issue. It is absolutely fundamental to the future of our country, how the hell could it be anything else?”

The comments were welcomed by a Brussels think-tank audience that included many EU officials.

"This is what we have been waiting to hear. At last a British minister telling it like it is," said one Brussels official.