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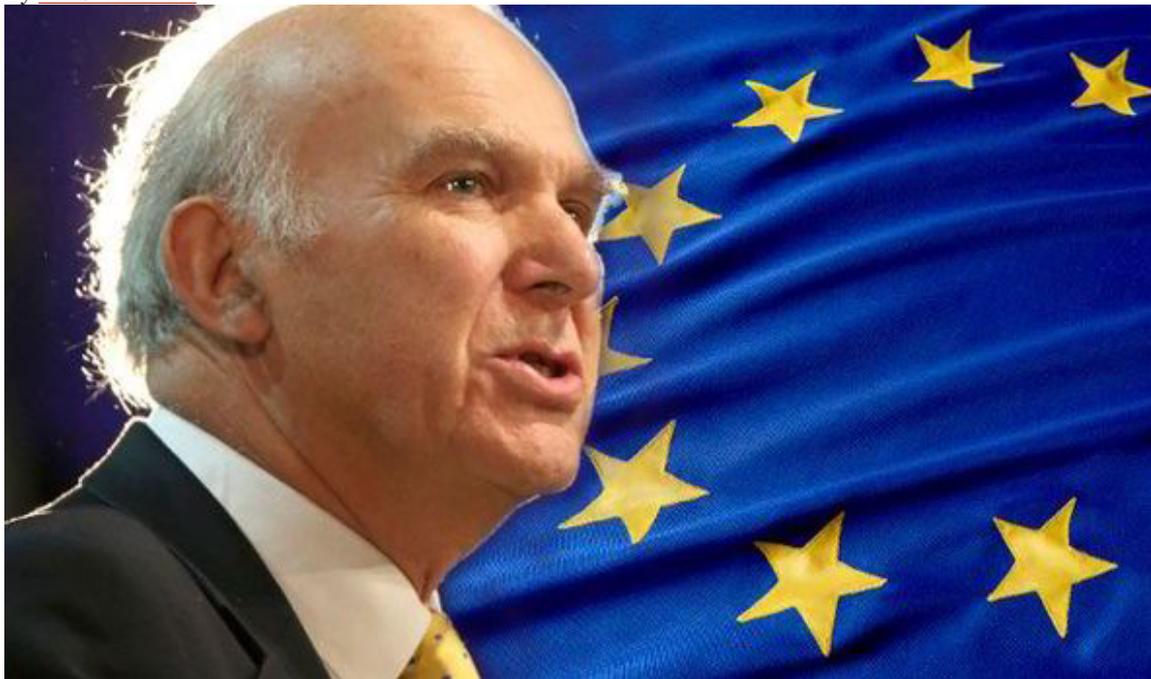
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Fury as Vince Cable describes EU referendum 'dangerous' and 'utterly unrealistic'

VINCE Cable provoked anger tonight by describing calls for a referendum on Britain's EU membership "dangerous" and "utterly unrealistic."

Wednesday, January 21, 2015

By [MACER HALL](#)



Brussels officials welcomed the remarks by Vince Cable

In a speech to Brussels officials, the Lib Dem Business Secretary savaged Tory proposals for seeking a new deal for Britain to be put to a national vote.

"I think the approach of the Conservatives is actually quite dangerous," he said.

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Vince Cable

"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 told a meeting organised by the Lisbon Council think-tank in Brussels.

"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."

Mr Cable said Britain should campaign against "excessive bureaucracy" and abuse of the benefit system.

But he rejected David Cameron's desire to repatriate a string of powers from Brussels back to Westminster.

He claimed holding a referendum was "dangerous" because it could undermine confidence in the British economy among investors by raising doubts about the UK's membership of the European single market.

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

And he insisted the EU's open-border freedom-of-movement rules should not be scrapped to curb migration.



GETTY

Business Secretary Vince Cable leaves Downing Street after the first cabinet meeting of 2015

"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 feared that the UK Independence Party had "significant allies" within Tory ranks.

And he warned that holding an EU referendum at a time when Europe's economies were stuttering raised the risk of Britons voting for an exit.

The atmosphere was very different today compared with that around the 1975 poll on Britain's membership of the Common Market, the forerunner of the EU, Mr Cable added.

"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.

He said a new referendum would take 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 also admitted that there was a "deep division" between the Tories and the Lib Dems over Europe.

"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?"