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EU referendum plan "dangerous"

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David Cameron's plan to offer a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union by the end of 2017 has been labelled "dangerous" by a Liberal Democrat Cabinet minister.

Vince Cable told an audience in Brussels that the Prime Minister was "raising expectations" about the deal he could achieve for Britain in his promised renegotiation ahead of the public vote but changes would be "very difficult to deliver".

The Business Secretary said the "centre of gravity" in British politics was to remain part of the European project and he did not think the Tory plan was "sensible or helpful in any way".

"We are not afraid of referendums, we have said that if there is a significant treaty change there will have to be popular consent," he said.

"But precipitating a referendum in current conditions, holding out the prospect of major reforms that aren't going to be achieved, is dangerous."

Answering questions at an event organised by the Lisbon Council think tank, Mr Cable said the way to achieve change in Europe was by building alliances with "like-minded countries" rather than the plan set out by his Conservative coalition partners.

He said: "I think their strategy is actually quite dangerous. It is assuming that the other 27 countries will automatically agree to British requests, which they may or may not, I will leave you to make your mind up about that.

"But he is raising expectations that changes can be achieved within the European Union which will be very difficult to deliver."

The Business Secretary acknowledged that reform was needed, and hinted that without it the pro-Europe case was “in danger of breaking down”.

He said: “We are not defending the European Union as it is, it needs reform, of course. There is a lot of bureaucracy, there are genuine issues around the benefit abuse issues and so on which have to be dealt with.

“But the best way to deal with them is to work with like-minded countries.”

“I’ve had this experience as a minister, I have been in my job for five years. I work with colleagues on the Competitiveness Council. We have something called a like-minded group, there is actually a majority of European countries that share the same agenda about reform and we believe we can accomplish much more in that way.”

Mr Cable insisted that the majority of British politicians in the Conservative, Lib Dem and Labour ranks wanted to maintain the UK’s membership of the EU, but there was “a lot of sniping”.

He said: “The centre of gravity of British politics, and I mean mainstream Conservatives, my own party, Labour, are actually committed to Europe, we want to stay in it.

“We have the populist fringes and we have a lot of sniping, but I think the centre of gravity is to be in Europe.

“But in order to maintain that and strengthen it we need to be able to say that the European Union is moving in the right direction.

“The way we define the right direction ... is actually making a real success of the single market and using that to stimulate real growth and rising living standards.

“That’s our message: we do want to be part of this project and we do want to see it deliver real goods and real outcomes which then enable us to reinforce our support for the European Union.

“It’s that line of causality that’s in danger of breaking down.”

Mr Cable’s comments came after he called for a single market in digital services so that Britons could access films and music purchased through online services such as Netflix wherever they are in the European Union.

The Business Secretary will claim that a digital single market in Europe would help consumers and provide a 340 billion euro (£260 billion) economic boost.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Bis) said the lack of a single market meant UK shoppers were often unable to take advantage of online special offers available on the continent and were nervous about buying from overseas because of confusion about their consumer rights.

Mr Cable’s department said available content on online services such as Netflix varies wildly across the EU, and UK subscribers are often unable to stream content they have paid for when they are abroad.

Currently, over half of British consumers pay more to buy online in the UK rather than overseas because they are unclear whether they can get a refund if something goes wrong, Bis said.