



How Leave outgunned Remain: The battle of the 'five Ms'

by Charles Grant
25 June 2016

Remain suffered from unconvincing messengers, too narrow a message, difficulties over migration, a savage media and a ruthless Leave campaign machine.

Many people in other parts of the world are shocked that Britain has voted for an option that they believe is bound to damage its economy and diminish its global influence. For Prime Minister David Cameron, winning a referendum on an entity as unpopular as the EU was always going to be an uphill struggle. A month before the vote, thinking it unlikely that Remain would win, I wrote a piece for the CER explaining why. To my regret, the article turned out to be entirely accurate. This piece seeks to explain why Leave won the referendum campaign. Remain suffered from five disadvantages: the messengers, the message, migration, the media and the campaign machine – in short, the five Ms.

The messengers

No product sells easily without good salesmen, especially when – as is the case with the EU – the product has a chequered track record. Remain's problem was that Leave had better salesmen. The Leave campaign was led by two eloquent and persuasive messengers, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson (senior Conservatives whom, until February, Cameron had hoped and believed would stand at his side). Opinion polls consistently showed that Gove and Johnson were more trusted on the EU than the leading Remainers, Cameron and George Osborne, his chancellor. This was somewhat surprising, since Cameron and Osborne had been riding high a year earlier, when they won the general election against the odds, and since Cameron is normally an effective salesman.

As the campaign progressed, the stock of the prime minister and his chancellor fell. Cameron had a particular problem in that, during his renegotiation of the terms of British membership, he several times said that Britain would do fine outside the EU. He felt that he had to say that in order to persuade his EU partners to take his demands seriously. But then later on, during the campaign, when he found a sudden passion for the benefits of staying in, while predicting dreadful consequences if Britain left, people found him unconvincing. All the more so, since, throughout most of his career, Cameron had seldom had a good word to say about the EU.

Furthermore, both Cameron and Osborne made mistakes in the early months of 2016. Cameron mishandled his family's involvement in the Panama papers affair, initially being reluctant to publish the details – though in fact he had done nothing wrong. And Osborne produced a budget that included several controversial measures – such as cuts to disability payments and a radical reform of schools – which had to be withdrawn. The EU's enemies in the media exploited these errors to blacken the reputations of Osborne and Cameron.

Meanwhile the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, should have been another key messenger for the In campaign. Remain needed him and his senior colleagues to mobilise Labour's traditional voters in the North and the Midlands, many of whom worry about EU migration. But although Corbyn supported Remain, as a life-long opponent of the EU he seldom sounded convincing. Many of his speeches contained as much criticism of the EU as praise. By the time of the referendum, large numbers of Labour voters were still unsure where the party stood on the EU.

Some of the most eloquent spokespeople for Remain, especially in the latter stages of the campaign, turned out to be regional politicians, such as Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish first minister, Ruth Davidson, the Tory leader in Scotland, and Sadiq Khan, the newly elected Labour Mayor of London. But none of Remain's leaders matched Johnson's drawing power or charisma.

The message

Remain also had problems with the message. Its task was inherently more difficult than that of Leave: the arguments for staying in the EU are complicated, economic, numerical, hard to explain and often dull, while the arguments for leaving are simple and emotional. Stronger in Europe, the officially-designated Remain campaign, focused very largely on the economy, and was right to do so, since its research showed that voters worry about the economic consequences of Brexit. It was right to line up business leaders, economists and international organisations, all of which argued that Britain would be better off in.

Unfortunately, however, government ministers and spokesmen went over the top in the way they presented economic data from Treasury reports on Brexit. At the start of the campaign, Osborne announced that if Britain left the EU, every family would be £4,300 worse off. The economic argument underlying that claim was sound, but that and other predictions sounded too certain and too precise to convince. As the government piled on more and more forecasts of doom and gloom, it laid itself open to the charge of scare-mongering. By the end of the campaign, a lot of people simply didn't believe what the government said about the economy, and they didn't want to hear more statistics.

The second problem with the message was that it was almost entirely negative: Brexit would lead to dire consequences. Undoubtedly Stronger in Europe was right to make that its main message. But I met large numbers of voters, including younger ones, who wanted to hear something good about the EU and how Britain could play a leading role in it. Osborne's claim that leaving the EU would threaten peoples' pensions – and bring down house prices – inspired few younger voters. Late in the campaign, Gordon Brown tried to make a positive case for the EU. But the government appeared not to make much effort to do so.

Migration

The Outers knew that migration was their strongest card: anyone who wanted to limit the number of EU citizens entering the UK had no choice but to vote Leave. However, in the early phases of the campaign,

Vote Leave – the officially designated Out campaign – distinguished itself from Leave.EU and Grassroots Out – two organisations linked to UKIP’s Nigel Farage – by being more high-minded; Vote Leave claimed that it would talk about economics and sovereignty as much as migration.

But about a month before the referendum, Vote Leave reckoned that it was on course to lose and that a new approach was needed. Henceforth it focused on migration, migration and migration. It produced leaflets that were similar to those of Leave.EU, saying that Turkey was joining the EU (completely untrue, of course). This new emphasis tilted the opinion polls in the direction of Brexit.

Cameron and Stronger in Europe never developed a confident argument on migration. Their main response to questions on EU workers coming to Britain was simply to change the subject and talk about the benefits of the single market. Cameron got into particular difficulties during TV interviews and debates, because of his foolish manifesto pledge to bring migration below a hundred thousand a year (net immigration in 2015 was 335,000, of which nearly half was from the EU) – a pledge that could not be fulfilled even if all EU migration stopped.

Labour and Scottish politicians sang the benefits of immigration, but Labour’s message was blunted by splits among senior figures: Jeremy Corbyn, Gordon Brown and Hilary Benn wanted no controls on legal EU migration, while Yvette Cooper, Ed Balls and Tom Watson said that the EU’s rules on free movement should be revised. So the story became ‘Labour split on migration’ rather than ‘Labour backs the EU’. Stronger in Europe could have tried harder to explain that if Britain wanted access to the single market, it had to accept free movement as the price. But to be fair to the campaign, there never was a silver bullet that would have enabled them to kill the issue.

The media

Then there was the media problem. Most of the influential British newspapers – the Sun, the Express, the Daily Mail and the Telegraph – did not just back Leave, but became propaganda sheets for that cause (of those four, only the Telegraph allowed some pro-EU or neutral articles to appear). For several years it has been fashionable to say that the print media have become irrelevant. Indeed, at the start of the campaign one eminent political columnist assured me that they would not make any difference to the referendum result. He was wrong.

As Martin Fletcher, a former *Times* Brussels correspondent and foreign editor, recently wrote: “For decades, British newspapers have offered their readers an endless stream of biased, misleading and downright fallacious stories about Brussels...articles that did not bash Brussels, that acknowledged the EU’s achievements, that recognised that Britain had many natural allies in Europe and often won important arguments, on say, the creation of the single market, were almost invariably killed.”

Of course, not everyone swallows everything these newspapers say. But, as I discovered while knocking on doors during the campaign, many Britons believe all sort of bizarre things about the EU that have no basis in fact, and the source of which is ultimately newspapers – for example, that most immigrants to Britain come from the EU, that 20 per cent of the population are EU migrants or that 75 per cent of Britain’s laws are made in Brussels.

Before and during the campaign, the eurosceptic newspapers carried a strong message that EU migrants were causing enormous problems in Britain. They ran front-page after front-page of scare stories about

how migrants and refugees were trying to get into the country – often conflating the two groups. Many of these articles were factually incorrect. Even on the day after the Orlando shootings in Florida, the *Daily Mail* – uniquely among UK papers – led its front page with ‘Fury over plot to let 1.5 million Turks into Britain’. The written press did a great job in reinforcing Vote Leave’s twisted message that thousands of foreigners – whether asylum-seekers, Romanians, Syrians, terrorists or Turks – were all hell-bent on entering the country.

And when Cameron brought back his deal on EU reform in February, the eurosceptic press sang in unison that he had achieved nothing of value. It was not a coincidence that several key newspapers said exactly the same things about the deal: Vote Leave had written their lines. The BBC’s reporting reflected this ‘consensus’ and most people ended up believing that Cameron’s deal was rubbish. In fact, while it did not transform the nature of the EU, the deal did introduce some important reforms. 10 Downing Street decided that it would be too difficult to try to change perceptions of the deal. It probably should have tried harder, because Cameron was left in a difficult position. He had always said he wanted to stay in a “reformed EU” rather than the current one – but since he had, everybody said, failed to reform it, his sudden enthusiasm for the current EU seemed odd.

The BBC’s performance during the referendum campaign was lamentable. Of course it was right to give equal prominence and time to the two sides. But it failed to fulfil its legal obligation to inform and to educate. When senior journalists interviewed Leave campaigners, who said things that were untrue, the comments often went unchallenged. Why was this? Having spoken to many BBC journalists – some of whom acknowledge there was a serious problem – I conclude there were at least two reasons.

First, a lot of well-known BBC presenters and interviewers know very little about the EU. So when, for example, a Leaver said (as they often did) that the ‘five presidents’ report’ showed that a super-state was under construction, with a European army, and that Britain would have to join, the interviewer let it pass. Few BBC journalists knew that this infamous report only concerned the eurozone, did not mention an EU army, did not apply to Britain and had been effectively vetoed by Germany.

On June 21st the BBC broadcast a televised debate from Wembley Arena. Between each section of the debate, a voiceover sought to explain the factual background to the next subject for discussion. One of these voices stated that “EU leaders are discussing the creation of a European army”, which is completely untrue. When I set up the CER, 18 years ago, BBC journalists were much better briefed on EU matters than they are today. There are, of course, honourable exceptions who are well-informed, and many of them regret that the BBC made only half-hearted efforts to educate staff before the campaign began.

The second point is that some interviewers were quite well-informed, but still held back from correcting Leavers when they made untrue statements. As an institution, the BBC was terrified of being thought of as pro-EU – partly because of the sheer volume of complaints it receives from hard-line Outers. So the BBC bent over backwards not to behave in ways that could be construed as biased against Leave. One of the BBC’s most senior journalists confessed to me, a few days before the referendum: “If we give a Leaver a hard time, we know that the Mail or the Sun may pick on us and that that is bad for our careers. But if we are tough on Remainers it might upset the Guardian and that doesn’t matter at all. This affects the way some colleagues handle interviews.”

The machines

The final 'M' problem was the machines running the campaigns. Vote Leave, was led by two highly experienced political activists, Dominic Cummings and Matthew Elliott. They had run the successful 'No to AV' side in the referendum on Britain's electoral system, five years ago, and had also been involved in campaigns against the euro. They ran a focused and ruthless campaign, ensuring that their friends in the media came out with the right messages at the key moments.

They knowingly said and printed things that were untrue, for example that Britain sends £350 million a week to Brussels, that it would have to join an EU army, that it would be liable for eurozone bail-outs and that Turkey was joining the EU. They exploited the fact that in political advertising, unlike commercial advertising, there are no penalties for untruths.

Meanwhile Britain Stronger in Europe had a chairman, Lord Rose, whose early media performances were so embarrassing that he was later kept off air. Its staff were decent, hard-working and intelligent people, from all the main parties. Its work on social media was excellent. Stronger in Europe cannot be accused of a lack of professionalism; in the final weeks, the No 10 press operation more or less took over the campaign.

However, Stronger in Europe sometimes struggled to rebut the propaganda put out by its opponents. Some of the people that it put up for key media slots lacked sufficient knowledge – or had not been sufficiently briefed – and so were unable to deliver killer facts or arguments. With the benefit of hindsight, Stronger in Europe should have tried harder to force the Outers to say what alternative to EU membership they were proposing (a point on which the Outers disagree, and struggled to present a convincing case). It should have done more to highlight the risks of Scottish secession, and the huge problems that Brexit will create for Northern Ireland. Nor did the campaign ever try seriously to explain that the single market means much more than tariff-free trade, namely the removal of regulatory barriers. However, as this piece has argued, most of the difficulties that Stronger in Europe faced were not of its own making

Ultimately, the self-styled 'insurgency' of Vote Leave managed to portray the campaign as a battle of the people against the elites. Somehow, nobody seemed to mind that Johnson was educated at Eton and Oxford, Gove at Oxford and Farage at Dulwich College. Remainers probably had no choice but to keep citing the many experts who said Britain would be better off in. However, each time they did so, they reinforced Leave's claim that they were condescending towards common people. Perhaps the most significant quote of the entire campaign was Gove's "I think people in this country have had enough of experts" – one that he may live to regret.

Britain is not the only non-deferential country in the developed world. Hostility to elites has become strident across many parts of Europe and North America, as the US presidential election campaign has shown. This presents a long-term problem for the EU, because whatever its strengths and weaknesses, the Union will always be seen as an institution that is intimately linked to the establishment. In the Netherlands I was recently told that there can never be a new EU treaty because, whatever its content, the people would vote the treaty down in a referendum.

Unless democratic politicians across Europe can persuade populations to trust them, and to believe that they will make good decisions on the basis of their expertise, the future of representative democracy is bleak. The future of the EU depends on populations believing that those they elect will act in their interest when in Brussels. That requires the EU itself to do a much better job of explaining to ordinary people, in terms they understand, what it is doing and why. The British referendum campaign demonstrated that in the UK, at least, ignorance of the EU was far from bliss.

Charles Grant is director of the Centre for European Reform.