

Vince Cable: Cameron Playing ‘Dangerous’ Game on EU

By LAURENCE NORMAN



U.K. Business Secretary Vince Cable, pictured here at a U.K. high-technology engineering firm, spoke in Brussels Tuesday about U.K.-EU ties.

[David Cameron](#)'s push for a referendum on his country's membership in the European Union, and his demand for powers back from Brussels to persuade U.K. voters to stay in the EU, has its fans.

Vince Cable, his business secretary, is not among them.

Mr. Cable, a leading figure in the Liberal Democrats, the British government's junior coalition partner, was in Brussels Tuesday speaking at the Lisbon Council think tank about the EU. Long known for his pro-European views, Mr. Cable sent Mr. Cameron a warning: raising expectations of major changes in EU rules to satisfy British demands was a dangerous gambit.

“There are a few issues where Britain, Germany, other major countries have a common view, and I’m sure changes can be obtained,” he said. “But anybody who is expecting that our relationship with Europe can be fundamentally renegotiated is just utterly unrealistic.”

Mr. Cameron has spoken of holding a referendum on EU membership in 2017 if he wins a general election in May. Polls currently show the race too close to call.

Facing a challenge from the anti-EU U.K. Independence Party, or UKIP, along with widespread euroskepticism in his own party, Mr. [Cameron has called for broad changes to EU migration rules](#) to prevent people from moving to the U.K. to receive more generous welfare payments. He has also demanded a cutback in EU red tape, national parliament vetoes of EU legislation, and other reforms to give Westminster greater autonomy in areas like justice and policing.

With the [election due in four months](#), Mr. Cable said he was not about to outline specific policy requirements for a potential post-election coalition deal. However, labelling Mr. Cameron’s referendum promise “dangerous,” he said the stance of other major parties on a referendum and EU ties would be a key factor in his party’s post-election discussions.

“It’s very, very important,” he said. “We are not defining red lines. But this is a very important issue. It is absolutely fundamental to the future of our country.”

The Liberal Democrats, like the main opposition Labour party, support a referendum only in the case of a proposed increase in Brussels’ powers. After nearly five years in coalition with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats rank fourth in most major polls, trailing Labour, the Tories and UKIP. If the polls don’t shift, they could lose a significant number of their current 56 U.K. lawmakers.

Nonetheless they are still likely to have dozens of lawmakers and could hold the balance of power if the election is as tight as polls currently show.

Mr. Cable said he believes the EU needs to be reformed and listed a crackdown on welfare abuses and slimmed-down red tape as examples. However, Mr. Cable, whose party once strongly backed U.K. adoption of the single currency, demonstrated he had not completely lost his euro faith.

“I wouldn’t be completely fatalistic about the eurozone. It’s going through a very, very bad period which is partly due to the difficulties of managing structural adjustment within a monetary union,” he said. “In 10 years’ or 20 years’ time, we may look back on this and find that the eurozone has overcome its difficulties and is seen as a broadly successful undertaking.”