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Quitting the EU is not an extremist view

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The prime minister has embarked on a classic piece of triangulation strategy of the kind pioneered by Bill Clinton when he was US president and later by his disciple, Tony Blair. Broadly speaking, this involves Mr Cameron defining both sides of the European debate as extremes and then positioning himself as the voice of reason in the centre.

One “extreme”, in the Cameron narrative, is the Eurosceptic movement, represented by myself, many other Tory MPs and Ukip leader Nigel Farage, agitating for a complete break with the EU and the restoration of Britain status as a self-governing democracy. The other is slavish subservience to all things Brussels, of the kind to be found in much of the Labour party and a small minority of the Conservative party, best represented by Euro-enthusiasts Peter Mandelson and Kenneth Clarke.

The prime minister has neatly positioned himself midway between these two views, presenting himself as the man who

will reform the terms of British membership of the EU, curb the migrant crisis, reduce job-destroying red tape, eliminate the threat of absorption into a European super-state, and stop Eurozone states from ganging up against the City.

He will pose as the pragmatic fixer in the centre, striving to protect British interests and rising above the sound and fury generated by rival Remain and Leave camps. He will pitch his appeal at the “moderate middle” of public opinion – people who sense there is a lot wrong with the present arrangements but who find the idea of quitting the EU a leap in the dark. And he will collude behind the scenes with the Eurocrats to create the impression that he has secured a great deal for Britain in the teeth of European opposition.

In addition, Mr Cameron is also working towards a rebranding of British membership of the EU. The most critical section of his Chatham House speech was when he declared that we need “a British model of membership that works for Britain and for any other non-Euro members”, calling this “a matter of cardinal importance for the United Kingdom”.

There has already been plenty of chatter at Westminster and in Brussels about Britain becoming an “associate member” of the EU – a reassuring phrase suggesting an arm’s-length relationship with the EU centred on free trade – the deal we wrongly thought we were getting when we joined the EEC more than 40 years ago. The prime minister has developed this idea and rebranded it as the “British model”, a reasonable centrist arrangement whereby we get the benefits of EU membership without any of the tiresome costs.

Mr Cameron’s requests in his letter to EU Council president Donald Tusk have been roundly panned in the press for their timidity and lack of ambition. As my colleague Bernard Jenkin said: “Is this it?”

I agree – the requests offer no serious prospect of restoring British independence, of enabling us to take back control of our borders and other vital national interests.

Make no mistake. Mr Cameron's "moderate" British model would still mean the supremacy of European law and the European Court of Justice. It would still mean Britain being outvoted in the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. We would still be bossed around by the European Commission.

I would urge likeminded MPs and citizens who support our departure from the EU to study the government's tactics and strategy very carefully. Conservatives for Britain, the group representing Tory parliamentarians committed to fundamental reform of our EU membership, meets on Tuesday to discuss our response to the PM's proposals. Part of that response must be an appreciation of the dangers of the "spin war" that will have such a bearing on the outcome of the referendum.

Forty years ago, another wily political operator, Harold Wilson, succeeded in persuading the country that he had secured a great deal for Britain in his European negotiations. He had done nothing of the sort, as the intervening years have demonstrated. We cannot let the wool be pulled over our eyes once again.

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