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# Big business backs Cameron's push to keep Britain in the EU

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The bosses of about half of Britain's 100 biggest companies are to sign a letter backing David Cameron in his fight to keep the country in the EU in the referendum in June that will shape the future of the UK.

As Tory opposition to the prime minister's strategy mounted, Downing Street rallied the backing of corporate leaders at companies including Shell, BAE Systems, BT and Rio Tinto, who will argue in the letter that Britain is "stronger, safer and better off" in a reformed EU.

The barrage of business support will come as some relief to Mr Cameron after London mayor Boris Johnson on Sunday declared his support for a British exit.

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Mr Johnson, who had been offered a senior cabinet post by Mr

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Cameron if he remained loyal, will now become the most prominent figure of a Brexit campaign which, if successful, could topple the prime minister.

The London mayor joins six cabinet ministers, including Mr Cameron's friend Michael Gove, in the Out camp, with speculation that the number of Tory MPs opposing the prime minister was moving towards 150.

Michael Fallon, defence secretary, was dispatched by Downing Street to play down the significance of Mr Johnson's decision to back a Brexit, telling the BBC that "it was expected" and that it was not a big blow to the prime minister.

Meanwhile Mr Johnson used his weekly column in the Daily Telegraph to suggest that he did not really want Britain to leave the EU after all; he thought a Leave vote would give the UK leverage to get better membership terms.

"There is only one way to get the change we need and that is to vote to go," he wrote. "All EU history shows that they only really listen to a population when it says No."

Mr Cameron says a vote to Leave will not lead to a second negotiation and referendum; a Brussels summit agreed last week that if Britain votes to Leave the deal secured by the prime minister would be ditched.

Mr Cameron's fury over Mr Johnson's decision was compounded when Mr Johnson relayed his EU decision by text. The prime minister fulminated that the mayor appeared to be putting his political ambition to lead the Tory party ahead of the interests of London as a financial centre, a claim denied by Mr Johnson.

Mr Cameron's anger was shared by Lord Heseltine, the former deputy prime minister, who said: "If he were to be successful in his ambition to cut us off from Europe, the flags would fly in Frankfurt and Paris in his honour."

As Mr Cameron tried to defend the EU deal that he secured in Brussels, Downing Street officials were trying to finalise one of the biggest ever pro-European shows of strength by the business community.

A draft letter being circulated to business leaders said that: "Following the prime minister's renegotiation we believe that Britain is better off staying in a reformed EU."

The letter, to be published on Tuesday, was said to have the support of about 50 chairmen and chief executives of FTSE 100 companies. Most would sign on behalf of their companies, others in a personal capacity. The letter was also expected to be signed by the bosses of smaller companies.

There was, however, some boardroom resistance to a section that read: "We believe that leaving the EU would deter investment and threaten jobs." Some company chiefs feared that the warning would upset trade unions.

Some consumer-facing companies, including Tesco and J Sainsbury, did not want to be involved in the letter, amid fears that it could antagonise customers, although Virgin and HSBC were expected to sign.

Mr Johnson emerged from his home in London at 5pm to announce his "agonisingly difficult" decision to support a Brexit vote, claiming that the EU was "out of proper democratic control".

He denied that his move was an attempt to woo the Eurosceptic heart of the Tory party ahead of a leadership bid, adding: "The last thing I wanted to do was to go against David Cameron and the government."

Mr Johnson, a highly effective campaigner who is feared by the Remain camp, said that Mr Cameron had done "fantastically well" in securing some EU reforms last week but they were not enough.

"I don't think anyone can realistically claim this is a fundamental reform of the EU or of the British relationship with the EU," he said.

Mr Johnson, whose family is staunchly pro-EU, admitted that he had endured "a huge amount of heartache" in reaching his decision and hinted he would not seek to be the frontman of the Brexit campaign.

"I won't take part in TV debates against other members of my party," he said.

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