

# The British Party Politics of Europe's Future

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The current turmoil in British politics has been a source of concern for many EU governments. The apparent instability of the Labour government, coupled with the Opposition Conservatives' sceptical attitude towards the EU's new institutional settlement, may induce the country's partners to loosen their links with the UK. Yet, continental states' gloomy prognoses about British European policy may be both unwarranted and self-fulfilling. Britain's partners must instead maintain their existing cooperation with the UK as well as take active advantage of the current flux in European policy-planning within the Conservative party.

The United Kingdom's European election results could have important implications for the development of the European Union.

Labour's electoral wipe-out; the Conservatives' aspiration to marshal previously disparate elements of the European Right into a new, more coherent grouping (see SWP Research Paper 5/2006); the candidacy for the Presidency of the Parliament posed by the leader of the left-leaning Liberal Democrat cohort, Graham Watson: all these developments could give the dominant centre-right grouping in Parliament—the European People's Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED)—the necessary leverage to forge a lasting, cross-group, Right-Liberal coalition, and thus to loosen its relations with the much depleted European Socialists.

And yet, despite the important implications of these election results, the focus of

European attention has remained largely upon British domestic developments and in particular the health of the Labour government.

There is marked concern that the latest events in Westminster herald a turbulent time for EU cooperation. In a febrile environment of crisis and scandal in the UK, many observers on the Continent are bracing themselves for the possibility that a brief spell of British ineffectiveness in Europe under a lame duck Labour government will be followed by the destructive brand of euroscepticism associated with the Conservatives (see SWP Comments 27/2008). This may induce Britain's partners to loosen their links with the country.

Yet, their gloom seems misplaced.

## Stability in European Policy until mid-2010

What does the prospect of a weak Labour government—unlikely to win a 2010 general election—really hold for the EU over the coming months? Many governments assume that it entails a spell of British ineffectiveness on all issues of EU policy.

In that analysis, British ministers, pre-occupied by domestic politics and unfamiliar with their new portfolios following the recent Cabinet re-shuffle, will be inactive at the European level. The resulting British disengagement from Europe would have important ramifications for EU policies. Around 20 major dossiers failed to complete their legislative passage before the dissolution of the last European Parliament. This score of incomplete dossiers include proposals on telecommunications, financial services and hedge-fund regulation. In many of them, the UK has functioned as the linchpin in a coalition of member states with neo-liberal tendencies. Ordinarily, the depletion of the Socialists in the European Parliament would have been deemed propitious for these neo-liberal concerns. Against this background, Britain's partners could be forgiven for looking for new and stronger allies.

This expectation of blanket British marginalisation is, however, not the only possible interpretation. An alternative, and more nuanced prognosis of British clout under a domestically weak Labour government would look more closely at the quality of the ministers entering and exiting government. EU governments adopting this more nuanced perspective will be more selective in their re-evaluation of their relations with the country.

Analysis of the UK's recent ministerial changes reveals a mixed picture. Certainly, with the resignation of Geoff Hoon, who until recently had been tipped to be the UK's next EU Commissioner, the Transport Council could lack an active British presence. And with transport issues firmly placed on the European agenda by the incoming Swedish Presidency and Baltic Sea

Strategy, the timing is crucial. Yet, the re-shuffle has also brought in some strong European personalities. The new Europe Minister Glynis Kinnock's experience as an MEP means that Britain's representation at the European level could become more active, even if Kinnock will not actually take part in Cabinet meetings.

In fact, of course, both of the above analyses, though valid, are too personality-based.

Even if the Labour government's life expectancy is limited and there have been changes in its personnel, this does not infer a fundamental change in its European clout. On a more abstract level, it is necessary to ask what kind of European policy agenda the government is pursuing and whether it retains the structural influence to realise it. From this perspective, the general trend will be one of continuity, but only so long as the UK's partners maintain their relations with the country.

The Brown government has tended to shy away from a long-term agenda in Europe, making its shortened life-expectancy somewhat irrelevant. That short-termism is also reflected in the structure the government has built for itself to pursue its European goals. This structure is not dependent upon Britain's ministers in the Council of the EU so much as upon its bilateral relations with other EU countries. Under the practice of 'multiple' or 'promiscuous' bilateralism, the Labour government chooses the most amenable of a range of possible partnerships on a tactical basis, depending on the issue at hand.

It would be short-sighted and self-defeating for the member states, which enjoy this kind of relationship with the UK, to suddenly cool relations merely because the British government's life expectancy is shortened or its ministers weakened. Such relations have always been deemed temporary. Moreover, they have not been dependent on the activism of individual British ministers so much as upon the machinery and voting power of this large member government. In short, the Labour government will only

become a lame duck government in Europe if its partners treat it as such. As Foreign Secretary David Miliband's pronouncements in the German media indicate (FAZ March 2009), the British government's awareness of the utility of European cooperation remains, and so too does its appreciation of the need for partnerships.

### **Conservative European Policy**

Speculation about what a Conservative government would entail for the EU already focuses on the two elements described above as being important for understanding Britain's clout in Europe—European policy agenda and 'structural influence'.

Analysis of the first element—the Conservative policy agenda—has focussed on the headline policy pronouncements made by Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague. Hague has pledged to return competencies to the member states on issues of social policy as well as to push for stringent budgetary reform. He has even threatened that he will not "leave the matter there" should the Lisbon Treaty have undergone EU-wide ratification by the time the party has come to power—although he now appears to have backed away from this nebulous commitment.

As for the structure in place for realising Conservative European policy, analysis has looked at the structural marginalisation awaiting the Conservatives in the EU. With their withdrawal from the EPP-ED, the Conservatives will lose much of their influence in the European Parliament as well as strain relations with Europe's Centre-Right governments.

Against this background, most analysts on the Continent have looked upon the prospect of a Conservative government with gloom. The best they can hope for is a structurally marginalised Britain under Conservative leadership. The worst-case scenario would see a combative Britain reopening Europe's hard-fought institutional settlements.

In their gloom, however, few observers on the Continent have noted the obvious disparity between the Conservatives' ambitious European policy agenda and the structural isolation that will await them in Europe should they be elected. Yet, this disparity must be a key point of analysis for anyone keen to see a constructive British presence in Europe.

The Conservatives themselves are acutely sensitive to this disparity. Indeed, Conservative policy planners have long been scouting for partners amongst Europe's governing parties. And they have largely foundered due to potential partners' reluctance to engage with a party apparently so preoccupied by a negative, dogmatic European agenda.

This failure to garner partners will strengthen a process within the party, which has seen Hague's headline European policy goals re-evaluated and a more pragmatic approach towards the EU emerge.

It is the prospect that the Conservatives may form the next government, and must thus take a more practical line, that has induced these changes. For a long time, EU affairs were the domain of William Hague and his advisers. He and his entourage focussed on the big institutional questions of EU affairs. However, with the party's elaboration of green papers on social and economic policies, the focus of attention in its European policy-making is shifting. The Conservative Implementation Team charged with working out how to realise these new policy proposals must increasingly take account of the European level. This shift of focus in European policy away from William Hague's institutional preoccupations and towards more practical questions heralds a less dogmatic approach to the EU. This trend will likely be reinforced as the party considers how to implement its emerging agenda on international issues such as global trade and global poverty.

## Dealing with the Conservatives

Practical engagement with the EU, and the responsibility to partners which this entails, will likely check the Conservatives' dogmatism. EU member states need already to draw the party into cooperation by engaging with policy groups such as the Treasury Team or Energy and Climate Change Team and offering them access to information and expertise.

All the same, continental governments will struggle to see how constructive Conservative cooperation on EU affairs could be reconciled with the British public's marked euroscepticism.

Successive Eurobarometer surveys place the UK towards the bottom of the table when it comes to conviction about the benefits of EU membership and trust in the EU's institutions. Moreover, this situation seems unlikely to change. Expectations that Britain's financial and political crisis will trigger support for the adoption of the euro, greater knowledge of EU affairs and an enthusiasm for EU regulation in areas like unemployment seem misplaced.

Prospective partners of a Conservative government will thus worry that any cooperation would entail a long and laborious game of cat-and-mouse with the British electorate, echoing the unpredictable 'utilitarian supranationalism' (Bulmer) associated with Tony Blair's European policy.

Again, though, this assessment seems overly pessimistic.

When faced with a Eurobarometer-survey question "do you support more EU action?", the British public may well answer in the negative. This, however, is no indication of how they would react in practice. When weighing up concrete cases of EU action, the public's decision will be more nuanced in two ways. Firstly, the electorate will take into account questions of the *style* in which action is taken. British voters set a premium on government unity. They also show unusually high support for EU-wide action if this is coordinated and coherent. Secondly, voters will consider *what kind* of EU action is required. This is not a question

of more or less Europe so much as whether EU action should be Left or Right, environmentalist or industrialist, neoliberal or protectionist.

Seen in this light, the Conservatives' more constructive pronouncements on EU policy may provide a good basis for cooperation. These goals consist of giving the EU a more pronounced role in combating global warming and global poverty.

Many on the Continent have so far been sceptical of these goals. The reasons for this coolness lie in the suspicion that any focus on outward-looking, global issues marks an effort by the Conservatives to disguise their hostility towards further integration on sensitive 'internal issues' of EU cooperation like Justice and Home Affairs. Such suspicions may well be warranted. However, these global issues have also been singled out by the Conservatives because they are supported by ideologies (eco-ideology and humanitarianism) robust enough to shift the focus of public attention from questions of 'more or less Europe' to the *kind* of action desired. These issues also reflect a growing consensus within the party itself about its new identity, and will thus allow for a degree of party unity—important for the *style* of Conservative engagement in Europe.

Clearly, this 'global agenda' will not suffice as a basis for cooperation across the vast range of issues dealt with by the EU precisely because it neglects sensitive issues of 'internal policy'. By contrast, as a *modus operandi* for shifting the focus away from questions of 'more or less' Europe, it serves well and can be applied to other areas of EU activity.

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