



Foreign Policy Centre Briefing: Brown, Cameron or Clegg: who would secure British influence in Europe?

By Alexandra Pardal

The televised election debates between party leaders has brought a new dynamic to the UK general election, showcasing the differences in policy and personality of Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Conservative leader David Cameron and Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg. Clegg is widely seen as the winner of last week's first round – with a big leap in his and his party's polling – which has upped the ante for this Thursday's debate on foreign policy. Britain's relationship with Europe will be one of the major issues and the conservatives have already begun their fight back against Clegg by accusing him of supporting a European superstate. So, how do the three party leaders match up on securing future British influence in Europe?

To start with the incumbent, Gordon Brown has had a smooth and arguably successful spell of EU relations since becoming Prime Minister in June 2007. Thought to be a eurosceptic as Chancellor of the Exchequer – notable in not taking the UK into the euro with the majority of the old 15 Member States in 1997 – European leaders have found him to be a pragmatic and cooperative partner in No 10.

As soon as he entered office in 2007, Brown was confronted with the negotiation of the Lisbon treaty, the successor to the failed constitutional treaty. While the "constitutional" elements of the previous failed treaty were ditched, European leaders attempted to salvage the improvements it had proposed to decision-making procedures and democratic control. Gordon Brown took the opportunity to negotiate a specific protocol on the Charter of Fundamental Rights – to ensure that it would not impinge on UK domestic law – and opt-ins into home and justice affairs so that the UK could decide on a case-by-case basis which policies to participate in, for example for terrorism and crime-fighting.

Since then, the biggest EU priority has been the response to the financial and economic crisis. The collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 caused panic in Europe, with countries struggling to cope with the implications for their banks and depositors. Given the strong interdependence of the eurozone currency area, leaders decided to hold a first ever eurozone summit to agree on common rules and policies to prevent the meltdown of their banking systems. Gordon Brown was the only non-eurozone leader to be invited to this first ever summit on 12th October 2008, and the UK's scheme of part-nationalising the banks, increasing liquidity in the financial system and guaranteeing inter-bank loans to prevent a credit freeze for businesses and households is widely recognised as the blueprint for the eurozone's agreement. A subsequent EU leaders' summit adopted the plan for the entire European Union in November 2008.



Indeed, Brown's relationship with key European leaders has been positive, as suggested by the widely reported comment of French President Sarkozy: "You know, Gordon, I should not like you. You are Scottish, we have nothing in common and you are an economist. But somehow, Gordon, I love you." Such goodwill has reaped benefits recently with the UK negotiating successfully in November 2009 for former Leader of the House of Lords Catherine Ashton to become EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, one of three most important EU positions.

Nevertheless, Brown has found it more testing to negotiate with other European countries on financial regulation, in view of the perceived need to protect the competitiveness of the City vis-à-vis its smaller rivals in Frankfurt and Paris. One major piece of legislation, the alternative investment fund managers' directive - covering mostly hedge funds and private equity funds - was recently stalled by Brown. However, on other financial issues, such as an international bank levy, he has worked closely in tandem with other European partners.

Labour's manifesto commitments fall in the current reformist European mainstream and would have little difficulty resonating with the UK's European partners. This is illustrated by the manifesto's emphasis on improving Europe's competitiveness and regulatory environment; reforming the EU budget; supporting EU enlargement; strengthening cooperation on crime and terrorism; and supporting practical European cooperation on defence.

Foreign media often remark that Gordon Brown is more appreciated internationally than in his home country, not least as a result of his role in steering a course through the financial crisis. On the basis of his international track record, Europe's leaders would generally be happy to see Brown in government once more.

In contrast, it is fair to say that David Cameron has made few friends on the continent since becoming Conservative leader in 2005. His decision to take the conservatives out of the mainstream conservative European People's Party in the European Parliament drew vehement criticism from Europe's main conservative Prime Ministers, including Angela Merkel of Germany and Nicolas Sarkozy of France. The Tories' new colleagues include the Polish Law and Justice Party - whose politicians are known for homophobic and racist views - the Czech Civic Democrats whose founder Vaclav Klaus claims climate change is a "global myth" and the Latvian National Independence Movement which has celebrated the Latvian Unit of the Waffen SS troops and recently banned Riga's gay pride march. As a result of the decision, Merkel's CDU party cancelled joint working groups with the conservatives and Merkel herself did not meet Cameron for two years. More recently, the German Chancellor made a veiled warning on Cameron's policies of opposing the Lisbon EU treaty while supporting Turkish accession: "France and Germany [...] refuse to stretch out our hand to those who oppose the Lisbon Treaty but who at the same time talk about enlargement. Those who want more have to cooperate". No UK



conservatives were invited to Germany during Merkel's election campaign last year, as is traditional in Anglo-German conservative relations, and she pointedly did not make time to meet Cameron during her last trip to London, despite the upcoming election. At the same time, Sarkozy has been more emollient and recently decided to unfreeze relations by meeting Cameron on his last visit to London.

The decision to form a new fringe conservative group has also met with criticism domestically. David Frost, director-general of the British Chambers of Commerce said this was "not viewed by business as a sensible move", while Tory grandee Lord Patten called it "an unwise decision and will reduce the Conservatives' influence in the European parliament". The new leader of the Tories' European Parliament group is Michal Kaminski who, according to Edward Macmillan-Scott – a former leader of the Tory group in the European Parliament - symbolises the "rise of disguised extremism in Europe." Macmillan-Scott successfully stood against Kaminski to become Vice-President of the European Parliament, but has been expelled from the UK Conservatives for not towing the party line.

Against such a bleak backdrop, can the Conservatives' recent manifesto proposals put it on a sounder footing for securing UK influence in Europe? To sum up, the manifesto's main proposals include a referendum on any future EU treaty change; a UK Sovereignty Bill to "make it clear that ultimate authority stays in this country"; and a renegotiation of the EU treaty to opt the UK out of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, criminal justice and social and employment legislation. These have been Conservative party policy since Cameron made his last big speech on Europe in November 2009.

Reactions in the UK and Europe have been clear since Cameron announced his policies: no other European member state is willing to reopen treaty negotiations and any attempt to do this would run counter to British interests. Richard Lambert, CBI director general, warned that opting out of social and employment policy "would be slow and painful, damaging the UK's relationship with the EU and causing yet more upheaval for employers". On the continent, major governments have already let it be known that they will not agree to treaty change: Spanish Europe Minister Diego Lopez Garrido said "I do not know of a single country in Europe that now thinks we should be spending any time to change the treaty we have just spent eight years negotiating. It is really, really impossible".

Indeed European leaders are keen to move onto more pressing issues, in light of the economic recession. Elmar Brok, member of the governing German CDU and an ally of Chancellor Merkel, pointed out: "The Conservative leader's new warning, however, that he will seek to "repatriate" powers from Brussels to London is no more realistic than the referendum he has just given up on. Unfortunately for Mr Cameron and his election campaign, I do not see any chance of passing even the very



first step of such a process. She [Chancellor Merkel] is fed up of constitutional debates which we have had for 10 years. We need to discuss the competitiveness of the EU and employment.”

The Conservative manifesto promises of treaty opt-outs also look shaky on substance. The UK already has a special protocol on the Charter of Fundamental Rights, stating that it does not impinge on UK law. And there is also a British opt-out from the EU Working Time directive, which is the only piece of legislation Cameron and Hague have cited as motivation for their desired opt-out of employment and social policy. At the same time, the manifesto promise to opt out from the criminal justice parts of the EU treaty bears important implications for the fight against terrorism and international crime. One of its elements is the fast track extradition scheme, or European arrest warrant, responsible for the arrest of the failed London bomber Hussain Osman in 2005 and his subsequent sentencing to life imprisonment for conspiracy to murder. According to the UK’s Serious Organised Crime Agency, the European Arrest Warrant is meeting with “growing success”: in 2008-2009, the UK managed to bring 104 suspected criminals back to the UK for trial or to serve custodial sentences from other European countries while 683 suspected criminals were taken off British streets to stand trial or serve sentences in other EU countries. As recently as November of last year, the UK crime agency used the scheme, in cooperation with forces in other countries, to smash a people smuggling network across six European member states.

If a Conservative government were to insist on treaty opt-outs, against the odds, the price could be very high in terms of the UK’s interests, as David Frost, Director General of British Chambers of commerce, has warned: “Business wants a pragmatic approach to the EU - not an ideological one. We do not believe that the Conservatives’ new policy to opt out of European social and employment legislation is realistic, as it would require substantial UK concessions in return.” These concessions could include the UK’s treasured rebate from the EU budget. This has as much been threatened by France’s Europe Minister Pierre Lelouche in view of current conservative policies: ‘If we get a government that is ferociously anti European [...] then I think the relationship is going to be very difficult. As we enter the next phase one of the issues we have to discuss midterm is of course finances. France is a net contributor to the tune of €5bn a year, of which €1.5bn is the same as British rebate. That should tell you quite a bit”.

So what of Cameron’s promise of a UK Sovereignty Act? This particular commitment would have even more far-reaching implications because the basis for the functioning of the EU is the precedence EU law takes over national law. Without this precedence, the EU Single Market enabling UK businesses to trade across Europe – on which 3 million UK jobs depend – would break down. The proposal is seen as potentially harmful to British membership of the European Union even amongst leading Conservatives. The current conservative Business Secretary Kenneth Clarke has written that: “There has never been any serious doubt that for us to purport to



reverse this principle by an Act of Parliament would be fundamentally incompatible with our continued membership of the Union, and would be taken as an immediate signal of our withdrawal from full membership." He went on to call "ideas such as a 'supremacy act', "a recipe for anarchy".¹

William Hague's suggestion that the conservatives would not seek "some immediate confrontation with the rest of the EU" suggests that the conservatives may not actively pursue these policies. However, overall, David Cameron's track record on relations with other EU leaders as well as the manifesto commitments do not bode well for his ability to secure UK influence in Europe if he does enter government.

So could Nick Clegg's pro-Europeanism secure a better hearing for the UK's interests? Clegg's personal credentials are certainly far more continental than his two opposite numbers, being half Dutch, and a former European Commission civil servant and Member of the European Parliament.

The Liberal Democrats are also members of the third largest group in the European Parliament and Clegg would immediately be able to reach out to Liberal Democrat Prime Ministers in government, albeit from small EU countries: Andrus Ansip of Estonia, Brian Cowen of Ireland, Lars Løkke Rasmussen of Denmark, and Matti Vanhanen of Finland.

Nevertheless, despite his understanding of the Brussels machine, Clegg is almost completely unknown amongst Europe's major government leaders, unlike Brown and Cameron. This means he would be starting from scratch in forging these key relationships for Britain. This would be made easier by the Liberal Democrats' manifesto proposals, which, in the main, chime with policies currently holding sway in other European capitals, including: stricter international regulation of financial services and banking; reducing trade barriers and boosting support for green jobs; and reform of the EU budget. Another important manifesto commitment is the promise to "keep Britain part of international crime-fighting measures such as the European Arrest Warrant, European Police Office (Europol), Eurojust, and the European Criminal Records Information System." This contrasts with Conservative Party policy to withdraw the UK from the criminal justice elements of the EU treaty and would reassure those EU partners, such as France, who cooperate regularly with the UK authorities on the fight against cross-border crime and terrorism.

Other Liberal Democrat policies would not go down as well, such as their wish to keep the European Parliament from travelling once a month from Brussels to Strasbourg, which would be vetoed by France.

However, on balance, and despite being an unknown quantity in European capitals, Clegg's Liberal Democrat policies would not pose particular problems for relations with European partners.

¹ A Tory Europe Network essay by Rt Hon Kenneth Clarke MP, October 2003



Conclusion

This resume of the party leaders, their current EU relationships and their policies, show that Brown, Clegg and Cameron are each distinctive in what they offer in terms of securing British influence in Europe: a tried and tested Gordon Brown who is highly respected in European capitals; an inward-looking David Cameron who has ruffled feathers and whose EU pledges are considered “unrealistic”; or a largely unknown Nick Clegg whose policies would, nevertheless, not offend the UK’s European partners. It remains to be seen whether the winner that emerges from Thursday’s leaders’ debate on foreign policy will be simultaneously viewed from abroad as the most effective advocate for Britain.

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