

To leave or not to leave? The Conservatives and the European People's Party in the European Parliament

David Cameron, the new leader of the Conservative Party, has been accused by his critics of favouring style over substance, and yet on one issue his position has been very clear: he wants to see the Conservatives leave their current political group in the European Parliament (EP). This party group, known as the European People's Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED), is currently the largest in the EP, with 264 seats, of which British Conservatives hold 27.¹ David Cameron believes that the views and aims of the group are fundamentally at odds with Conservative beliefs. In particular, he argues that the Conservatives do not share the EPP-ED's pro-integrationist ambitions. He has also claimed that on free trade and the transatlantic partnership the group does not have the same views as the Conservatives.

An objective assessment of the choices facing the Conservatives shows that a decision to leave the EPP-ED will have mixed consequences. The legislative influence of the Party in the European Parliament would probably be reduced, while the organisational benefits are not entirely clear. In addition, the areas of disagreement with the EPP are not the matters the Parliament concerns itself with most. On the economic issues, which dominate the agenda of the European Parliament, the Conservatives are probably closest to the EPP out of all the existing party groups.

An important consideration must also be the availability of attractive alternatives. Rather than join another of the present groupings in Strasbourg, the Conservatives will probably opt to set up a new group of their own. Inevitably, this will be a group dominated by the Conservatives, with most of the other members coming either from small parties or small countries, with the possible exception of the anyway problematic Polish Law and Justice Party. It will be difficult for the Conservatives to represent this as a strong, modern, forward-looking new group within the EP.

The Conservative Party in the European Parliament

Although the EP has now been an elected body for over 25 years, the Conservative Party has yet to find an organisational arrangement that it feels comfortable with and has struggled to establish a permanent base in the form of a coherent parliamentary group. In the EP, party groups serve two purposes: first, they are meant to be cohesive coalitions of national parties with the interest of achieving policy goals; second, they distribute political posts and organise the work of the Parliament. Party groups choose the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the EP, distribute committee positions and rapporteurships and decide on the parliamentary agenda. There are currently seven party groups in the 732-seat EP, with Labour in the Group of the Party of European Socialists (PES, 200 seats) and the Liberal Democrats in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE, 90 seats).

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the twenty-fifth in a series of regular *European Policy Briefs* produced by the Federal Trust. The aim of the series is to describe and analyse major controversies in the current British debate about the European Union.

We would welcome comments on and reactions to this policy brief. Other Policy Briefs are available on the Federal Trust's website www.fedtrust.co.uk/policybriefs.

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The Conservatives have not always been associated with the EPP in the Parliament. From 1979 to 1992, the British Conservatives were the dominant party in the European Democratic Group (EDG) in the EP. This was the third-largest group of the Parliament, between 1979 and 1989, including in its ranks the Danish Conservatives as well as (for a few years) the Spanish Alianza Popular (AP), the forerunner of the current Partido Popular (PP). The EDG began to fall apart with the AP's decision to join the EPP group in the Parliament after its change of name in 1989, a decision that was intended to symbolise the Spanish party's shift to the centre-right. After the 1989 European Elections the EDG was only the fifth-largest EP group. In April 1992, after a period of unofficial collaboration with the EPP, the Conservatives officially took on allied membership of that group. The Conservatives have never joined the overall EPP party federation but have always restricted their association with the European People's Party to the EP.

As allied members, the Conservatives had considerable independence from the EPP in Parliament. While they did sign up to its basic political orientations in 1992, they have not been obliged to follow its more detailed policy programme. In the early 1990s, these basic political orientations were anyway still ideologically acceptable to the Conservative Party, which had after all just agreed to the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The agreement also allowed the Conservatives to campaign on their own manifesto in the 1994 European Elections, and as allied members of the EPP group at Strasbourg they frequently made voting decisions at odds with EPP recommendations.

The allied membership of the EPP parliamentary group came to an end in 1999, when the then Conservative leader William Hague renegotiated the terms of the Conservatives' relationship with the EPP. Conservative views on Europe had changed since the early 1990s, increasing the conflict between Conservative and EPP political priorities. William Hague persuaded the EPP to agree to a looser associated membership for the Conservatives within a new coalition, the EPP-ED. The name of the reformed grouping refers back to the European Democrats of 1979-1992, and parties

belonging to the ED element of the coalition rather than the EPP do not sign up to the entire programme of the EPP. They were also explicitly allowed to vote as they wished in case of policy differences.

The ED currently has five member parties and 39 MEPs. 27 of these are Conservatives, with the next largest party the Czech Civic Democrats (ODS) with 9 MEPs. The other members are the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP, 1 MEP), the Portuguese Partido Popular (2 MEPs) and the Italian Pensioners' Party (1 MEP). According to its web-site, the ED is committed to 'democracy, individual liberty, the rule of law, national sovereignty, free enterprise, minimal regulation, low taxation, private ownership, respect and security for every individual and a strong transatlantic alliance'. Despite this apparently distinctive political programme, it cannot be said that the European Democrats enjoy anything like the same highly-developed organisational identity as does the EPP group. The EPP-ED is not a coalition of two political groups but is in reality a means of keeping parties within the EPP fold even though they are at ideological odds with some parts of EPP policy.

The Conservatives in London have become increasingly dissatisfied with this arrangement, and there have been persistent efforts from the party leadership (especially under Iain Duncan Smith) and from individual MEPs to loosen the ties to the EPP. However, the EPP leadership has resisted giving more autonomy to the Conservatives as the concessions granted in 1999 were already seen as far-reaching. The association with the pro-European EPP, which was, for example, strongly in favour of the Constitutional Treaty, remains problematic for many Conservatives. The success of the UK Independence Party in the 2004 European Elections may well have strengthened the perception among some in the party that the Conservatives need to be clearer in their position of hostility to further European integration.

Leaving the EPP: the options

David Cameron made the pledge to leave the EPP-ED during the leadership campaign last year at a point when his

campaign had not yet become unstoppable. His promise was at least partly tactical, a way to gain support from Eurosceptic MPs and from the Eurosceptic membership of the Conservative Party. At the time of his pledge, David Cameron may not have realised all the practical implications of leaving the EPP.

The Conservatives now have three options if they decide to cut their organisational ties with the EPP. First, they could become non-aligned members of the EP. Other parties that are non-aligned include the Democratic Unionist Party, the French National Front, the Italian Lega Nord, the Austrian Freedom Party and the Belgian Vlaams Belang. In addition to these generally right-wing parties, there are two centrist Italian parties that are non-aligned as well. Non-aligned members are not completely without rights in the EP: the Parliament's internal rules provide them with a secretariat, enable them to nominate members to committees and allocate them speaking time in the plenary. However, they very rarely receive important posts within the Parliament and their political impact at Strasbourg is inevitably limited.

The second option for the Conservatives would be to join a pre-existing group. The Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN) is seen as the only group that would fit with the Conservatives' ideology. Current members of this group include Fianna Fáil, Ireland's governing party, the post-fascist Italian Alleanza Nazionale, the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS), the Danish People's Party and several Baltic conservatives. The UEN is a very diverse group but its members are broadly nationalist and right-wing in orientation. The Italian and Polish elements of this coalition would be partners that Mr. Cameron might find difficult to advocate to British public opinion.

The final option, and that which has received the most attention, is the possibility that the Conservatives could set up a new group within the EP. The Parliament's internal rules for this are precise. A political group needs to be made up of at least 19 MEPs from at least one-fifth (i.e. 5) EU member states. Establishing a new group is made easier by the fact that MEPs would not have to give up the seats and posts in committees

they have been given as part of the EPP. This is of course more important to sitting MEPs than to the Conservative leadership in London, whose eye is primarily on the British domestic impact of any decisions taken about the work of the Conservative MEPs in the European Parliament.

As there are already 28 MEPs within the Conservative national delegation, the real difficulty for David Cameron and his shadow foreign minister William Hague lies in the provision that there need to be at least five member states represented in any new parliamentary group. Various possible parties have been mentioned by the media, including most frequently the Czech ODS and the Polish PiS. Hague has reportedly also talked to Kathy Sinnott, an independent Irish MEP, and the Dutch Christian Union. The other members of the ED are also sometimes mentioned as possible future partners, together with the Eurosceptic Swedish June List, the Gaullist splinter group *Mouvement pour la France* and various Baltic conservatives that are currently members of the UEN.

Leaving the EPP: motivation and consequences

Ideological disagreements and the powers of the EP

In his public description of the reasoning behind his decision to withdraw the Conservative Party from the EPP parliamentary group, Mr. Cameron laid stress on the supposed incompatibility of view between the Conservatives and the EPP on such questions as the European Constitutional treaty and the trans-Atlantic alliance. While a certain ideological gap between the Conservatives and the EPP is undeniable, it has to be remembered that their working association is limited solely to the context of the European Parliament. The EP does not decide on the important milestones of European integration: its role in the drafting of the Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice Treaties was minimal. The Constitution was adopted by EU governments, not by the EP. The EP also has very little influence on European foreign policy. Although its foreign affairs committee is prestigious within the EP, it does not and cannot

change the political orientations of member state governments, who take the decisions on foreign policy issues. While the EPP is clearly more pro-European and possibly less Atlanticist than the Conservatives, these are not matters that are of great importance for the day to day work of the EP.

Instead, the EP has its greatest influence on legislation concerned with economic issues such as regulation of the single market, environmental protection and consumer rights, where the divide between the left and right of the political spectrum is particularly evident. On these matters, the Conservatives are certainly closest to the EPP out of all existing party groups.

Legislative influence

Leaving the EPP-ED would undoubtedly reduce Conservative influence on European legislation in two principal ways, both by reducing Conservative influence on the political compromises which are at the heart of the European Parliament's work and by reducing the number of important posts and tasks allocated to Conservatives within the European Parliament.

In leaving the EPP, the Conservatives would be leaving the largest party group in the EP. With 264 out of 732 seats, the EPP-ED has 64 seats more than the Party of European Socialists (PES), Labour's party group. It has 174 more seats than the third largest group, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), with 90 seats. Much of European legislation, especially those areas where the EP acts as a co-legislator with the Council, is the result of political compromise between the governments in the Council and party groups in the EP. If the Conservatives do leave the EPP, not merely will their capacity to shape the negotiating position of the largest party grouping in the EP be diminished. They will also undermine the cohesion of the centre-right political forces in the European Parliament thus strengthening the bargaining position of the more economically left-wing ALDE and PES.

In leaving the EPP-ED, the Conservatives would moreover condemn themselves to marginalisation within the European Parliament. If they joined or formed a

smaller group, they would no longer receive the more prestigious dossiers and posts within committees. If they decided to join the non-aligned MEPs, they would not be put in charge of any legislative reports, an important and influential task in a working parliament such as the EP. In essence, leaving the EPP-ED is akin to quitting the governing legislative coalition within the Parliament.

Alternative arrangements

Apart from the loss of legislative influence leaving the EPP-ED would entail, a significant problem is also that there is a dearth of suitable alternatives. Joining the non-aligned group is unattractive for three reasons. First, it would seem to show that the Conservatives are a politically isolated group within the EU, with no ideological partners close to them. Second, it would also mean sitting at the back of the EP together with such marginal figures such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, Robert Kilroy-Silk, Vlaams Belang and the Austrian Freedom Party. Even UKIP has a political group, Independence and Democracy (IND/DEM). Finally, non-aligned members have the least organisational rights within the EP.

It is thus easily understandable that the Conservatives would prefer to be part of or indeed the dominant force in a political group, ideally with some ideological backbone. That way, they could be part of the EP in a manner that more closely reflects their priorities as they perceive them. Their new group would also have a clearer identity both on the European stage and for electoral purposes at home. UKIP's clarity of position and political independence as part of a Eurosceptic party group seems a particular annoyance to some Conservative politicians.

To remain part of an EP group, the Conservatives could either join the UEN or form a new group of their own. Joining the UEN is an unacceptable option to many Conservatives because of the membership in the group of Italy's post-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale*. As a result, the only path still open seems to be that of an entirely new grouping. The Conservative hope would be that such a new group could be presented as an important new force within the EP,

uniting forward-looking parties of similar ideology that do not fit into the current groups.

However, the parties currently envisaged as partners for the Conservatives in Strasbourg do not easily fit that description. The Polish PiS, the most significant prospective partner, has been criticised for its hostility to gay-rights marches and its support of the death penalty. Within Poland, PiS is less oriented towards free markets and economic reform than its centre-right rival, Civic Platform (PO). Indeed, it is jealously protective of Polish national interests and strongly against CAP reform. The Czech ODS is already part of the ED component of the EPP-ED and is more in tune with Conservative ideology, usually voting together with the Conservatives in the EP. However, while it is said to be open to Conservative proposals to join a new group, it has refused any firm commitment until after the Czech elections in June, as the ODS is also internally divided on the issue.

Other than these two relatively large parties, the other candidates for an alliance in the EP are all marginal forces, mostly even within their own countries. The Portuguese PP merely received 7.7 per cent of votes in the last national elections, for example, while the Dutch Christian Union scored only 2.1 per cent.

The Conservative leadership's efforts to leave the EPP-ED has not met with support from all Conservative MEPs. A total of around 20 MEPs are said to be opposed to the idea of separating from the EPP-ED, while seven MEPs have openly declared their willingness to resist any attempt to quit the group, especially during the current term of the Parliament. Caroline Jackson MEP has written in *The Guardian* that the Conservatives should stop 'playing nasty in Europe' and that 'it is time to call a halt to this pointless rummaging in the margins of European politics'. The recent re-election of Timothy Kirkhope MEP, a relative pro-European, as the leader of the UK Conservatives in the EP shows that there is no majority view among Conservative MEPs that ties with the EPP-ED should be cut. The response of David Cameron has been to threaten defiant MEPs with deselection in the next European elections.

Ideally, the Conservatives would like to

present their new group as the home of modern, forward-thinking, liberal and open-minded parties sceptical of European integration. The PiS, the PP, the Italian Pensioners' Party and the Christian Union are not obvious candidates for plausible presentation in this light. It would be hard for the Conservatives to claim in their new parliamentary grouping that they were at the forefront of a popular new 'sensible Euroscepticism'.

Organisational benefits

The decision to leave the EPP-ED would have organisational consequences. If the Conservatives decided to become non-aligned, there would be clear organisational costs, including less speaking time, a lower budget and the inability to secure important institutional positions. If a new group was set up, there would be on the other hand some benefits to the Conservatives. The Conservatives would receive a budget that they, as the dominant party, could use for their own purposes. This budget would not necessarily be any smaller than the one they would have obtained had they remained in the EPP-ED. As their own political group, they would also be allocated more speaking time. The new group could also retain some of its institutional posts. The Conservatives would, for example, be likely to retain their Vice-President of the EP, currently Edward McMillan-Scott.

However, these benefits must be weighed against less positive organisational consequences. Within a new group, the Conservatives would struggle to improve, or even maintain the number of committee chairmanships, vice-chairs and rapporteurships they are allocated. More importantly, the Conservatives would probably receive posts that are of lower prestige and importance. Malcolm Harbour MEP, for example, was recently in charge of co-ordinating the passage of the services directive for the EPP-ED. If a party is interested in constructive co-operation in EU affairs, obtaining important posts in order to influence policy outcomes is essential. This possibility would be seriously threatened for the Conservatives as leaders of a new group in which they would need to take particular account of the organisational

demands of their smaller allies.

Outlook

The final decision whether or not to leave the EPP-ED may well be influenced by symbolic considerations. In the UK, David Cameron has very publicly moved the image of his party towards the political centre, presenting himself as a forward-looking compassionate conservative. Critics will argue that doubt is thrown on his real commitment to this aspiration by his attempt on the European stage to leave the party group that unites the most powerful mainstream centre-right parties in Europe. It will be for Mr. Cameron now to decide which course of action will demand the lower political price for him, carrying out his promise to the most radical Eurosceptics of his party, or breaking it. If he placates his Eurosceptic supporters, he will probably divide his MEPs in Strasbourg and force those who follow him to sit in a small, diverse, marginal group with some unwelcome allies. If he disappoints his Eurosceptic supporters, he risks reigniting controversy on the European issue within his party. Neither is an easy option. It is unsurprising that he has clearly sought to postpone a decision on the matter.

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¹ One Conservative MEP, Roger Helmer, sits in the Parliament as a non-aligned member.