

The Conservative Party and Euroscepticism

Written by Simon Usherwood

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SIMON USHERWOOD, NOV 11 2012

The past couple of years have seen a succession of policy stances by the British Conservative party that would appear to confirm its popular image as a eurosceptic actor. From the negotiations in December 2011 on the Fiscal Compact (BBC 2011), to the current debates on the European Union's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (BBC 2012a), the Conservatives and their leader, David Cameron, have set out positions that do not sit easily with most other EU member states. In this piece, I would like to consider how this has come about and what consequences it might have.

The Roots of Tory Euroscepticism

Conservatism has always been ambivalent about European integration (see Stephens 1996). On the one hand, the predominance of free-trade liberalism in the party from the 18th Century onwards gave a strong incentive to participate in any continental system of removing trade barriers. On the other, social and political values of nation, tradition and identity created a distrust of any concession of sovereignty.

In the 1960s, it was the former tendency that predominated, and the party was keen to get into the then European Economic Community, despite repeated rebuttals. This reached its peak with Edward Heath and his active pro-European policies, culminating in membership in 1973. That membership – cemented by the renegotiation and referendum in 1975 – has proved to be the bedrock of all subsequent Tory policy; the pragmatic acknowledgement that a voice at the table and a vote in the chamber have real value has never been lost.

However, it could be argued that Margaret Thatcher (and the party folk-memory of her) has been the touchstone for subsequent Conservative policy. Thatcher was a pragmatist at heart, whatever her later protestations. She oversaw the Single European Act and laid the groundwork for the post-Cold War European system: even her most famous declamation on integration, at Bruges in 1988, so shocking at the time, now reads like a guide to much that we take for granted (Usherwood 2004).

Where Thatcher mattered at the time was in her normalisation of awkwardness as a government position. From the budget rebate negotiations of the early 1980s, to the Delors Committee, to the UK's membership of the Exchange Rate Mechanism, she put up a fight and often refused to speak the language of 'Brussels politics.' Her post-retirement claiming of the eurosceptic mantle was thus generally accepted by most in her party.

The 1990s marked a long period of deep in-fighting within the party over the European issue, with successive leaders trying by turns to manage the factions or to paper over the cracks. With local party associations (which controlled candidate selection) typically being more eurosceptical than Central Office, the trend was towards ever more sceptical Tory MPs (see Quinn 2011), even as the issue lost wider public importance, especially once the question of British membership of the Euro was shelved by New Labour. The image for voters was of internal division and of fighting esoteric battles.

In the end, it was only with David Cameron's election as leader that the party found an accommodation with itself, namely to hold a critical line of policy, while actively not talking about the EU unless absolutely necessary.

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The Present Situation

Today, the Conservatives are reaping the harvest of this policy. The 2010 General Election saw the entry of many new, young MPs into the Commons, most of whom are strongly eurosceptic. Often this scepticism is visceral, rather than particularly thought-through; Thatcher is seen as a symbolically important figure, ahead of her time on neoliberalism, tough on Europe and thrown out of office by a pro-European cabal (whose comeuppance came on Black Wednesday). Moreover, this new intake has been only weakly managed by party whips, as evidenced by the rebellions several times this year.

As the leader of a coalition government, Cameron has faced huge pressure from his backbenchers to toughen up his European policy, both for its own sake and in order to win outright at the next General Election. Thus, Cameron's push for the European Union Act, which requires a referendum on any further transfer of competence to the EU; his unwillingness to be an active participant in resolving the Eurozone crisis (Gamble 2012); and tough stance over accepting the European Court of Human Rights (which isn't even part of the EU, but is 'European') ruling on votes for prisoners (BBC 2012b): all these are attempts to placate the party without that leading into wider repercussions.

In essence, Cameron is caught between several conflicting pressures. Firstly, he has a party that is broadly sceptical, rates the EU as an important issue and feels rebellious. From them, anything less than withdrawal feels increasingly unsatisfactory. Secondly, he has a coalition partner that is broadly pro-European (which hampers policy), but which also doesn't have an interest in early elections (since it's likely to do very badly). Thirdly, there is a Labour party that is willing to use the EU as a means to eject the current government from power, or simply cause its discomfort (as seen in the vote on the budget). Finally, there are the other 26 EU governments with whom Cameron has to deal on a regular basis to find Union-level agreements on a wide range of policy.

The Consequences

There has been much discussion in British political and media circles of late of the need for an 'in/out' referendum on membership. Certainly, the pressure on Cameron to accede to such demands has increased, for the reasons outlined above. However, I would argue that we have not yet reached a point where that is inevitable. Primarily, this is because senior Tory managers and leaders recognise the very substantial costs and problems associated with it: the likelihood of a 'no' vote, leading to economic disruption, loss of influence around the world and major distraction from other projects on austerity and recasting the public sector.

However, the shadow of the British debate, especially within the main governing party, casts a long shadow. The UK finds it ever more difficult to achieve its goals in EU negotiations, as the patience of partners is increasingly exhausted. From their perspective, it makes little sense to align with a country that might be leaving the Union in a few years; alternatively, it does make sense to hide behind the UK's perceived obstructive behaviour. Thus, in the upcoming MFF negotiations, several other states want cuts in spending that match the UK Parliament's resolution, but are more than happy for the UK government to take the flak. The suspicion that surrounds any British initiative in the Union will only continue to deepen.

In the UK itself, the continuing debate within the Tory party makes it very hard for a mature public debate on either the British relationship with Europe or on Britain's role in the world to emerge. With a very sceptical print press, an at-best ambivalent public and a backbench that takes it as axiomatic that withdrawal is the only possible solution, the Conservative leadership is not only deeply constrained, but is likely to remain in its current fire-fighting mode for the rest of the Parliament to 2015. Thus, the UK will remain the 'awkward partner' – in George's (1998) famous phrase – for the foreseeable future.

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