

British Tories in discussions with Italian neo-fascists

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11 June 1999

Members of Britain's Conservative Party have been involved in talks with Italy's neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale (AN—National Alliance). It was revealed Wednesday that discussions were held about the formation of a new coalition of the European right. The AN is the political heir of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. In 1994 it was part of Italy's Freedom Alliance government under media magnate Silvio Berlusconi.

With just one day to go before voting began in Britain Thursday for elections to the European Parliament, Edward McMillan-Scott, leader of the Conservative group at Strasbourg, ruled out any collaboration with the AN. Significantly, however, his pledge to renew the party's alliance with the Christian Democratic European People Party (EPP) faction was not enthusiastically endorsed in London. In a letter to Chancellor Gordon Brown, Conservative leader William Hague said only that it was a “likelihood” that the Tories would again team up with the EPP.

AN leader Gianfranco Fini claimed that he and his European leader, Christiana Muscardini, had been in talks with Tory MPs in London recently. They had discussed plans to form a coalition with the Conservatives in the European Parliament once the election results are announced on Sunday night.

Tory right-winger and Euro-sceptic MP Bill Cash attacked the reports, but admitted that he had met Fini at his European Foundation headquarters in London. This was only “for a few minutes” last year, he claimed. The *Independent* newspaper also reported that the Tory youth group, Conservative Future, is a member of a pan-European alliance that includes AN.

Despite the shocked tones in which such contacts have been reported by sections of the British media, Tory links with the extreme right are longstanding.

British fascists in the National Front were known to have submerged themselves in the Tory party during its years in government—attracted by its racist and nationalist policies and its law-and-order rhetoric. Over the last year, Margaret Thatcher and other leading Tories have been the most forthright supporters of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, currently awaiting extradition to Spain charged with human rights abuses. They have defended Pinochet's 1973 military coup and ensuing dictatorship as being necessary to uphold private property in Chile.

The present revelations have been used to support Tony Blair's attempts to consolidate Labour as Britain's centre party and to further fuel divisions within the Tory party. Nonetheless, they are indicative of an important political shift in Britain and across Europe.

Since the Tories were reduced to a virtual rump in the 1997 General Election, their divisions over British adoption of the euro have become increasingly bitter, and have led to the creation of at least two new right-wing parties from within the party's ranks—one pro- and one anti-European.

Over the last months, Hague has sought to harden the party's anti-euro stance while keeping his increasingly restless pro-European faction on board. But the one aim has increasingly cancelled out the other. In these elections, the Conservatives' campaign centred on their pledge to “save the pound”. As a consequence nine senior Tories told the *Times* newspaper they would now vote for the breakaway “Pro-European Conservatives” in the elections. Lord Gilmour of Craigmillar, the former Defence Secretary sacked by Margaret Thatcher in 1981, said that the “Conservative position on Europe is at the moment indefensible”. Eight ex-Tory MPs and MEPs (members of the European Parliament) also indicated their “grave concern” at the

Conservatives' position on Europe in another letter to the *Times*. The signatories—who include Nicholas Scott, former Minister for the Disabled; Sir Robert Hicks, a former Government whip; Sir Julian Critchley, former Tory MP and writer; and Sir David Knox, a former Tory vice chairman—wrote that “like many Conservatives, we shall find it very difficult to know how best to cast our vote”.

Earlier in the week, Hague had threatened to expel all those advocating votes for another party. Several cases are currently pending, but the expulsion of such high-profile figures would likely precipitate a split. Another two leading former Tory ministers and euro supporters, Kenneth Clarke and Michael Heseltine, made clear they would break their silence on Hague's policies as soon as the polling booths closed, setting off another round of infighting. Clarke and Heseltine are to feature as prominent supporters of an all-party pro-euro campaign to be launched next month.

The hardening of the Tory's anti-European line has also seen right-winger Michael Portillo come to the fore in the party once again. This week Portillo, long the right's favoured candidate for leader, made his first campaign speech since he lost his seat at the General Election two years ago, stridently denouncing the euro.

These divisions are the outcome of the growing social polarisation in Europe, which has manifested itself in the disintegration of the traditional centre-right parties. In many European countries, such as France, Italy, Britain and Germany, the Christian Democrat or Conservative parties have been decimated in recent elections. Their middle-class former supporters—facing unemployment, job insecurity and cuts in public services—turned against them en masse, driving them out of government.

In response, sections of these organisations have advocated a sharp turn to the right, seeking to mobilise social tensions behind nationalist and xenophobic campaigns. Some have called for formal alliances to be made with the neo-fascists. Besides the British Tories, AN is also said to have been pursuing discussions with the Gaullist and conservative parties in France, where sections of the RPR, as well as the UDF, have entered into alliances in local government with Le Pen's fascist National Front (FN). Jean-François Mancel, former RPR general secretary and a close friend of President Jacques Chirac, was expelled from the party after

supporting such an accommodation with the FN at the national level, which he described as “the right-wing party of tomorrow.”

This right-wing turn can be seen throughout the former “people's parties” in Europe, irrespective of what stand they take on European Union. In February's state elections, the German CDU distinguished itself by conducting an openly racist campaign against any relaxing of immigration laws.



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