

UK Conservatives form new rightist bloc in European parliament

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Britain's Conservative Party has broken from the European Peoples Party grouping in the European Parliament to form a new bloc with a number of right-wing anti-federalist parties. The Tories have been part of the EPP group for over two decades.

The new bloc consists of nine parties and will be known as the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR). It is the fourth largest grouping in the European Parliament, with 55 MEPs from eight countries.

The move follows the decision of France and Germany to push ahead with the Lisbon Treaty giving greater powers to the institutions of the European Union (EU). Ireland is to hold a fresh referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in October. Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen said that he was "confident we now have a solid basis to go to the Irish people and to ask them again for their approval for Ireland to ratify the treaty so that Europe can move on."

The European Commission (EC) has guaranteed that Ireland will still be able to determine its own tax policy, retain its military neutrality and keep its restrictive anti-abortion laws. If Ireland votes "yes" then the treaty can be in operation by next year.

UK Conservative leader David Cameron has promised that a Tory government would hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. His party is coming under increasing pressure from the right-wing anti-European United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which came second to the Tories in the recent elections for the European Parliament ahead of the Labour Party. UKIP rejects federalism and advocates UK withdrawal from the EU and draws its support primarily from the Tories' own petty bourgeois constituency. But it has also successfully exploited

more widespread hostility to the undemocratic character of the EU institutions, while avoiding any propaganda that hints at the EU's primary function as an instrument of the major corporations.

It is partially in response to this challenge that Cameron has finally, after months of negotiations, taken the step of leaving the EPP and allying his party with such reactionary nationalist forces.

The new grouping includes the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS) of Jaroslaw and Lech Kaczynski. One of PiS's MPs was reported to have declared the election of President Barack Obama as "an impending catastrophe, the end of the civilisation of the white man."

Some of its leading figures associated with the Roman Catholic station, *Radio Maryja*, wrote an open letter to Polish voters in the run up to the election in which they denounced "the rising wave of anti-Polishness and the falsifying of history in Europe."

"We will not tolerate the Germanisation of western and northern Polish territories under the mask of Europeanisation," the writers declared. Christianity was the root of European greatness, the letter proclaimed, and then went on to denounce homosexuality as a "pathology" that was undermining the family.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski is a regular on a *Radio Maryja* talk show run by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, who is noted for his anti-Semitism and homophobia. He told a post-election rally in Bialystock, "If Europe is to be strong, it has to be Christian. And today it is anti-Christian, and especially anti-Catholic."

The Czech Civic Democratic Party (ODS) is the third largest grouping in the new bloc.

One of the smaller members of the new group is the Latvian National Independence Movement. It sent representatives to a memorial ceremony celebrating the

role of the Latvian Legion of the Waffen SS, which is said to have been involved in war crimes against Russian civilians. Some members of the Legion were part of the Arajs Kommando, one of the most notorious killing units of the Holocaust.

Timothy Kirkhope, who leads the Tory group in the European Parliament, defended his ally's involvement in the event: "There was a commemoration of those who had served in the Waffen divisions of the Wehrmacht in the Second World War. The Labour Party has been churning this thing out over and over again."

The willingness of the Conservative Party to court isolation within Europe ultimately reflects the extent to which powerful interests within the financial oligarchy see the EU's attempts to regulate hedge funds and other financial institutions as an unwarranted intrusion. The Tories move to ally with dubious far right elements has the full backing of Rupert Murdoch's media empire, especially the leading British tabloid *The Sun*.

While the ECR is an unstable grouping, it could prove useful in opening up fissures between old and new EU member states and on national separatist lines within European nation states. There is a degree of continuity here with the policies pursued by the Bush administration, which sought to exacerbate divisions within the EU in order to prevent it emerging as a consolidated entity that could challenge US hegemony.

The *Financial Times* voiced the concerns of other sections of business at the prospect of British isolation within, or even disengagement from, Europe. The British Chambers of Commerce said that "having so many UK MEPs outside the mainstream groupings is a worry for business."

David Yeandle, head of employment policy at the Engineering Employers Federation (EEF), told the paper, "We are concerned the Tories won't be as influential as they would have been within the EPP group."

The EU is Britain's major trade partner and British membership has attracted foreign manufacturers such as Honda, Nissan and Toyota seeking access to European markets. The Conservatives have in the past been highly conscious that, having lost its empire, Britain needed Europe. The Tories led attempts to take the UK into Europe in the 1960s and succeeded under Edward Heath in 1973. Even under Thatcher, the party

was a firm advocate of the creation of the Single European Market.

The Tories' actions are having an extremely disruptive impact in Europe, where Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and President Nicholas Sarkozy are disturbed by the prospect of a Conservative government coming to power in Britain. France and Germany deliberately downplayed their attempts to increase EU control over financial institutions at the recent EU summit in an effort to avoid further destabilising the UK's Labour government and Prime Minister Gordon Brown. If the Brown government can limp on until next year, they may be able to secure agreement on the Lisbon Treaty. A Tory victory would pose the prospect of a British referendum on Lisbon that would raise the question of continued UK membership of the EU.

The renewed focus on Europe is also putting great strain on relations within the Tory Party between its Europhobes and Europhiles. Shadow Business Secretary Kenneth Clarke, a noted pro-European, has warned that it may not be possible to renegotiate Britain's relationship to the EU. Clarke said that if Ireland had ratified the treaty by the time a Conservative government came to power, there would be no attempt to renegotiate the treaty. Cameron responded by disowning Clarke's remarks.

The pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* reported that "Cameron has reassured worried MPs in private that Mr Clarke has 'not changed a word' of Tory policy on the European Union Treaty, after the Shadow Business Secretary said renegotiation might not be possible. The Tory leader's move to disown Mr Clarke's comments confirms that there is a serious shadow cabinet split on Europe, with the leadership firmly backing a referendum and Mr Clarke arguing against it."

Some Tory MPs are openly discussing "the nuclear option" of threatening to leave the EU.



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