

Ratification of Lisbon Treaty provokes crisis for Britain's Conservatives

Julie Hyland

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The Czech Republic's ratification of the European Union's Lisbon Treaty created a political maelstrom in the UK, exposing major divisions within the Conservative Party and the crisis facing British foreign policy more broadly.

The Czech Republic is the last of the EU's 27 member states to ratify the treaty. With its signature, Lisbon will come into force next month along with the selection of an EU president, foreign minister and diplomats.

The treaty is a thoroughly undemocratic piece of legislation. Aimed at consolidating Europe as a political, trade and military bloc against its major rivals, it is a replacement for a proposed European Constitution scuppered by French and Dutch voters in referendums in 2005.

In an attempt to manoeuvre around opposition, the EU drafted the treaty, which retained all the features of the rejected constitution. Outside of Ireland, the 490-million strong population of Europe has had no say over its provisions. Given that the treaty is predicated on the further privatisation of social services and break-up of residual labour protection across the continent, Europe's ruling powers are aware that it could not achieve a popular mandate.

The exclusion of working people from European political life has meant that opposition to the treaty has largely come from right-wing parties. They have utilised its autocratic character to whip up anti-European sentiment to shore up their own dwindling political base and extract greater concessions from the EU.

Czech President Vaclav Klaus's grandstanding had delayed ratification until November 3. Referred to as the "Margaret Thatcher of Central Europe", he had previously called for the EU to be replaced with a giant free trade zone. He had railed against the threat to Czech "sovereignty" posed by the treaty, passing over the fact that the Republic's economy is entirely subordinate to the major powers, and that it had fully acquiesced to US plans to station its missile defence system in the country.

Ultimately, the fact that the Czech Republic, like many other Central European countries, has been a significant recipient of EU funds meant that Klaus's opposition would not stand. Underscoring Lisbon's anti-democratic provisions, the EU agreed to Klaus's demand that the Czech Republic be given an

opt-out from the treaty's Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the path was cleared for it to pass.

Klaus's agreement has created problems for Britain's Conservative Party. It too has used popular opposition to the EU to gain political capital—especially after the Labour Party reneged on its manifesto commitment to hold a referendum on Lisbon.

In September 2007, Tory leader David Cameron authored an article in *The Sun*, complete with his personal signature, in which he made a "cast-iron guarantee" that a future Conservative government would hold a referendum on the EU treaty. Evoking Winston Churchill, Cameron thundered "from the moment the EU Constitution was dreamt up by elites in Brussels, the Conservative Party's squadron was first in the air, demanding a referendum in this battle for our country's future".

Decrying Labour's abandonment of its referendum promise, he wrote, "Small wonder that so many people don't believe a word politicians ever say if they break their promises so casually". In contrast, "If I become PM a Conservative government will hold a referendum on any EU treaty that emerges from these negotiations".

Cameron's pledge was in part motivated by the attempt to reconcile competing factions within his party. Tory Euro-scepticism is widespread and is motivated by support for "free trade", hostility to any regulations—particularly in the sphere of social rights—and a preferred orientation to the US as a counterweight to its main rivals in Europe. Divisions over Europe have brought down Tory leaders and spawned rival political outfits, such as the UK Independence Party.

In his own bid for party leadership in 2005, Cameron sought to cut the ground from under his main Euro-sceptic challenger David Davis by promising that he would take the Tories out of the pro-EU conservative grouping, the European Peoples Party, in the European parliament. His pledge won him the support of significant anti-EU Tories. Earlier this year, the Conservatives formed a new alliance with more extreme right-wing parties largely from east Europe, including Poland's Law and Justice Party and Latvia's For Fatherland and Freedom.

More fundamental to Cameron's pledge was his efforts to woo multi-billionaire press baron Rupert Murdoch. All the

hype about defending “British sovereignty” was but a means of securing the backing of this leading representative of the financial oligarchy that really dictates the political agenda. According to right-wing political commentator Peter Osborne, Cameron’s referendum pledge in *The Sun* was “part of the laborious negotiation that eventually led the Murdoch press to switch its allegiance from Gordon Brown’s Labour Party to David Cameron’s Tories.”

Cameron’s pledges have now come back to haunt him. The Tory break from the EPP grouping has led to accusations that they are undermining Britain’s influence in Europe. It has damaged Conservative relations with Germany’s Angela Merkel and France’s Nicolas Sarkozy, while the *Times* had reported previously that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had “expressed alarm that a rupture in relations between a future Tory government and Europe would diminish Britain’s ability to wield influence in world affairs”.

In a volte-face immediately following the Czech Republic’s ratification of the treaty, the Tories announced there would not be a referendum after all. Cameron claimed it was not possible to do so retrospectively. Blaming Prime Minister Gordon Brown for “betraying” Britain in agreeing to Lisbon, the Tory leader said he was in favour of a “patient and incremental” approach to the EU, while pledging that a Conservative government would “fight Brussels” to secure “legal locks” and “British Guarantees” over European legislation.

Reports indicate a grass-roots rebellion at Cameron’s backsliding. Davis sought to stake his claim to this sentiment, calling on Cameron to pledge a “double-referendum”. One would be to gain backing for Tory efforts to secure EU guarantees over issues such as criminal justice, asylum and “serious exemptions to the seemingly endless flood of European regulations which cost the UK economy billions of pounds each year”, and the second to endorse any agreements reached.

Notwithstanding Davis’s interjection, concern that in-fighting could jeopardise Conservative chances in next year’s General Election has thus far seen the party present a united front.

Cameron has received aid from the *Sun*, who backed his climb-down saying that it was forced on him by Labour’s earlier treachery over Lisbon. In an editorial proudly declaring its hostility to the EU, the newspaper proclaimed it would “never abandon its fight to protect Britain as an independent nation”.

“But we need to be realistic about the perils we face today,” it continued. “Britain is up to its eyes in debt, the Pound is sinking, dole queues are swollen, and we face industrial strife on a scale unseen since the Winter of Discontent”.

Any future Tory government could not “waste precious energy fighting on two fronts”. The necessary debate on Europe would take place, but under conditions in which “we are not distracted by the worst economic crisis in living memory”.

Even so, the politically explosive issue of Britain’s relations with Europe has merely been set aside, with the delay only adding to the eventual repercussions.

On the one hand, the Tories have made themselves ever more heavily reliant on Murdoch, who is solely concerned with his own wealth making. Osborne reported that “[T]he last few weeks...have seen a series of sordid negotiations between the Conservatives and executives from the *Sun* in search of a face-saving formula”, with the pledge for a referendum on any *future* European treaty as the compromise.

To dance to Murdoch’s tune, however, can only further antagonise Europe’s major powers. French Foreign Minister Pierre Lellouche described Cameron’s latest pledge to secure more opt-outs as “pathetic” and “autistic”. He said he had told Tory leaders, “You want to be marginalised? Well, you go for it. But it’s a waste of time for all of us”.

“It’s not going to happen for a minute. Nobody is going to indulge in rewriting [treaties for] many, many years. Nobody is going to play with the institutions again. It’s going to be take it or leave it and they should be honest and say that”.

Giving voice to the strategic considerations surrounding Lisbon he continued, “It is a time of tumultuous waters all around us. Wars, terrorism, proliferation, Afghanistan, energy with Russia, massive immigration, economic crisis. It is time when the destiny of Europe is being defined—whether or not we will exist as a third of the world’s GDP capable of fighting it out on climate, on trade, on every...issue on the surface of the Earth.

“We need to be united, otherwise we will be wiped out and marginalised. None of us can do it alone. Whether you’re big or small, the lesson is the same. And [Britain’s] risk is one of marginalisation. Irrelevance”.

Cameron brushed off Lellouche’s comments. But as the Obama administration has made clear, irrelevance in Europe means irrelevance in the US. Only in October, the *Financial Times* cited remarks by US Ambassador Louis Susman on British-EU relations. “Strip away the diplomatic niceties”, the *FT* wrote, “and Mr. Susman seemed to be issuing a gentle warning to Mr. Cameron—do not expect open arms in Washington if Tory opposition to the Lisbon Treaty leads to a serious rupture with the rest of Europe”.

American opposition might be enough to restrain some amongst the Tories anti-European wing. Davis said that his own proposal was aimed at providing “a formidable negotiating weapon” against Brussels, and not intended as a vote on “in or out” of the EU. That will not be enough to satisfy a section of the Tory party who want nothing less.



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