

Split on gay marriage and Europe, UK Tories rescued by Labour Party

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The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition managed to pass its Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill in parliament this week, but only after making an eleventh-hour plea to Labour.

The legislation, supposedly placing marriage between same-sex partners and heterosexuals on an equal footing, was passed by 366 to 161 and will now go to the House of Lords.

However, 133 Tory MPs voted against the bill, including two cabinet ministers. Conservative opponents had introduced a wrecking amendment demanding that civil partnerships—currently the only form of “marriage” legal for same-sex couples—should be extended to heterosexuals, effectively delaying the legislation beyond the next parliament.

Labour had pledged to support the amendment, but switched at the last moment when it became clear the government might lose on the amendment—and after the potential cost of such a change was revealed. Labour’s manoeuvring underscores the fraud of claims that the same-sex marriage bill is motivated by considerations of equality and democratic rights.

Prime Minister David Cameron backed the legislation as a means of detoxifying the Tory brand from its long association with homophobia. The aim was not only to try and broaden the base of the Tory party, whose membership has fallen from 1.2 million at the time of the Thatcher government to just 130,000. Cameron made a calculation that with all parties agreed on drastic austerity measures that are alienating the mass of the population, a Tory pitch to gay rights might garner it support among a privileged section of the middle class.

Marital equality for homosexuals, however, conflicts with Britain’s anti-democratic constitutional provisions enshrining the Church of England as the state religion. The established Church and other religious groups are bitterly opposed to the legislation, which has also drawn

significant opposition from within Tory ranks. Thus, while the bill allows same-sex couples to marry legally for the first time, it is subject to numerous caveats. In particular, it does not allow same-sex married couples the same pension rights as heterosexual couples.

Tory backbench opponents sought to exploit such glaring inconsistencies to sabotage the legislation, arguing that the bill was discriminatory in confining civil partnerships to same-sex couples. To placate opposition, the government agreed to review the future of civil partnerships. Figures produced by the Department of Welfare and Pensions indicated that overturning the discrimination against civil partnership in pension rights would cost up to £4 billion in public service pension schemes.

At the last moment, following a plea from Cameron, Labour Party leader Ed Miliband instructed Labour MPs to oppose the amendment, which was defeated by 375 to 70.

Nonetheless, Tory opponents have called on the House of Lords to reject the bill, with David Burrowes MP insisting it is the right of peers to do so given that the legislation did not figure in party manifesto pledges.

Tory MPs openly speak of a “civil war in conservatism”, in which Cameron’s leadership hangs in the balance.

The Same-Sex Marriage Bill is only the latest in a series of rebellions by Tory backbenchers—the most significant of which has involved Britain’s membership in the European Union (EU).

In a bid to silence opponents of the EU in Tory ranks, Cameron had pledged to hold a referendum on British membership by 2017, if he won the general election due in 2015. Failure to include this pledge in the Queen’s Speech outlining the government’s legislative programme for the year saw 130 Tory MPs back an amendment condemning its omission.

Last week Cameron agreed to publish a draft Bill committing the next parliament to an in-out referendum. As this is opposed by his Liberal Democrat coalition partners, he agreed this would be taken through parliament by Tory backbench MP, James Wharton, with the support of Conservative ministers.

Tory euro-sceptics, the most strident supporters of austerity, argue that excessive bureaucracy from Brussels is damaging the competitiveness of British capital. They would usually have the ear of big business on this, but the majority of the corporate elite is concerned that a referendum would sanction British withdrawal and undermine their interests in Europe and globally.

Nineteen business leaders, including the heads of the Confederation of British Industry, Deloitte, Lloyds and others, have signed an open letter published in the *Independent* opposing the move.

Under the headline, “We need to stay in the European Union—or risk losing up to £92bn a year,” the signatories demanded that Cameron should fight “hard to deliver a more competitive Europe” and protect the City of London as “Europe’s global financial centre.”

Business leaders and political commentators have accused Cameron of sacrificing the “national interest” to protect the Tory party from a further haemorrhaging of its support in the direction of the anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

UKIP has made significant inroads in the Tory vote in local elections and several Tories have defected to it over the EU referendum. In a letter to Cameron, organised by the Grassroots Conservative group, more than 30 present and former party chairmen warned that more would follow unless legislation on same-sex marriage was abandoned, “or the party leadership changed.”

Cameron was forced to rule out demands for a Tory-UKIP alliance at the next election scheduled for 2015, but he is being undermined by leading figures in his own party. In an inflammatory statement, former Conservative party chairman Lord Norman Tebbit complained that Cameron had “fucked up” over gay marriage, warning that the legislation could lead to a lesbian Queen on the throne, with an heir produced by artificial insemination.

Tebbit tacitly endorsed UKIP, saying it was understandable that the latter was winning support. He warned that if UKIP made significant gains in next year’s European elections, “I know there’s people rich enough to get involved and fund a significant campaign at a general election.”

His threat underscores the essential political purpose of

UKIP. Similarly to the Tea Party movement in the United States, UKIP have been given wide publicity by the media in Britain—despite polling similar figures to the Green Party. This has allowed former stockbroker and UKIP leader Nigel Farage to strike a populist pose, denouncing the government as out of touch “toffs” and utilising his own brand of identity politics, championing a supposedly beleaguered white, English minority “losing out” to immigrants and the EU.

Polling figures show that UKIP’s base is overwhelmingly based among those aged 60 years or over, with a higher than average representation of homeowners among its supporters. Formerly this layer would have been considered a fairly comfortable section of the middle class and a “natural” constituency for the Tories. However, largely dependent on pensions and savings, these sections have been hit by the economic crisis and the squeeze on pensions, coupled with rising prices.

Neither UKIP nor any of the official parties have any policies to remedy such social grievances. Instead they seek to manipulate these layers as a means of driving politics further to the right, in order to legitimise further draconian attacks on workers’ living standards and democratic rights.

To this end, Cameron has invited leading euro-sceptic John Redwood to act as an adviser on economic policy. An arch-Thatcherite, Redwood is employed by multinational investment bank, N M Rothschild & Sons.

This will not be enough to placate the most right-wing sections of the ruling elite. Speculation is rife that Cameron will face a leadership challenge within months. Education Secretary Michael Gove has staked out his position on Europe. In addition, Defence Secretary Philip Hammond has laid down his marker, accusing the government of wasting time and money on gay marriage legislation as opposed to military expenditure.



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