

‘May Contain Nuts’? The reality behind the rhetoric surrounding the British Conservatives’ new group in the European Parliament

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The British Conservative Party’s decision to leave the European Peoples’ Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED) group in the European Parliament (EP) and establish a new formation – the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) – has attracted a lot of criticism. Leading the charge have been the Labour government and left-liberal newspapers like the *Guardian* and the *Observer*, but there has been some ‘friendly fire’ as well. Former Conservative ministers - so-called ‘Tory grandees’ - and some of the party’s former MEPs have joined Foreign Office veterans in making their feelings known, as have media titles which are by no means consistently hostile to a Conservative Party that is at last looking likely to return to government.¹ Much of the criticism originates from the suspicion that the refusal of other centre-right parties in Europe to countenance leaving the EPP has forced the Conservatives into an alliance with partners with whom they have – or at least should have – little in common. We question, or at least qualify, this assumption by looking in more detail at the other members of the ECR. We conclude that, while they are for the most part socially conservative, they are less extreme and more pragmatic than their media caricatures suggest. We also note that such caricatures ignore some interesting incompatibilities within the new group as a whole and between some of its Central and East European members and the Conservatives, not least

with regard to their foreign policy preoccupations and their by no means wholly hostile attitude to the European integration project.

The charge sheet

Not all of the criticism of the Conservatives' decision to set up the ECR, we should note, has focused on the parties that have joined them. Concentrating on the practical implications of the decision for both the Conservatives and for the UK government, some commentators have suggested that leaving the much larger EPP-ED for the much smaller ECR will both reduce the Conservatives' ability to influence EU legislation and confirm fears that they will once again decide to play the role of 'the spoilers, the naysayers, the foot-draggers of Europe.'² A similar argument is made by Europhile former diplomats, like Lord Kerr of Kinlochard, Britain's ambassador to the EU at the time of the Maastricht treaty negotiations, who labeled the decision 'a rigid commitment to impotence'. Ex-Conservative Party Chairman and European Commissioner, Chris Patten, also called the decision 'unwise'. A few former Conservative MEPs have gone even further: according to Caroline Jackson, it was a 'stupid, stupid policy' which would 'sow the seeds of endless trouble', isolate Cameron, and 'leave bad blood with Christian Democrat parties throughout Europe'. This view would seem to be confirmed by the more or less veiled criticism emanating from, say, Germany's Angela Merkel. And her concerns would seem to be shared even by the European leader to whom he is said to be closest, namely Fredrik Reinfeldt – the modernizing Conservative leader of Sweden's centre-right coalition.

To these critics, the Conservatives' decision to leave the EPP-ED is seen as a counterproductive and therefore irrational act. As a result, it is explained not with reference to the ideas propounded by the new group (see Appendix 1) – ideas which have therefore attracted virtually no media interest or comment – but instead in terms of the internal politics of the Conservative Party. David Cameron, it is routinely observed, made the promise to leave the EPP-ED group solely in order to match or outbid his rivals in the leadership contest which took place in 2005. He has stuck to it, it is assumed, because to have abandoned it would have caused a damaging internal row with Conservative right-wingers already suspicious of their 'modernising' leader but prepared to see the fulfilment of his pledge as a *quid pro quo* for their not grumbling too much about his attempt to re-locate the Party back in the centre-ground. Moreover, the departure from the EPP-ED would, it was said, at least deprive the anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) of the chance to cast doubt on the Conservatives' Euroscepticism by pointing to their willingness to work with continental federalists. Finally, to have decided to carry on with the arrangement despite his commitment would have risked sending a signal to the electorate that Cameron was not a man of his word. It might also have made it even harder for the Conservative leader, once Prime Minister, to resist hardline Eurosceptic pressure to retrospectively re-litigate the Lisbon Treaty.³

Table 1 about here

The majority of the criticism, however, of the Conservatives' move has been rather less measured, especially in the press. Here the focus has been not merely on the policy consequences but on the supposedly extremist politics and character of the partners with which the Conservatives have chosen to work in the new group – the fourth largest in parliament after the EPP, the Socialists, the Liberals and the Greens (see Table 1). Essentially, as the *Guardian's* correspondent put it a month before the European elections, the argument is that 'the Tories are shooting themselves in the foot by trading power and influence in the committees dominated by the centre-right for a motley crew of Brussels-bashing populists and reactionaries on the rightwing fringes of Europe.'⁴ So obsessed, apparently, were the Conservatives with calling a halt to further integration that they rejected the mainstream and moderate continental centre-right and chose, claimed another journalist on the same paper, to

ally instead with the proudly ignorant parties of eastern Europe. Know-nothing chauvinism, sexual and religious prejudices, and conspiracy theories from Europe's dark heart motivate them, but they are against federalism and that is all that matters to Cameron.⁵

The bulk of attention has been paid to the two biggest members of this apparently bad bunch – the Polish Law and Justice party (PiS) and the Czech Civic Democrats (ODS) – although the other, much smaller, outfits – particularly those from Latvia, the Netherlands and Belgium – have also attracted some comment. As a result, anyone reading the press coverage of the new group immediately before, during and after its formation on 22 June 2009 would have come away with the some pretty negative impressions.

The charge-sheet against Law and Justice is particularly long. First and foremost, it is portrayed as homophobic: ‘leading figures’ have apparently declared that ‘homosexuality will lead to the downfall of civilization’ and banned gay pride events as obscene. But Law and Justice is also portrayed as, at best, aggressively nationalist, especially in its irreconcilable antagonism toward Germany, and, at worst, simply racist: leading figures have said to have claimed that Barack Obama’s rise to the US Presidency marks ‘the end of the civilization of the white man’. Moreover, it seems that Law and Justice is linked to authoritarian Catholic nationalists who are self-declared fans of General Franco, including not only its former partner in government, the League of Polish Families (LPR), but Radio Maryja, upon which Law and Justice’s leaders, the Kaczynski twins are said to make regular appearances and which apparently allows antisemitic broadcasts. Indeed, one Polish pundit is quoted by the *Guardian* to the effect that, in the light of a deal that supposedly allowed Radio Maryja approved candidates onto Law and Justice’s European list in return for its support during the elections, Cameron might as well be in an alliance with the station’s notorious proprietor, Father Tadeusz Rydzyk.⁶ Finally, we are reminded (in the same article) that during its time in government, Law and Justice ‘formed a coalition with extremists and ultra-nationalists, conducted witchhunts of opponents, pursued deeply illiberal policies and was turfed out of office as a national embarrassment.’

Anyone wondering if the ODS was any less politically extreme would – if they relied on the British press anyway – would be just as disappointed. Based on the comments of its

founder (sometimes simply referred to namelessly as ‘one of its leaders’), the Czech President Václav Klaus that ‘Global warming is a false myth and every serious person and scientist says so’, they are, it is implied, climate-change deniers – a charge also levelled at Law and Justice. They are also, it is noted, led by a politician, Mirek Topolánek, now famous not so much for being unable to hold his governing coalition together during his country’s six-month presidency of the EU but for being photographed ‘naked and excited’ (as one paper put it) at a poolside party hosted by Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi.

As for the smaller parties recruited into the ECR, each of which swell its ranks by just one MEP each, it is Latvia’s Fatherland and Freedom Party that has received the bulk of the critical asides. This was not so much because it had, like Law and Justice, apparently banned gay pride events but because of its alleged support for veterans who joined Latvian units of Hitler’s Waffen-SS – something that led to a televised spat between Britain’s foreign secretary, David Miliband, and the Conservative Party Chairman, Eric Pickles, at the beginning of October 2009. The SS story even merited a mention in the *Sun*, which otherwise, like its fellow tabloids, has reflected readers’ interests by showing no interest whatsoever in who the Conservatives line up with in the EP. Back in the broadsheets, the other small parties have attracted less attention, though like their larger counterparts they have often been found guilty by association. Of the Lijst Dedecker, for example, the *Independent* noted that some of its politicians ‘are former members of the far-right Vlaams Belang party, whose candidates backed a statement saying: “We urgently need global chemotherapy against Islam to save civilization”’, and used

campaigning material featuring an ape with the words "I have not forgotten my roots ... have you?".⁷ The same report noted that the Dutch ChristenUnie had been accused of being anti-women because the fundamentalist Calvinism of one of its supposed components apparently led it to believe that women should stay at home rather than stand for parliament.

Neither this, nor any of the other offences supposedly committed by their partners in the ECR, are, we should note, attributed to the parties from Lithuania and Hungary, so we will deal with them only briefly. But when it comes to the parties who have been the subject of poison pen-portraits in the media, what are they really like and, just as importantly, what are the points of agreement and disagreement with each other and with Cameron's Conservatives?

Law and Justice

Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice or PiS) was the main governing party in Poland between 2005 and 2007. It was formed in 2001 by Jarosław Kaczyński (one-time chief of staff to former Polish President and legendary Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa) and his twin brother Lech (formerly an extremely popular justice minister, but who is currently the Polish President) as a party which would fight corruption, promote law and order, and usher in a radical break with Poland's post-war communist past. It won the 2005 elections by claiming, as well, to represent a more 'social' or 'solidaristic' approach to economic policy than the liberal conservative Civic Platform (PO) – a member of the

EPP-ED EP grouping, now in government itself – and by broadening its electoral base to include the clerical-nationalist ‘religious right’.

This was not so very hard to do because Law and Justice is, indeed, a socially conservative party whose negative attitude to, for example, homosexuality (while it contrasts markedly with the liberal views espoused by British Conservative ‘modernisers’) is a reflection of the Catholic Church’s teaching on this issue and, as such, has been broadly accepted by virtually all politicians on the Polish centre-right. A large number of the latter, whichever party they are in, would argue that their opposition to, say, ‘civil partnerships’ and gay adoption does not constitute homophobia but represents a legitimate position on moral-cultural issues that conservatives have long felt strongly about. The difference between PiS and PO is that the latter tends to play down these issues and to discuss them in less emotionally-charged language, especially for West European audiences; it also denies PiS’s claim that EU agreements (notably the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which Poland has opted out of) can be used to impose on Poland the obligation to pass liberal legislation.

There is certainly no denying that some of the output of Father Tadeusz Rydzyk’s clerical-nationalist broadcaster Radio Maryja borders on the paranoid, the anti-Semitic and the outright xenophobic. But PiS’s relationship with it is more instrumental than ideological: Radio Maryja and its associated media empire, after all, play a key role in mobilising Poland’s ‘religious right’ electorate which can account for 5-10% of the votes cast in a Polish election, and has in the past supported other centre-right political

groupings, including those linked to the EPP, and Lech Wałęsa. Nor is the relationship always a smooth one: in 2007 Jarosław Kaczyński (who has, in the past, criticised Polish parties that made an explicitly clerical pitch) came under fire from Father Rydzyk for his failure to show sufficient enthusiasm for moves to constitutionally enshrine Poland's restrictive abortion law, while his brother Lech has had to endure some pretty unpleasant criticism of his wife, Maria, whom the clergyman called a 'witch' for her apparent links with feminist organisations.

The Kaczyńskis, of course, are more frequently criticized by liberals than by conservatives, but many of accusations routinely flung in their direction are misleading. For instance, the statement that Barack Obama's rise to the US Presidency marked 'the end of the civilization of the white man' was made by an obscure and marginal backbencher in a late night debate to a virtually empty parliamentary chamber. True, Law and Justice's leadership took no disciplinary action against him but they themselves welcomed Mr Obama's election and distanced themselves and the party from such comments. Likewise, they never condoned the warm words for General Franco expressed by an MEP from their party's former coalition partner, the clerical-nationalist League of Polish Families (LPR).

Indeed, many of the criticisms of PiS in the Western media fall into the category of guilt by association or elision. One example of the latter is the unfounded assumption that Law and Justice, like some members of the ODS, denies the existence of man-made climate change. More frequently, however, PiS is tarred with the same brush as the LPR or with

its other former coalition partner, the agrarian protest party, Self-Defence (Samoobrona). In fact, when the three governed Poland between 2005 and 2007, PiS did its best to keep its more radical partners on a short leash, giving them little say in economic or foreign policy at the same time as making it obvious they would be unable to deliver on their more radical promises – a strategy which saw both the LPR and Samoobrona fail to secure any parliamentary seats in 2007 while PiS (although it lost office) increased its share of the vote from 28% to 35%. In any case, Law and Justice is by no means the only party in Europe - ‘old’ or ‘new’ – to have shared government with apparently unsavoury and extremist partners: the Austrian and Italian components of the EPP or (currently) the Slovakian component of the former PES (now known as the S&D) spring immediately to mind. Meanwhile, those who accuse PiS of ‘conducting witch-hunts against its political opponents while in government’ are presumably referring to its decision to form a powerful central anti-corruption agency (CBA) with wide-ranging powers to investigate and prosecute public officials at all levels and/or to its attempt to introduce legislation that would greatly expand the scope of ‘lustration’ (vetting individuals for their links with the communist-era security services). Yet both of these flagship policies were given legislative support by PO (which, as an EPP member, is rarely judged by the same standards in the British media as PiS) nor did it dissolve the CBA or get rid of its controversial Head on assuming office in 2007.

Given all this, it might make more sense for those seeking to criticise the Conservative Party for its choice of Polish partner to point out the substantive ideological and policy differences between the two. While in practice (that is, in government), Law and Justice

tended to follow reasonably orthodox liberal economic policies, it continues to stress its links with and support for the more socially-oriented programmes espoused by the Solidarity trade union. Moreover, Law and Justice supports (as, indeed, do all Polish parties) a large EU budget involving substantial fiscal transfers from net contributors (like Britain) to poorer states (like Poland), together with the scrapping of the British budget rebate. And, because of the large role that the farming sector plays in the Polish economy, it also supports (again, like all Polish parties) the continuation, in more or less its current form, of the Common Agricultural Policy, which it sees as a means of developing and modernising Polish rural communities.

Although, when discussing the future of the European project in abstract terms, Law and Justice uses similar, broadly Eurosceptic, anti-federalist rhetoric to that employed by the British Conservatives and declares itself in favour of an inter-governmentalist approach, in practice it has often supported stronger and closer European integration and the extension of the so-called 'community method'. For example, while PiS is in theory sceptical of the EU's international aspirations and its attempts to acquire more effective foreign policy instruments, in practice it has called for a stronger Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) to defend the interests of EU states such as Poland vis-à-vis Russia and Jarosław Kaczyński has even called for the formation of 100,000-strong common European army. On the other hand, the party's nationalistic determination to stand up not just to Russia but also to Germany (one of its reasons for deciding to join the anti-federalist Union for a Europe of Nations [UEN] group in 2004 rather than the EPP-ED was its objection to the German Christian Democrats' supposed domination of the

latter), could potentially embarrass a Cameron government hoping to forge good relations with both of these major powers.

Attitudes to CFSP – and to the budget and the CAP – are not the only examples of potentially fundamental differences. President Kaczyński may have decided to withhold his signature from the parliamentary act ratifying the Lisbon treaty until an Irish Yes vote, but it was a Law and Justice-led government that negotiated and signed up to the treaty in 2007. The objections that it raised during the treaty negotiations were not so much rejections of the principle of further integration as concerns about the proposed new voting system in Council of Ministers disadvantaging Poland. And the overwhelming majority of the party's deputies voted for the treaty's ratification in parliament in spring 2008. Moreover, although Law and Justice opposes the Civic Platform-led government's plans for swift adoption of the euro, unlike the British Conservatives, its misgivings relate to timing rather than to the principle of a single currency.

ODS

From the moment of its foundation in 1991 the ODS has defined itself as a party inspired by Anglo-American conservatism and economic neo-liberalism.⁸ It was the linchpin of two market-reforming centre-right coalition governments led by its founder, Václav Klaus, between 1992 and 1997 and remains one of the two most powerful players in Czech politics to this day. Euroscepticism has become one of Klaus's trademarks,

especially since he became President in 2003. An opponent of the euro, the European Constitution and the Lisbon Treaty, he now advocates – often in tones that reflect antipathy to anything that smacks of Soviet or German domination – the rollback of European integration to pre-Maastricht levels and the eventual transformation of the Union into loose bloc of sovereign states. His other bugbear is environmentalism: measures to combat global warming, he claims, are both unnecessary and risk a slide in Communist-style authoritarianism and austerity. The Czech president has also taken up a *pot pourri* of other controversial positions: he opposed Western military intervention in Kosova and Iraq war as futile violations of national sovereignty, denounced efforts to strengthen judicial authority in the Czech Republic as a creating ‘judge-ocracy’, warned Czechs of the risk of future immigration creating a dysfunctional multi-cultural societies like those of Western Europe, and rejected as misplaced criticism of the political direction of Putin’s Russia.

But while Klaus remains as much of an iconic figure for ODS as Margaret Thatcher is for the Conservatives, few in the party have ever shared the President’s views on issues such Iraq or Russia and many have also moved away from his high-octane Euroscepticism – especially when it appeared to cost the party support during the general election of 2002, after which he was ousted from the leadership. His surprise replacement as ODS leader, Miroslav Topolánek, was a pragmatic politician from the provinces whose lack of intellectual polish and obvious ideological commitments, prompted Klaus (echoes of Thatcher and Major perhaps) to dismiss him in private as ‘utterly vacuous’. However, although gaffe-prone, he has proved a tough and capable operator in domestic politics with a shrewd appreciation of the compromises the Civic Democrats would need to make

to gain power. The flipside of this is that he has allowed the formal content of the party's post-Klaus programme to be set by other, often more ideologically-minded colleagues.

The ODS position on the EU is a significant case in point. Official ODS thinking on Europe has been largely shaped by its foreign affairs spokesman and one time Klaus protégé, Jan Zahradil, who currently heads the ODS group in the EP. Although a very trenchant Eurosceptic, Zahradil moved ODS away from grandiose visions of a Europe of free markets and free nations favoured by Klaus towards the notion of 'flexible integration' within the EU. This would allow new member states like the Czech Republic to pursue radical pro-market policies, such as flat taxes, and the EU as a whole to respond to the competitive pressures of globalisation and the structural tensions produced by enlargement. While paying lip service to Zahradil's vision, however, Topolánek was more preoccupied with winning and holding power and implementing fiscal and welfare reform back at home. Knowing that an arch-sceptic like Zahradil would be unacceptable to potential coalition partners, Topolánek sidelined him, favouring instead a newcomer to the ODS, the diplomat and former advisor to Václav Havel, Alexandr Vondra. As Europe Minister in Topolánek's second (2007-9) minority government, Vondra argued for a middle way between the assertive 'euro-realism' of Klaus and blanket enthusiasm for European integration. Similar pragmatism informed Topolánek and Vondra's approach to the Lisbon Treaty. While seeing the Treaty as flawed and over-integrationist, they judged it the best compromise on offer to the Czech Republic, especially when the country was due to hold the EU Presidency in the first half of 2009 – a stance which finally led Klaus publicly to resign his ODS membership.

ODS's blend of ideological Euroscepticism and pragmatic *realpolitik* explains the party's seemingly contradictory stand on European issues: having lobbied hard for Czech Senate to approve the Lisbon Treaty as Prime Minister, splitting ODS legislators down the middle and earning the undying enmity of the Klaus camp, Topolánek was happy to echo Klaus's words by branding the Treaty a 'dead document' once his government had fallen and the fate of the Treaty lay safely elsewhere. The British Conservatives will thus find their Czech allies 'on message' but not 'on board' in seeking to challenge the Treaty.

A similar blend of pragmatism and inconsistency characterises the Civic Democrats stance on climate change and the environment. Officially, they are far from being on the same wavelength as Cameron's Conservatives. ODS policy documents occasionally refer to the threat of global warming but their understanding of environmental protection is essentially restricted to preventing pollution and preserving nature, both of which come a distant second to the party's concern with economic growth. Again, though, the party's line cannot be read as identical to that pursued by Václav Klaus, not least because it is not uniformly toed. Some prominent ODS politicians have urged the party to follow British Conservatives in making green politics and fighting climate change a supposedly key priority. And one of ODS's new MEPs, Edvard Kožušník, has borrowed Cameron's 'Vote Blue, Go Green' slogan and, outdoing even the Conservative leader in cycling prowess, rode from Prague to Strasbourg to take up his seat, still clad in lycra! That said, there is, even in the post-Klaus era, no shortage of Civic Democrats – some of them MEPs – who deny that climate change is man-made.

Topolánek himself has characteristically echoed this anti-environmentalism and climate change scepticism, describing man-made global warming as a 'pseudo problem' and decrying efforts to combat it as waste of time and money, while his key concern has centred on the party's twin priorities of increasing energy efficiency and securing Europe's energy security by reducing dependency on Russian oil and gas by promoting nuclear power. As far as many practical measures, are concerned, however, such priorities may in fact overlap with the aspirations to lower carbon emissions voiced by many of Europe's mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties – including the Conservatives. The Civic Democrats' have also displayed a high degree of pragmatism on environmental issues. In 2006 the party's strong advocacy of nuclear power, both domestically and on the European stage, did not prevent it from agreeing to a freeze the Czech civil nuclear programme as part of coalition deal with the Czech Green party, an eco-liberal grouping with strong pro-market leanings which was a junior partner in both Topolánek governments.

At the time of writing the Czech Republic has a caretaker technocratic government leading the country to early election in mid-2010, whose outcome is unpredictable, Any subsequent realignment on the centre-right is likely to see Mr Topolánek – or a similarly minded successor brought to power by the party's ever more powerful regions – seek to incorporate politicians and voters from the disintegrating Green Party and the small Christian Democratic Union (KDU-CSL) into a broader centre-right reformist bloc or a broadened ODS. Such a move towards the political centre could provoke the departure of those in the party still loyal to the Klaus vision. The resultant realignment would make the party a more comfortable partner for the British Conservatives on 'blue-green' issues,

but might open up gaps on the two parties' stances on Lisbon and the future direction of the EU that go beyond tactical questions of when and how to compromise.

And the rest...

Although it currently has only one MEP, Latvia's *Tēvzemei un Brīvībai - Latvijas Nacionālās Neatkarības Kustība* (For Fatherland and Freedom – Latvian National Independence Movement or TB-LNNK) has proved perhaps the most controversial recruit to the ECRG.⁹ It was formed in 1997 through the merger of two parties with roots in the resurgent *perestroika*-era anti-Soviet nationalism of the Baltic states and it is this which provides the context for its support for veterans of the Latvian Legion – two SS divisions recruited largely from Latvian conscripts in 1943. For TB-LNNK and other nationalists, veterans of the Legion should be remembered as resistance fighters opposing the Soviet re-occupation of Latvia, rather than as Nazi collaborators – an interpretation that to them is supported by the Nuremberg Tribunal and US authorities finding that the Latvian Legion was never ideologically or organizationally fully integrated into the SS and was not liable for war crimes, even though it contained recruits who (as police and militia men before 1943) must have participated in the mass murder of Latvian Jewry in 1940-1.

This stance on the Legion stretches across the mainstream Latvian political spectrum, taking in parties who are members of other EP groups. Likewise, TB-LNNK is by no means alone in opposing guarantees of legal equality for, and social recognition of, gays and lesbians. In short, the party is not an outlier in terms of that country's political

spectrum. Indeed, it is a relatively well-established and stable part of the (very fluid) Latvian political landscape, and was a partner in successive coalition governments between 1995 and 2004. Recently, however, its vote has been in decline. Dropping under 10% did not however, prevent it from joining the five party coalition that took office in January 2009 in the wake of the financial crisis.

TB-LNNK, then, is – at least in Latvian terms – not an extremist but a conservative nationalist grouping. It has endorsed deregulatory and pro-market policies such as flat taxation, although it is committed to a social market economy and has more recently paid more attention to the need to combat poverty and inequality, the growth of which it views as a threat to national cohesion. The latter remains its primary goal. Indeed, its main concern has always been the preservation of Latvian nationhood and a distinct view of the relationship of Latvian state as one of legal continuity with independent inter-war Latvia – a view which spills over into making proficiency in the Latvian language a requirement of obtaining citizenship, creating difficulties for Russian-speaking minorities and their families who never previously needed to do so. Having been keen to join the EU, the party has, since accession, often sounded a Eurosceptic tone, in rhetorical terms at least, opposing moves towards a more federal Europe and advocating a more inter-governmental union of nation states. This scepticism is given a sharper edge by concerns over EU pressure for more inclusive citizenship laws and fears that the EU's CFSP might impede Latvia's ability to pursue its own robust national policies towards Russia. Despite this, the party supported both the European Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty as acceptable and workable compromises. It also advocates not only a more integrated

EU energy policy (partly to counter Russia's game playing over oil and gas) but also rapid adoption of the single currency.

The Belgian *Lijst Dedecker* only came into being in early 2007 after its founder, Jean-Marie Dedecker was expelled from the Flemish Liberal Party (VLD) in which he had become something of an *enfant terrible*, not only because of his willingness to criticise his own party but also for advocating the demise of the so-called *cordon sanitaire* – the voluntary agreement among other political parties not to cooperate or coalesce with the far-right Vlaams Blok (VB, now known as Vlaams Belang). While careful to distance itself from what many would consider to be the xenophobia and even racism of the latter, the Lijst opposes the *cordon sanitaire* and it can certainly be classified as an anti-elitist, what some might term 'populist', party, trading heavily on its supposedly 'common sense' policies on direct democracy, small government and law and order. Such stances stand some chance of stealing voters from VB and have already encouraged defections by some of its politicians. On the other hand, the Lijst has also gained recruits from the liberal VLD and has the support of economically neo-liberal think tanks.

The Lijst's one MEP, Derk-Jan Eppink, has extensive experience not just as a political journalist but also as an EU insider. Having worked for two European Commissioners, Frits Bolkestein and Siim Kallas, he wrote a revealing book about his experiences which, among other things, suggested that the EU needed to do much less in some areas (notably taxation, agriculture and regional policy) and more in others (most obviously market liberalization, energy, and immigration, not least in order to prevent the 'Islamicisation' of Europe).¹⁰ Before coming back to stand for the EP, he worked as a journalist and

foreign affairs commentator in New York. Eppink, then, is potentially a highly valuable member of the ECR if he can adjust to the life of an MEP and to party politics in general. At first glance, anyway, the self-styled 'eurorealism' of the party he represents – one which, without questioning European integration *per se*, urges the EU to focus more on concrete achievements and cutting bureaucracy - should suit him (and probably the Conservatives) down to the ground.

ChristenUnie (CU), the third West European member of the ECR, is not quite the fundamentalist party it is sometimes portrayed as, though the media's confusion is understandable. CU was founded at the beginning of 2000 as an alliance between two of three small Protestant parties which from the mid-1980s had periodically presented a unified list at elections; the third party (the SGP), which (unlike the other two) continued to resist women's participation in politics decided to remain independent. CU won four seats at the general election of 2002 but its hopes of joining the government, along with the SGP, were dashed at the last minute by a veto from the Dutch Liberals. However, after the election of 2006 CU was invited to join the 'grand coalition' formed by the Christian Democrats and the Labour Party in which two of its members became government ministers, one in charge of defence. The invitation was not extended to the more fundamentalist SGP, yet the latter nevertheless formed a joint list with the CU for the EP elections. After that list won two seats, the SGP's MEP chose not to join the ECR. The CU's MEP, Peter van Dalen, who did, was formerly a civil servant and far from being an advocate of some kind of patriarchal theocracy.

Clearly, even accepting there is a difference between the CU and its electoral ally, the SGP, some of the party's policy positions do not dovetail with those of the British Conservatives, even if Mr Cameron's party and its new Dutch allies do have rather more in common than the 'bible-bashing' media caricature of the latter might suggest. For instance, the CU may be opposed to the EU becoming some kind of super-state, but it is also resolutely opposed to Turkish membership – something the Conservatives continue to support. On the other hand, being in government obliged CU to forget its role as part of the No campaign in the Dutch referendum on the Constitutional Treaty and endorse the Lisbon Treaty. Likewise, its concern to protect and promote traditional family life and faith schools, and its concern to reduce abortion and drug use, should resonate well with some more traditionalist British Conservatives. More socially and culturally liberal Conservatives, however, would find it hard to stomach its stress on women staying at home to look after children and its opposition to gay marriage, Sunday trading and genetic engineering. That said, Conservative 'modernisers' would find something to admire in its enthusiasm for green issues and international aid, while their more traditionalist colleagues might well judge the CU rather a 'soft-touch' when it came to its attitudes to asylum-seekers.

Of the two remaining parties in the ECR, *Lietuvos Lenkų Rinkimų Akcija* (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania) is essentially a small party representing one of Lithuania's minorities for whom ethnicity is as, if not more, important than ideology (although it is interesting that its MEP resisted intensive lobbying by Civic Platform to join the EPP-ED grouping). The other party, *Magyar Demokrata Fórum* (the Hungarian Democratic Forum or MDF) would seem to pose few ideological problems for the British

Conservatives. However, its one MEP, Lajos Bokros (infamous in Hungary for an eponymous austerity package he was responsible for introducing as part of the then socialist-liberal government in the mid 1990s) may quit the EP to head the MDF campaign in Hungary's forthcoming national elections, in which case he may be replaced by György Habsburg. As the son of Otto von Habsburg, the former CSU MEP and president of the Pan-European Union, he is unlikely to be any more Eurosceptic than the rest of his essentially pro-European party, which seems to have plumped for the ECR largely in order to boost its claim to an ideological and political identity distinct from Hungary's dominant centre-right party, Fidesz. The latter, despite occasional bursts of nationalistic and Eurosceptic rhetoric, continues to sit without obvious signs of discomfort in the EPP group, as do the other large conservative parties (like the Spaniards and the Swedes) whom the Conservatives may once have hoped might join them.

Conclusion

Things did not begin well for the ECR – and not simply because it was obvious from the outset that its founders had failed to attract any other electorally significant parties outside the UK, Poland and the Czech Republic. When the new EP convened for the first time in July 2009, the group was immediately plunged into controversy when veteran MEP, Edward Mcmillan-Scott, successfully stood for one of the Vice-Presidencies of the EP edging out the group's official nominee, Law and Justice's Michał Kamiński. Mcmillan-Scott's decision, taken in spite of a personal plea by David Cameron not to stand, caused chaos: the Conservatives' leadership of the ECR was conditional upon their

supporting Mr Kamiński; now the Poles insisted that unless he were made group leader, they would walk – egged on apparently by hardline Eurosceptics in the Conservative delegation and supported by the Czechs. Seeing no other option, the leader of the Conservative delegation, and the man everyone thought would lead the ECR, Timothy Kirkhope, agreed to stand aside for Mr Kamiński.

A large number of Conservative MEPs – probably a majority – were less than happy about leaving the EPP-ED in the first place but had assumed that they would at least be in charge of the new grouping (in as much as anyone is ‘in charge’ of an EP party group). Now they were to be represented by someone they knew little about other than the fact that he had been one of his party’s leading spin-doctors back in Poland. Worse, in response to the delegation’s decision to remove the whip from him (a prelude to his eventual expulsion from the Conservative Party on 15 September), McMillan-Scott went on to criticise Mr Kamiński’s youthful involvement with an anti-communist group that he labelled ‘a far-right, homophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic organization’, although it soon became obvious that it only took on such a guise well after Kaminski, now seen as a moderate in Law and Justice, had left it.¹¹

Many Conservative MEPs nevertheless remained optimistic that leaving the EPP-ED for the ECR need not leave them isolated on what their opponents were determined to portray as the political fringe. After all, the EPP needs the ECR’s support on a whole host of issues, which should mean deals can be done on both individual issues and, say, the all important rapporteurships. Some Conservative MEPs even fondly hope that, far

from wanting to strangle the new group at birth, some components of the EPP-ED will, if the ECR holds together, even be tempted to come across. The worrying thing for the ECR, of course, is that they may well need further defectors. After Mr McMillan-Scott's departure, there were 54 MEPs from eight countries in the ECR. Since July 2008, when the threshold was raised, EP statutes insist that a party group contains at least 25 from seven member states. The Conservatives' new group can therefore only therefore afford to lose just one country delegation, at least during its first year of existence, after which (at the discretion of the EP's President) a group can carry on until the end of the legislative term if its members continue to represent at least six member states – a condition that still leaves the ECR worryingly vulnerable to defection.

Of course, the Conservatives could look beyond the EPP for new recruits but this really would take them into shark-infested waters. According to some reports prior to the group's formation, there was some consideration given to including the Danish People's Party and the Italian Northern League. Resuscitating such an idea could be politically suicidal for the Conservatives. Such parties may be Eurosceptic but they are also way to the right of any of the current members of the ECR. If they were to join, the liberal media in the UK would certainly find it very easy indeed to find ammunition to embarrass Mr Cameron – probably on a weekly, if not a daily, basis.

As it is, their attempts to damn Mr Cameron by the company he keeps should be taken with a pinch of salt. Just as importantly, perhaps, they miss the point. It is certainly true that some parties in the ECR are more socially conservative than the Conservative Party,

although only insofar as the social liberalism of, say, David Cameron and George Osborne, accurately reflects the attitudes of most of their fellow Conservatives. But they are – especially in the context of their own political cultures – far from being extremists, even if, when taken together they form not so much a coherent whole as a mix of liberal conservatives (the Conservatives, ODS, LDD and MDF) and conservative nationalists (PiS and TB-LNKK). Possibly more significant is the fact that they are also rather less opposed to some key aspects of the European project than the Conservatives like to think. And not only is their Euroscepticism (in marked contrast to the Conservatives’) often more instrumental than principled – in the jargon, more Soft than it is Hard.¹² It is also accompanied in some cases by hostility towards major powers like Germany and Russia. As Prime Minister of a party that is likely to be more Eurosceptic than ever but of a country that will presumably seek to remain on reasonable terms with its larger neighbours, David Cameron, could well find that the ECR provides him with more problems than solutions.

Table 1 European Conservatives and Reformists as of August 2009

Original Name	English	Abreviation	State	MEPs	Previous EP Group EPP-ED
Conservative Party	(NB includes one Ulster Unionist, but not Edward Macmillan-Scott)	Con	UK	25	
<i>Prawo i Sprawiedliwość</i>	Law and Justice	PiS	Poland	15	UEN (now EFD)
<i>Občanská demokratická strana</i>	Civic Democratic Party	ODS	Czech Republic	9	EPP-ED
<i>Lijst Dedecker</i>	Dedecker's List	LDD	Belgium	1	None
<i>Magyar Demokrata Fórum</i>	Hugarian Democratic Forum	MDF	Hungary	1	EPP-ED
<i>Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK</i>	For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK Electoral Action	TB/LNNK	Latvia	1	UEN (now EFD)
<i>Lietuvos Lenkų Rinkimų Akcija</i>	of Poles in Lithuania	LLRA	Lithuania	1	None
<i>ChristenUnie</i>	Christian Union	CU	Netherlands	1	ID (now EFD)
				<hr/> 54	
Other EP Groups	European People's Party	EPP		265	
	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	S&D		184	
	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats	ALDE		84	
	Greens	Greens		55	
	Left	EUL-NGL		35	
	Europe of Freedom and Democracy	EFD		32	
	Non-attached			<hr/> 27	
Total MEPs				<hr/> 736	

Appendix 1: The Prague Declaration of Principles of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group in the European Parliament

Conscious of the urgent need to reform the EU on the basis of eurorealism, openness, accountability and democracy, in a way that respects the sovereignty of our nations and concentrates on economic recovery, growth and competitiveness, the European Conservatives and Reformists group shares the following principles:

1. Free enterprise, free and fair trade and competition, minimal regulation, lower taxation, and small government as the ultimate catalysts for individual freedom and personal and national prosperity.
2. Freedom of the individual, more personal responsibility and greater democratic accountability.
3. Sustainable, clean energy supply with an emphasis on energy security.
4. The importance of the family as the bedrock of society.
5. The sovereign integrity of the nation state, opposition to EU federalism and a renewed respect for true subsidiarity.
6. The overriding value of the transatlantic security relationship in a revitalised NATO, and support for young democracies across Europe.
7. Effectively controlled immigration and an end to abuse of asylum procedures.
8. Efficient and modern public services and sensitivity to the needs of both rural and urban communities.
9. An end to waste and excessive bureaucracy and a commitment to greater transparency and probity in the EU institutions and use of EU funds.
10. Respect and equitable treatment for all EU countries, new and old, large and small.

Source: Prague Declaration, available as a pdf on <http://www.conservatives.com>

References

¹ See Tim Bale, *The Conservative Party: from Thatcher to Cameron* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

² See Timothy Garton Ash 'The farce of Cameron's Latvian legion is bad for Britain and bad for Europe', *Guardian*, 11 June 2009. See also the FT leader on 22 June 2009.

³ For more detailed (albeit pre-ECR) treatments of the politics and the practicalities of leaving the EPP-ED and forming a new group, see: Philip Lynch and Richard Whitaker, 'A Loveless Marriage: The Conservatives and the European People's Party', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2008 61(1), pp. 31-51; and Andreas Maurer, Roderick Parkes and Markus Wagner, 'Explaining group membership in the European Parliament: the British Conservatives and the Movement for European Reform', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15 (2), 2008, pp. 246 – 262.

⁴ See Ian Traynor, 'EU allies warn Cameron over rightwing pact', *Guardian*, 12 May 2009.

⁵ See Nick Cohen, 'Cameron can't run away from Europe much longer: There's nothing compassionate about the friends the Conservative leader is making on the Continent', *Observer*, 17 May 2009.

⁶ See Ian Traynor, 'Anti-gay, anti-German and climate-change deniers: meet Cameron's new friends', *Guardian*, 3 June 2009.

⁷ See Andrew Grice and Vanessa Mock, 'Racists may plague Tory Europe Group', *Independent*, 20 June 2009.

⁸ See Seán Hanley, *The New Right in the New Europe: Czech Transformation and Right-wing Politics, 1989-2006* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁹ The authors gratefully acknowledge the advice of Richard Mole and Allan Sikk on this section.

¹⁰ See Derk-Jan Eppink, *Life of a European Mandarin: Inside the Commission* (Lannoo, 2007).

¹¹ For his rebuttal, see <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2009/08/michal-kamiński-the-allegations-that-i-am-a-racist-or-an-antisemite-are-disgusting-and-beyond-offens.html>

¹² For a wider discussion, see: Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart (eds.) *Opposing Europe?: The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism. Volumes 1 & 2* (Oxford: OUP, 2008). On the likelihood that the Conservative Party after the next election will be more Eurosceptic than ever, see <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/goldlist/2009/07/pronuclear-gay-friendly-barely-unionist-very-eurosceptic-meet-the-next-generation-of-tory-mps.html>