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Strange Bedfellows

The Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition and Europe

After several days of uncertainty following Britain's general election, late in the evening on Tuesday 11 May Gordon Brown stepped down as Prime Minister, to be replaced at 10 Downing Street by Conservative leader David Cameron. Having failed to obtain a straight majority of 326 seats for his party, Cameron managed to secure a deal with the Liberal Democrats, led by Nick Clegg, for a coalition arrangement of a type unseen in Britain since the Second World War. From an EU perspective, this coalition offers challenges and some significant uncertainty. How will these two parties work together on Europe and in foreign policy more generally when their positions could not be more divergent?

On 10 May, before the results of coalition negotiations became known, MEP and former member of the Conservative Party Edward McMillan-Scott wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper that he felt the Liberal Democrats might be able to 'constrain' the Eurosceptics in the Conservative Party. McMillan-Scott was expelled from the Conservative Party after standing for re-election as Vice President of the European Parliament against the official candidate of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group to which the Tories belong, and went on to join the Liberal Democrats in March 2010. From this unique position, he expressed hope that 'the centre can hold' in a Lib-Con coalition, due to the moderating influence of the pro-EU Liberal De-

mocrats¹. Indeed, leaders and newspapers across Europe moved quickly to note that the Conservatives might not prove as hard-line Eurosceptic as pre-election fears would suggest. One of the first calls to congratulate Prime Minister Cameron, for example, came from Germany's Angela Merkel. Meanwhile, *Le Figaro* reported the day after the election that Cameron's ascent to power 'does not frighten Paris', adding that 'the Elysée is betting on the pragmatism of the future Prime Minister not to mess up the European edifice'².

However, initial details of the agreement between the two parties may disappoint those EU-watchers who, like McMillan-Scott, had hoped that the influence of the Lib Dems would blunt the edges of Tory Euroscepticism. The Liberal Democrats appear to have secured many of their top priorities in domestic policy, including the promise of a referendum on electoral reform, a pledge to ease the tax burden on the poorest Britons, and increased funding for schools that enrol poorer children. Vince Cable, a Liberal Democrat who strongly advocates breaking up the biggest banks, has been given the role of Business Secretary. On the other hand, many of the policy issues classified as 'wins' for the Tories lie in the foreign policy arena³.

Perhaps the strongest signal of the new government's direction with respect to Europe lies in the selection of William Hague as Foreign Minister and Dr Liam Fox as Minister for Defence. Both men represent the right wing of their party, and stand among the most stalwart leaders of the Tories' Eurosceptic faction. Hague entered Parliament for the first time in 1989, one of the generation of Conservatives alarmed by the pace of European integration in the 1980s and galvanised by Margaret Thatcher's turn to the stridently Eurosceptic position outlined in her 1988 Bruges speech⁴. Hague was a leader of the campaign against Economic and Monetary Union in the 1990s, assuming the party leadership in 1997. He made opposition to the Euro a major platform of his campaign against New Labour in the 2001 general election (one of his campaign slogans declared that voters had '24 hours to save the pound')⁵. In the Commons, Hague made his distaste for the EU well known, declaring in 2000, for example, that Tony Blair was 'building a European superstate in everything but name, and unless he is stopped he will leave us with a United Kingdom only in name'⁶. Hague resigned after losing the 2001 election, but four years later was invited back into the party élite as Shadow Foreign Secretary, under David Cameron's leadership.

Since then, most analysts agree that Hague has served as Cameron's deputy 'in all but name', illustrating his enduring influence and popularity within the party⁷.

Hague's Euroscepticism has not waned in the last decade; indeed, he often reiterated it in his capacity as Shadow Foreign Secretary. In 2006, for example, he declared in a speech that 'The British people believe that political integration has gone far enough, and so do we,' adding that 'Europe is at its worst when political elites try to force their peoples to embrace bureaucratic empires'⁸. He repeated this notion of Europe as a threatening, encroaching bureaucracy in 2008, campaigning against the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. He stated: 'It is all too likely that if this Treaty comes into force we would see European institutions pouring their energy not into the hard grind of making our economies more competitive but in exploring how far and to what ends their new competences in these areas might reach'⁹. Finally, during the coalition negotiations on 10 May, British newspaper *The Observer* published a classified memo, composed by Hague along with a number of civil servants, setting out a 'hard-line Eurosceptic' agenda for a potential Conservative government¹⁰. The note promised that the Tories would 'seek engagement not confrontation', but added that they would 'fight [their] corner to protect [their] national interests.' The memo also stated that 'Britain's interests are best served by membership of an EU that is an association of sovereign Member States, not a federal Europe.' Crucially, the memo restated the Tories' ambition of 'returning powers from the European level to the UK in three key areas—the Charter of Fundamental Rights, criminal justice, and social and employment legislation'¹¹.

If Hague's appointment as Foreign Secretary sends a profoundly Eurosceptic signal, this message is further enforced by the instalment of Dr Liam Fox as Minister for Defence. Since he became Shadow Defence Minister in 2005, after losing the election for Tory party leader to David Cameron, Fox has established his position as a staunch Atlanticist who sees any developments in the CFSP or CSDP as potential threats to NATO or Britain's 'special relationship' with the United States. Indeed, some his rhetoric has been even more strongly anti-European than Hague's. In 2006, Fox stated: 'Britain can never allow its troops to be sent into action by any supra-national

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body, still less one with no democratic accountability. There is not, and cannot be, a role for the European Union in this sphere'¹². In the same speech Fox characterised the development of the CSDP as a kind of dastardly plot on the part of the EU, cautioning: 'The Europeanisation of defence by the EU is a dangerous prospect, advancing gradually, and we must be ever watchful. We have been warned'¹³. He repeated this theme while campaigning against the Lisbon Treaty, arguing that 'the EU Constitution is reshaping our Defence Alliances by stealth away from NATO and towards the EU'¹⁴. Fox has also publicly declared that Britain 'cannot accept defence policy run by the EU' and condemned 'the fantasy of all those who want to see NATO replaced by an EU defence identity'¹⁵.

With most Liberal Democrats taking up domestically-focused positions in the Cabinet, it remains unclear how they might influence the direction of the new government's foreign and Europe policies. It is possible that Nick Clegg, in his new capacity as Deputy Prime Minister, might be able to put pressure on Foreign Minister Hague to ease his stance against European integration. The document published on 12 May by the coalition government employs cautiously optimistic rhetoric, proclaiming that the two parties 'agree that the British Government will be a positive participant in the European Union, playing a strong and positive role with our partners'¹⁶. It refers specifically to competitiveness, climate change and global poverty, demonstrating the influence of the Liberal Democrats who emphasised Europe's potential in these areas throughout their campaign. The language on Justice and Home Affairs is also notably positive compared to previous Tory statements, promising to approach EU legislation in the area on a 'case-by-case basis'—a message further reinforced by the instalment of rare pro-EU Conservative Ken Clarke as Justice Secretary. Clearly, the document represents a shift away from the harder line of the leaked Hague memo. On the other hand, many of the specific provisions reflect a strong Conservative bent. The two parties agree, for example, 'that there should be no further transfer of sovereignty or powers over the course of the next Parliament', pledge to subject any such transfers to a referendum (though this is consistent with previous Liberal Democrat positions, since the party believes that a referendum would be a good opportunity to sell Europe to the people),

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and promise to ‘examine the case for a United Kingdom Sovereignty Bill’¹⁷. The parties also declare that Britain will not join the Euro¹⁸.

With no prospect of treaty reform on the horizon, it remains uncertain how these principles might be enacted in practice, or whether the coalition’s precarious consensus on Europe will face a major test. Both parties are in favour of enlargement, which is likely to be the next major issue that the EU as a whole must face (since Britain is not a member of the single currency, it has been able to stand relatively aloof from the struggles gripping Greece and the rest of the Eurozone). Yet Europe certainly represents the most massive and seemingly unbridgeable ideological division between the coalition partners. Despite the relative lack of controversial issues on the EU’s immediate agenda, it is thus rather easy to imagine a scenario in which divisions over Europe could threaten the stability of this coalition.

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² A. BARLUET, *Paris prêt à s’accomoder d’un eurosceptique a Londres*, “Le Figaro”, 7 May 2010.

³ P. CURTIS, *Details of the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition deal*, “The Guardian”, 12 May 2010.

⁴ A. FORSTER, *Euroscepticism in British Politics*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 133.

⁵ S. COATES, S. JAGGER, *Clegg may get key portfolio to go with role as deputy*, “The Times”, 12 May 2010.

⁶ W. HAGUE, House of Commons, Hansard vol. 357, c304, 22 November 2000.

⁷ A. STRATTON, *William Hague returns to cabinet as foreign secretary*, “The Guardian”, 12 May 2010.

⁸ W. HAGUE, Speech to the Conservative Party conference, 3 October 2006.

⁹ W. HAGUE, Speech: *The European project and democratic consent: disconnection or disengagement?*, Policy Exchange, 7 February 2008.

¹⁰ T. HELM, A. ASTHANA, *Tory-Lib Dem coalition threatened by secret hardline memo on Europe*, “The Observer”, 9 May 2010.

¹¹ Memo: *How to promote our national interest in an open and democratic Europe*, published in “The Observer”, 9 May 2010.

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- ¹² L. FOX, Speech: *The Europeanization of Defence*, Centre for Policy Studies, 19 June 2006.
- ¹³ Ibidem.
- ¹⁴ L. FOX, Speech: *Britain, Europe and NATO—Heading in the wrong direction*, Transforming Network Centric Warfare Forum, 30 January 2008.
- ¹⁵ L. FOX, Speech to the Conservative Way Forward dinner, 26 November 2007.
- ¹⁶ CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL DEMOCRAT PARTIES, *Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition negotiations: Agreements reached*, published at www.conservatives.com, 12 May 2010, p. 5.
- ¹⁷ Ibidem.
- ¹⁸ Ibidem.