



# Analizy natolińskie

2(44)2010

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## The UK election

### *What outcomes for Europe?*

In a British election notable for the lack of differentiation between major parties on many policy issues, the question of Britain's relationship with Europe remains especially, and unusually, divisive. However, predicting the consequences of this election for the EU can prove remarkably difficult, particularly in an area where the gap between manifesto pledges and policy reality may be especially wide.

The prospect of a Conservative government in Britain has caused considerable alarm and 'ill-feeling' among the leaders of other EU member states<sup>1</sup>. Since losing power in 1997, the Tories have become one of the most stridently Eurosceptic mainstream parties in Europe, embracing a narrative that characterises the EU as a power-hungry bureaucracy with designs to erode Britain's sovereignty. Although party leader David Cameron has demurred somewhat on the subject, the party's election manifesto demonstrates clearly the resonance of this discourse with the Tory mainstream. Although the document argues that 'Britain's interests are best served by membership of a European Union that is an association of its Member States', the manifesto goes on to declare that 'the steady and unaccountable intrusion of the European Union into almost every aspect of our lives has gone too far'<sup>2</sup>. The Conservatives then denounce the Labour government's decision to ratify the Lisbon Treaty via Parliament rather than referendum as 'a betrayal'. The document pledges to return unspecified powers and

competences to the UK, and to introduce a United Kingdom Sovereignty Bill ‘to make it clear that ultimate authority stays in this country’ (although it remains unclear what such a bill might entail, or how it might find expression in law)<sup>3</sup>. More concretely, the Tories also promise to subject any transfer of competences from the UK to EU, via the mechanism of the so-called ‘passarelle clause’, to a referendum<sup>4</sup>.

The depth of Euroscepticism displayed in the language and promises of this manifesto is clear. This message has been further enhanced by the Tories’ oft-criticised 2009 decision to abandon the centre-right European People’s Party grouping in the European Parliament, to form instead the ‘European Conservatives and Reformists Group’ with Poland’s Law and Justice and the Czech Republic’s Civic Democratic Party. As the Financial Times reported in March, for centre-right politicians like French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Germany’s Angela Merkel, Cameron’s decision to leave the EPP could be seen as an almost personal snub<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, it is unclear how and to what degree this anti-EU narrative will become reflected in the policy of a Tory government. On close examination, the promises contained in the party’s manifesto are strikingly vague; it remains unspecified how the Tories might negotiate for the ‘return’ of powers, or what that might mean in practice. The manifesto makes almost no reference to specific policies, so the party’s positions on many key issues remain unknown. Given that the EU is unlikely to engage in another round of treaty reform in the near future, the Tories would have little reason to face the kind of all-encompassing, existential debates on Britain’s role in Europe that might force them to follow through on the promise to hold referendums. Indeed, the biggest challenges for Europe in the next few years will probably centre around enlargement—particularly the possible accession of Iceland, Croatia and then the rest of the Western Balkans. Like the other British parties, Conservatives have thus far been supportive of enlargement, pledging in their manifesto to ‘keep the EU’s doors open’ to all applicant countries, including Turkey<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, one could argue that the harshness of Conservative Euroscepticism reflects somewhat the fact that the party has been in opposition for more than a decade. They have thus been able to develop their positions without the mediating and socialising influence of participation in EU-level policymaking. In this context, it is possible—indeed arguably likely—that the everyday reality of foreign policymaking and

participation in EU institutions might mitigate the party's Euroscepticism, in practice if not in rhetoric.

The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) provides a particularly illuminating case study of this phenomenon. The CSDP receives no direct mention in the 2010 manifesto, aside from a vague promise, buried in a section otherwise dedicated to supporting the armed forces, to 'release spending on unnecessary and bureaucratic EU defence initiatives'.<sup>7</sup> The policy, originally called the ESDP, came into being in 1998, a year after the collapse of the last Conservative government. In this context, the Tories have consistently opposed the development of the CSDP at every possible turn, labelling it a 'European army in everything but name',<sup>8</sup> and 'a dagger pointed at the heart of NATO'.<sup>9</sup> Although this hyperbolic rhetoric has become more muted in recent years, the Conservatives have never laid out their vision for the CSDP, nor have they had the opportunity to engage with the policy from a position of power or authority. As a result, it remains extremely difficult to discern how a Conservative government might approach the CSDP in practice, since to date they have focused entirely on demonising it—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the party's Euroscepticism, as well as the adversarial nature of Westminster politics. This problem extends to a wide range of policy areas, confounding any attempt to predict the EU policies of a potential Tory government.

Conversely, if Labour overcome their current poor polling position to obtain a fourth term in power, the party is likely to continue with the same approach to Europe it has employed to date. Although Gordon Brown is widely perceived as less favourable toward Europe than his predecessor, Foreign Minister David Miliband is among the most pro-EU politicians in the Labour party, and Labour's approach toward Europe is likely to remain consistent. Labour are thus hardly expected to undergo a conversion to federalism, but the party's manifesto argues that 'sullen resistance and disengagement achieve nothing' with respect to the EU<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, it goes on to take direct aim at the Conservatives, criticising the 'poverty of the Tory vision' and the party's

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marginalisation in Europe as a whole. The manifesto also contends that the Conservatives' Euroscepticism is seen to undermine British influence in the world<sup>11</sup>.

Like the Tories, Labour can be expected to support further enlargement of the EU, arguing in the manifesto that all Western Balkan countries should have opened negotiations by 2014<sup>12</sup>. Labour's manifesto pledges are somewhat more specific than those of the Tories, and consistent with the party's past positions. They pledge to promote economic competitiveness and cooperation on defence and security (though with reference, as always, to the supremacy of NATO in providing Europe's security guarantee). Labour also proposes the development of a European Peace Corps in pursuit of the goal of global peace and justice. Similarly, the manifesto makes reference to the EU's 'critical leadership role' in securing UN agreement on climate change, as well as in global poverty reduction<sup>13</sup>. Unsurprisingly, Labour also pledge to lobby for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy—as they have done throughout their time in power—and promise that Britain will not enter into the Euro without the consent of the people via referendum<sup>14</sup>.

However, this election is promising to break the mould of the two-horse race to which Britons have become accustomed in recent years. The Liberal Democrats, Britain's third party, are proving more popular than ever before, not least due to the impressive performance of party leader, former MEP and College of Europe graduate Nick Clegg in the first of three televised debates. Although highly unlikely to win an outright majority of seats in Westminster, in the event of a hung Parliament—meaning that neither Labour nor the Conservatives win a straight majority of seats—the Lib Dems will hold the balance of power.

This could prove particularly interesting with respect to EU policy, since the Liberal Democrats are considered to be the most overtly pro-European of Britain's three parties. Certainly their manifesto mentions the EU's role in British foreign policy more often than the other two parties' documents do, particularly with respect to climate change and security and defence policy (the Lib Dems pledge to 'reinvigorate Franco-British and wider European defence co-operation')<sup>15</sup>. The manifesto also calls for a more robust Common Foreign and Security Policy, arguing that 'Britain can have a far stronger voice on relations with Russia, China, Iran and the Middle East peace process when it joins with the rest of Europe'<sup>16</sup>.

In the section that deals specifically with Europe, the manifesto commits the Lib Dems to action in several specific policy areas. Like Labour, the Liberal Democrats promise to fight for CAP reform, and to work with the EU to ensure better regulation of the financial services and banking sector<sup>17</sup>. The manifesto is cautious on the subject of the Euro, marking a departure from the party's previous support for British entry into the common currency. The 2010 manifesto notes that 'it is in Britain's long-term interest to be part of the Euro', but adds that current economic conditions are not 'right' for entry<sup>18</sup>. The document also continues to support the idea of a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU—a suggestion first put forth by the Lib Dems during the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. Notably, however, the language of the document is as vague as the language employed by the Conservatives regarding referendums; the manifesto proposes such a referendum only 'the next time a British government signs up for fundamental change in the relationship between the UK and the EU', an event unlikely to occur in the next few years<sup>19</sup>.

In the event of a hung Parliament, the Liberal Democrats might have the opportunity to enter into a coalition government and see their Europe policies enacted. However, it remains unclear which party might be willing to court the Lib Dems to create a coalition. If a Liberal-Labour coalition comes into being, which is possible given both parties' dedication to domestic electoral reform, the pro-EU stance of the Liberal Democrats could conceivably pull Labour into a more cooperative position *vis-à-vis* Europe than Labour have demonstrated to date. A Liberal-Tory coalition, meanwhile, would have to contend with a virtually unbridgeable gap over the question of the UK-EU relationship; it is doubtless impossible to predict how such a coalition might approach EU policymaking. Indeed, the Conservatives have already begun to attack the Lib Dems for their pro-EU position, with shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague declaring in the *Sunday Times* that Nick Clegg would 'sign up for anything that has ever been on offer or proposed from the European Union'<sup>20</sup>.

Ultimately, Britain's election will not be fought, won or lost on European issues. Most analysts agree that the economy remains the paramount concern in the minds of most British voters, along with the fallout from recent expenses scandals, with foreign policy in general playing only a small role<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, a quick glance at the manifestos themselves reveals that in almost all cases, foreign and EU policies are relegated to the last few pages. However, one of the three live televised debates between the party

leaders, on Thursday 22 April, will deal with foreign policy exclusively. This debate is likely to highlight the vast gulf between the parties on the EU, and might even shed some light on how the next British government will engage—or not—with its European partners.

(April 2010)

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<sup>1</sup> B. HALL, Q. PEEL, *Sarkozy Hedges Bets on UK Election Outcome*, “Financial Times”, 11 March 2010; see also P. WINTOUR, A. STANTON, *Sarkozy to warn Cameron over defence co-operation in Europe*, “The Guardian”, 10 March 2010.

<sup>2</sup> CONSERVATIVE PARTY, *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain: Manifesto 2010*, Conservative Party, 2010, pp. 113, 114, URL: [http://media.conservatives.s3.amazonaws.com/manifesto/cpmanifesto2010\\_lowres.pdf](http://media.conservatives.s3.amazonaws.com/manifesto/cpmanifesto2010_lowres.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> B. HALL, Q. PEEL, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> CONSERVATIVE PARTY, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup> I.D. SMITH MP, Defence Minister’s Questions, House of Commons, Hansard vol. 341 c. 5, December 1999, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> B. JENKIN MP, Speech: *Defence Commitments should be Matched by Capabilities*, Conservative Spring Forum, Nottingham, 23 March 2002. For further references to the ‘Euro army’, and more general examples of Tory rhetoric on the CSDP during the policy’s early years, see W. HAGUE, Speech: *Blair’s Lack of Leadership on the Atlantic Alliance*, 20 February 2001; I.D. Smith, Speech: *Britain’s Place in a Changing World*, Chatham House, London, 31 January 2002; B. JENKIN, Speech: *A Fair Deal for the Armed Forces*, Conservative Party conference, Blackpool, 8 October 2003; and M. ANCRAM, Speech: *A New Century—the Conservative Alternative*, Politeia, London, 5 July 2005.

<sup>10</sup> LABOUR PARTY, *A Future Fair For All: Manifesto*, Labour Party, 2010, p. 70, URL: <http://www2.labour.org.uk/uploads/TheLabourPartyManifesto-2010.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> LIBERAL DEMOCRATS, *Manifesto 2010*, Liberal Democrats, p. 66, URL: [http://network.libdems.org.uk/manifesto2010/libdem\\_manifesto\\_2010.pdf](http://network.libdems.org.uk/manifesto2010/libdem_manifesto_2010.pdf).

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> J. OLIVER, D SMITH, *Nick Clegg nearly as popular as Winston Churchill*, "Sunday Times", 18 April 2010.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, B. WRIGHT, *Political parties prepare for 6 May election*, video, BBC News Online, 6 April 2010, URL: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/election\\_2010/8604390.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/election_2010/8604390.stm).