

The Corpse Bride

Addressing the EPP Misalliance



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The
Bruges
Group 

For a Europe of links not chains and new thinking in international affairs

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“Paradoxically, one could fight the case that the ideological difference between the Christian democrats and the European Socialists is less noticeable than between the EPP and British Conservatives.”

Wojciech Gagattek, University of Warsaw¹

¹ *The British Conservative Party and the Group of the European People’s Party-European Democrats in the European Parliament – an Analysis of the History and Present Shape of Difficult Relationships*, Published in *Międzynarodowy Przegląd Polityczny* and accessible on the internet.

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Introduction

Voltaire once wrote of the Holy Roman Empire that it was a triple misnomer, “Neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire”. Much the same could be said of the European Peoples’ Party. It is not European, in the sense that its Christian Democrat tenets do not belong to the Conservative parties of Europe; it is not Popular, in the sense that it is a top-down construct that rejects the will of the people as expressed in referenda; and, although it strives to become one, it is not (yet) a single political party.

The Conservative Party’s alliance with them is one of the great Faustian Pacts of modern European diplomacy, one in which both sides acknowledge that the union is a mismatch, a marriage seemingly conjured out of some chardonnay-soaked night on the Las Vegas tiles. These partners now prefer to live and sleep apart, only sticking together out of habit and because of a laziness over the paperwork any divorce would create.

But there is also an element of outward deceit that accompanies this relationship. There are some who quietly support it for ideological reasons. Their number is small, though they are well-represented within the ranks of the older generation of Conservative MEPs. These coelacanths of Brussels have been bypassed by the post-Major revolution, where, after the long period of knife fighting over the Maastricht Treaty and beyond, realisation finally dawned that the Brussels project went far beyond the construct of a single treaty, a realisation which brought an element of grassroots Euroscepticism finally and openly onto Party frontbench politics. This steady trickle has yet to seriously impact upon a large section of the MEPs, however, who hearken back more to the integrationist era of Heseltine, Clark and even Heath.

The EPP today remains an icon of the backwardness of such thinking, a symbol of where the future of the Conservative Party lies in Europe. Does it rest shackled to an openly federalist, corporatist, and occasionally hostile partner? Or does it seek to make use of the round-table politics of the continent, and form a smaller but more coherent group, able to stand up for its beliefs, express them clearly and sincerely, and link up with the Christian Democrat Centre Right on issues of common concern? The answer should be a no-brainer, and yet here we are today.

The Missed Opportunity

Some supporters of the EPP link have suggested to newspapers that the deal must be good, because otherwise some previous party leader would have made the split already. As this didn’t happen, they claim, Eurosceptics are simply making an empty hullabulloo.

In fact, this suggestion is complete tripe. The Conservative Party was actually within an ace of leaving the European Peoples Party and setting up store with credible like-minded friends.

There has been significant debate about whether plans existed to make such a move under Iain Duncan-Smith. In fact, several reliable sources confirm that a move was on the cards and time scheduled.

The IDS team recognised the failings in the EPP arrangement and sought a number of set improvements to the structure that would provide real self-determination: full local financial control; independent resources; a markedly separate structural and ideological independence; mechanical autonomy in such matters as a web site and such like.

Naturally, this was initially approached through negotiations. It may have been unlikely, but the EPP hierarchy could have appreciated the link with Conservative groups enough so as to provide this measure of friendly accommodation and real autonomy. But if they didn't and a split was unavoidable, how much better to make the break without rancour by displaying good faith and reasonableness throughout, so that afterwards the two elements could still cooperate at least in fighting European socialism. A slow and steady approach demonstrated a degree of reasonableness to certain nervous Shadow Cabinet figures as well.

As these European talks met with little success, Mr Duncan-Smith subsequently despatched a letter indicating that these were categorical prerequisites without which continuing membership of the EPP alliance was impossible. This was, in effect, the trigger.

The alternatives were already under consideration. Detailed advice was sought from the Shadow Attorney-General, Bill Cash, on possible mechanisms and options. Consequently, Owen Paterson (then the acronymically-challenged PPS to IDS) was sent to a number of potential political allies to sound them out. In Lisbon, he met up with the leader of the Portuguese Partido Popular, Paolo Portas, then in coalition as the country's Defence Minister. In Prague he encountered the ODS, the party of President Vaclav Klaus. In Poland he met with Law and Justice leaders who would later supply the country's Prime Minister and President. From that meeting, and a follow on back in London, emerged the opportunity of linking into the democratic Baltic parties.

All were united around the prospect of founding a grouping, ideologically independent of the EPP, with absolute autonomy on choosing who else could join their number, selecting its own staff, and in total control of what was estimated to be a budget on the table of some £5,000,000 - a sum that had the group's name on it and was just waiting to be claimed. The group would join up with the EPP on an issue by issue basis, as allies, when opinions converged.

A key observation presents itself at this point. Contrary to spin by certain pro-Europeans and naïve journalists, the parties with whom the Conservative leadership were seeking to ally themselves with were completely respectable, democratic, and uncontentious. Racists and bigots were excluded; any hint of impropriety excluded a group. On this issue, we can quote the emissary himself. Owen Paterson is extremely clear on this point: "We were dealing with highly respectable, effective political parties that actually win elections, or whose members sat in coalition government as senior ministers. But we were also united by a totally different view of Europe. We are all pro-NATO; we are all defenders of national sovereignty; and we are in favour of the free market. But they were then, as today, all looking at the Conservatives to take the lead. They were longing to march with us in a separate, independent group, and were ready to bring in their Baltic friends as well. The threshold to creating an official group was there, and not just any but the third biggest in the European Parliament. It is seen as a tragedy, perhaps even a betrayal, that we never dared move that first step."²

In July 2003, Duncan-Smith travelled to Prague to make a keynote speech setting out a new stall, in the company of key Conservative leaders from the Czech Republic and Poland. In fact, this was set to have evolved into the founding statement of the new group. It rejected the EU Constitution and its contents; it criticized the Eurozone; it addressed Europe's place in tackling rogue nations; it refused to accept a federalised Europe; it called for a greater role for national parliaments, a taming of the European Commission, the rule of the veto, an end to protectionism and to corruption. In short, it set out a vision of "an alliance of sovereign democracies" - a stall that differentiated itself so vastly from the EPP dogma as to be nailing a thesis to the Wittenburg Cathedral doors.

The next step was plain. After the European Parliament elections, due at that stage within twelve months, the political groups automatically go through a period of reconstituting, and the finances behind the groups are

² In interview

reapportioned. That was a logical, natural, albeit generous, break period to make the move. So the date on the cards was set for June 2004. With a new European Parliamentary session starting, a new group could be organised without excessive acrimony.

What this plan failed to take into account, of course, was the Palace Revolution that followed the next Party Conference later that year. IDS was ousted and Michael Howard took over. Seemingly anxious to keep a lid on the antics of the MP leadership factions, which by that stage were approximating a scene from *Gremlins*, and also to guarantee the silence of the likes of Ken Clark, the lid came crashing down on any development of the Europe issue. So the EP elections came and went, and (much to the immense dissatisfaction of certain of our continental friends) no break was made with the EPP. Indeed, the only marginal improvement in the situation was based on the IDS letter of the previous year, and then only with the heroic brinkmanship of five Conservative MEPs who held out against ridiculous pressure to win some improvement in the general lot - contrary to the pro-EPP kowtowing of a number of their colleagues.

Those promises, gained with the expenditure of so many diplomatic niceties and so much general goodwill towards the EPP, have since been thrown in the face of the Conservative Party. The EPP doesn't want Conservatives and their allies to have any measure of financial or ideological independence, and (as we shall see) has demonstrably failed to live up even to such parts of the bargain as it currently has signed up to. The time for Mr Nice Guy is over. The moment to leave has come.

A Difference of Beliefs

Apologists for the EPP like to underline a notional ideological fraternity between Conservatives and Christian Democrat members of the EPP. In fact, there are key and demonstrable differences in ideology and perspective.

The EPP secretariat parade themselves quite openly in their European credentials. "It is," they say, "the direct heir of the tradition established in the 1950's by Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide de Gasperi."³ They endorse Fundamental Rights, a political schematic as alien to Conservatism as the Napoleonic Code is to British Common Law. It is perhaps as illuminating to note that the group even describes itself, not as the Centre Right (let alone the Right), but as "the political centre in Europe".

A simple review of randomly-selected press releases and statements by various key members of the group, speaking on behalf of the EPP around just the single issue of the EU Constitution, confirms this divergence.

- (On why the EU Constitution was rejected) "I also think that the ground hadn't been prepared well enough, that the Constitution had to confront opponents who were doped up on lies." Francoise Grossetete, Vice-President of the EPP-ED, 8 July 2005
- "The 'No' of two EU countries was evidently very disappointing, but they could not be allowed to speak for all the other 23 members of the Union. So the ratification process must go on." Hans-Gert Poettering, Chairman of the EPP-ED, 1 June 2005
- "We should not forget that the Constitution was based on a very large consensus among all Member States. We will not get a better Constitution if we start the process again. Therefore, the Constitution, or at least the most important parts of it have to come into force if we want Europe to be more capable to act and more transparent." Wilfried Martens, EPP President, 30 May 2005

3 Political Position, EPP website

- “We want the economic and monetary union turning into a genuine social market economy.” Elmar Brok, Chairman of the EPP Convention Group, 27 May 2005
- “This is an important and historic moment in the unification of Europe.” Hans-Gert Poettering, Chairman of the EPP-ED Group, on the vote in the European Parliament approving the EU Constitution, 12 January 2005. The EPP voted with the Socialists in favour; the Conservatives against (with James Elles and Edward McMillan-Scott absent).
- (Also on the vote) “In adopting the project of the European Constitution with 500 votes, with 147 against, in other words with over 78% of the votes cast, the European Parliament has expressed the massive consensus which exists on this text on the whole of the European chess board, with the sole exception of the extremists and the British Conservatives.” Alain Lamassoure, EPP delegate on the Convention on the Future of Europe, 12 January 2005.
- (On why he was very happy with the vote) “Mr Cesa underlined the determining role played by the EPP group during the voting and has expressed full satisfaction with the great and positive result with a striking majority,” Lorenzo Cesa, Vice-President of the EPP-ED, 12 January 2005
- (On why the EU Constitution is a good thing) “New norms will be introduced on fulfilling a high level of employment, fighting social exclusion and discrimination, promoting social justice, social protection, gender equality, an increased level of education and health”. Jose Albino Silva Peneda MEP, 12 January 2005.
- “In our foreign policy we must no longer speak with two or three separate voices, we must act together. This is why it is not the right approach for a Member State of the European Union to apply to be a member of the United Nations’ Security Council separately.” Hans-Gert Poettering, Chairman of the EPP-ED Group, 11 January 2005.
- “The greatest danger for Europe would be to fall back into intergovernmental methods.” Françoise Grossetete, Vice-President of the EPP-ED, 11 January 2005
- “Unfortunately, no progress has been made concerning other items:
 - no extension of QMV in the CFSP sector
 - no QMV regarding harmonisation of indirect taxes
 - no general QMV regarding trade agreements”

Internal EPP briefing, Elmar Brok, Chairman of the EPP Convention Group, 10 July 2003

Perhaps in reviewing these articles we hit upon a reason behind the ignorance in much of Britain over how massive these differences are. Unless you are a Portuguese, French or Italian speaker, these examples would have passed you by, because for some reason those statements have before now not been translated into English.

Fixing the Pieces

There is a misconception currently being touted that responsibility for aligning the European wing of the Conservative Party is the preserve of the leader of the MEPs. In fact, this is inaccurate. Under article III.11 of the Party Constitution, “The [national] Leader shall determine the political direction of the Party having regard to the views of Party Members and the Conservative Policy Forum.” The MEP leader (who is in any event more of a first amongst equals) thus simply provides one voice amongst many, and he can be overridden. So much for the MEP veto on leaving the EPP. What practical benefits would it bring?

Much of the research behind this is contained in two classic works. The first is a Bruges Group paper looking forward to the 1999 Euro elections (www.brugesgroup.com/mediacentre/index.live?article=94); the second, a Centre for Policy Studies analysis (www.cps.org.uk/pdf/pub/40.pdf) that emerged two years later and delved into the hidden mechanics of how the Group system would operate.

Little of the mechanics has actually changed since then. The Conservatives found themselves operating outside of the EPP orbit for the first twelve years of an elected European Parliament, and independently before then; just so today they would be able to make use of the administrative benefits of group independence.

For starters, the group would be under less moral pressure in developing its whip. While technically independent, on far too many occasions particular voting lines have been seen to be wobbly due to excessive proximity to the EPP stance – until such times as particular planned whipping lines were brought to the attention of a more Westminster-based audience and potentially embarrassing votes headed off. It is amazing what an advance headline in the paper on the dangers of a piece of legislation will do to a planned vote...

The reason why supposedly intelligent MEPs were not able to distinguish between an integrationist position and one in line with established Party policy can be ascribed to many causes, of which one may charitably be put down as an overdependence on EPP staff. Setting up a fully separate group would free Conservatives from federalist staff members who do not share Conservative policy on defending national sovereignty. It is no mere coincidence that in the 2004 Euro-elections, UKIP leached significant support from a visibly ambiguous and hesitant Conservative party, and actually came third in the polls.

On the mechanical front, the present designated “ED” website amounts to a few stale paragraphs as part of a joke portion of the EPP site. A separate identity allows for a greater pride and a greater interest in promoting one’s identity than currently, where MEPs have for instance been showered (appropriately) with EPP umbrellas and t-shirts carrying the twelve-star logo, for distribution to their grateful constituents.

On top of that, were the Conservatives to set up the nucleus of another group, they would gain certain institutional benefits. They would be entitled on the numbers-share game to two Committee chairmanships, and a seat at the Conference of Presidents (the table that determines the inner game plan for the European Parliament). As a separate group, their leader gains more institutional significance than simply acting as an associate of another leader, so his speaking priority in meetings is advanced. In the lazy world of Brussels politics, this means that he (or his delegate) gets to speak on a subject at the top bracket of the allotted speaking time rather than at some later point on the whim of the EPP. In other words, he gets to make a statement before the Brussels press corps has filed their story and gone home.

The ED’s supposed financial independence is today a complete sham. The lunacy of some of the inmates can best be illustrated with the recent move by some Conservative MEPs to apply for money available from the EU budget to cover transnational parties, funds that the ED element could today legitimately claim while remaining part of the EPP alliance. No small beans either: the amount is reported to be in the region of €150,000 plus an extra €12,000 per MEP. It seems the EPP were horrified at the prospect of any independence of action emerging for the Conservative “allies”, because key figures in their hierarchy are reported to have spoken to pro-EPP figures like Sir Robert Atkins to express their concerns. Consequently, these moves were stymied by certain Conservative MEPs *precisely because* they thought it gave they themselves a dangerous element of independence! Such is the degree of base vassalage in which a number of Conservative MEPs now find themselves in thrall as mere satraps to the EPP.

If nothing else, this proves the promise won from the EPP of developing a “meaningful autonomous ED component” has been shattered, and can only be achieved by breaking with the EPP. The structures exist to create this. The

Conservative Party is large enough to qualify for Group status almost in its own right; it simply needs to identify a handful of sister parties to qualify for the full MEP Group allowance. More on this anon.

The EPP is also highly complicit in the institutional cover up that encapsulates the Brussels institutions. This is best expressed in two cases.

The first is that of the generic whistleblower. Repeatedly throughout the last few years, a number of brave people have emerged from the system, their voices of concern suppressed, now looking as a last resort to render public some tale of disgraceful wrongdoing that their superiors seek to bury. Their natural choice is not, as it happens, the media or their MP, but the MEP: an individual with at least a notional oversight over the community in which he operates. But the sorry lesson of past years is that far too often, pro-integrationist MEPs (in which bracket the EPP delegate all too often falls) is concerned not with correcting the faults, but suppressing the message by burying the messenger. Thus the EPP has become part of the problem, while it is left to brave MEPs like Chris Heaton-Harris to tell it as it is. And they wonder why there is a crisis of confidence in the EU ...

The second instance that shows the EPP as part of the problem rather than the solution relates to one of the Conservatives' own MEPs. Roger Helmer was thrown out of the Conservative grouping, not by the leader of the Conservatives, but rather by the leader of the EPP. Expelled from the Group, technically he could no longer be counted a part of the Conservative numbers and so was expelled by default. His crime was, prosaically, attacking the Commission President for undeclared business interests. The problem was, this was fratricide as far as the EPP was concerned, because Jose Barroso is one of their number. Departing from the EPP embrace would free the Conservatives to make just criticisms where just criticisms are deserved.

What does this mean? Let's summarize. **Breaking with the EPP would not only provide Conservatives with more resources, independent control of finances, a seat at the Conference of Presidents, a truly eurosceptical Brussels whip, an extra Committee chairmanship, higher speaking priority, an increased visibility with the media, and a freedom to take up the causes that define us. It would also give us a mechanism to become the standard bearer for the defence of the nation state across the continent of Europe; a status that it seems fate repeatedly reserves for us, if only we have the guts to stand up for our beliefs.**

Striking Out

Conservative links with the EPP group have proved to be one of UKIP's biggest recruiters. They point to the one, single issue where the leader of the Party has complete freedom to act, to demonstrate where he really stands, and identify what are his key beliefs. UKIP claims that the Conservatives have ducked an issue of principle on every occasion, and they are right.

The Conservatives through the EPP alliance are tied in with a group that supports the working time directive, and endorses the social chapter. They are shackled to a movement that not only supports but actually proposes the ambulance-chasing society of Fundamental Rights. Where better to witness this than in the Convention on the Future of Europe? There, the youth element of the Convention was stitched up by the EPP with their Socialist and Liberal counterparts for an integrationist agenda, while it was left to the Conservative delegates to not just participate in but *actually lead* the fight for the nation states. The youth EPP (YEPP) were as complicit as their elders. Meanwhile, in the Convention proper, David Heathcoat-Amory was so shocked by the level of pro-integrationism prevalent in the ranks of the EPP delegation that he himself formally left and set up an alternative group. Their work, the Minority Report, stands at utter variance from the draft Constitution penned by the EPP

doyen Elmar Brok, which was indeed described as “worse than Giscard’s.” Heathcoat-Amory’s conclusions from the whole protracted experience are succinct: “The fact that I left and joined the Democracy Forum is a pointer to what the EP group should do now.”⁴

More recently, the Blair visit to the European Parliament provided a bizarre microcosm of the crooked arrangement of today. Of the British Conservatives present, it fell to Roger Helmer to speak first, and for the full stretch allowed to leaders. As the concerned and therefore lead member of the ‘independents’, his speaking rights outweighed those even of the Conservative group’s leader. Pointedly, it seems that he also noticed key EPP figures such as Grossetete and Poettering vigorously applauding Blair and suggested that New Labour should join the EPP.

There are better alternative arrangements that could be made. The Poles are one of the great countries of Europe, and the Law and Justice party is key to its politics today. The Czech ODS is pre-eminent on their political scene. There are a number of other Eurosceptic political parties across Europe, that are untainted by history or policy. In the long term, given the obsessive EPP position on Turkish accession and Turkey in general, allies may also be found there. But for now, it would be enough to find decent friends; friends unlike those that have, for instance, tainted the ugly ranks of the socialist PES in the past.

But a clean break is needed. Our would-be allies have been messed around for years and clearly despair of Conservatives ever having their common sense revolution for the rue Belliard; they quite naturally are waiting to see action from Conservatives rather than the old empty talk. As one observer succinctly puts it, “They have been b*ggged around and have been bitterly disappointed as a result.” There is a need for plain action from the Conservative leadership; but once it is offered, that lead will be swiftly followed.

Conservative MP, Daniel Kawczynski, who understands the Polish political scene well, agrees: “Poland is a proud nation and will play a major role in the new European Union over the coming years. She will along with other Central and Eastern European States grow in confidence and influence. Poland is however waiting for her key ally Britain to take the leading role in pulling out of the EPP and forming a new non-federalist bloc. Britain is seen by countries like Poland as a major force for good in the EU. These countries want us to show the way forward. If we have the courage to do that they will follow and we will be able to build a coalition of like minded states which will for the first time in 50 years be able to take on the Franco-German federalist agenda.”⁵

The prize is massive. It is not simply about setting up an ideological standard. We are also talking about the control of finances estimated as worth at least 5 million pounds. The result would be a powerful weapon in defence of the nation state; a key think tank; a great prop to beleaguered MEPs fighting the system; a means for Conservatives and like-minded thinkers to form the 3rd biggest group in the European Parliament, with the increased status and profile that follows. It generates morale, and it is a tool for power.

To which a small sorry handful of so-called Conservative MEPs reply, “This is absolute madness; this is clouduckooland.” The delusion lies on their part. But they, as well as any association chairman, will recall that during the MEP selection meetings, candidates were asked, “Should the Party Leader choose to create a new group, would you leave the EPP?” We know this, because the Bruges Group was at the forefront in suggesting this needle as a decisive question. Reliable reports indicate that the majority of MEPs now selected openly went along with the supposition.

For them to refuse any move away from the Corpse Bride of the EPP, towards the altogether healthier prospects of a truly Conservative alliance, would surely be no less than the fraudulent abrogation of a touchstone pledge.

⁴ In conversation with the author

⁵ Conversation with the author