

Lord Plumb

„TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL
CO-OPERATION IS MADE
UNAVOIDABLE BY SIMPLE
ARITHMETIC“



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This working paper aims to deal with the overall theme of transnational European political groupings; and specifically the history and present position of the British Conservatives in that context.

General point: transnational political co-operation is made unavoidable by simple arithmetic. No Member State, no national party (and even no political group) can ever be in a simple majority, so national political parties have to find allies in order to achieve political aims. That means not only at the time of voting, but in the formation of policy and in the formulation, scrutiny and improvement of legislation. Thus broadly like-minded parties in the EP form themselves into groups, who meet together regularly, have a common staff and, wherever possible, vote together according to an agreed „whip“.

Specific British Conservative difficulties:

- 1) We have not the habit of coalitions in the United Kingdom (UK) – witness the edginess of the present government; most continentals are used to coalitions/cohabitation and do not set themselves as high standards of „agreement“. Policy differences are therefore more readily glossed over.
- 2) In 1979, the EP election results were freakish, in that just three weeks after the UK general election the demoralised Labour Party put up a spectacularly poor performance, allowing the Conservatives to win 64 seats. They were looked upon as unnaturally large by other parties of the Centre Right and even had the Conservatives had a strong desire to join up with the German CDU and their allies, the other nationalities would have been unenthusiastic about embracing such a large bloc of Brits. In any case such a „strong desire“ did not exist amongst the new British Conservative MEPs, who wanted to find their feet in the institution.

With two Danes and one Ulster Unionist, they formed what was essentially their own group, which although the third biggest, was still very small compared to the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, both of whom had experience of belonging to wider, international co-operation within their own „political families“ outside the EP (which, in large measure, the British Conservatives lacked).

Advantages: there were, of course, advantages to that situation, in that they were „masters in their own house“ and could take decisions about votes etc. without having to argue the case in detail with „outsiders“, although there was a significant degree of informal cooperation with the three other groups of the centre right – the CDs, Liberals and RDE (made up mostly of French Gaullists and the Irish Fianna Fail).

The disadvantages were that it was often hard to influence the positions of those three other groups from the outside. One huge logistical problem was that in the „group weeks“, in which the groups determined their positions and priorities for the plenary sessions of parliament the following week, the groups were rarely in the same city or even the same country. (In the early days, in the interests of spreading the activities around Europe, the groups could hold such meetings in any capital city and, twice a year, anywhere within the territories of the Member States. That practice has now been discontinued, for budgetary and also logistical reasons.)

Early on a vague feeling of loneliness set in on the part of some members, who looked around for possible closer allies.

Despite having much in common as regards trading issues, the Liberals were „out“ (the feeling was mutual) because they were opponents back home. The German practice of having coalitions between different parties at different levels (e.g. Christian democrats in coalition with one party at Land level and another at Federal level and all parties competing against one another at every election, was completely outside the habits of the British).

There was some sounding out with the Gaullists, whose basic policy of „Europe of the nations“ struck a positive chord with many British Conservatives, but they were also „out“, because of their alliance with Fianna Fail, which would have created many problems in the context of the Northern Ireland situation. In any case, the French would not have been keen to play second fiddle to the larger British contingent.

The Christian Democrats, within the Germans were the leading national „delegation“, had much in common with the British Conservatives – a core belief in free trade and the need to achieve a single market; atlanticism in foreign policy; an emphasis on human rights and individual freedoms and responsibilities; and a lack of any narrow ideology. There were minus points on the side of the CDs: Some Belgian and Dutch MEPs came from Christian trade unions, who were wary of Mrs Thatcher; and some Italians were wary of the secular nature of the Conservative Party. But the highest hurdle, by far, between the two groups, was federalism. On the part of the CDs, above all of the Germans, European federalism was at the heart of their ultimate national and European aspirations, while to the British it was seen as a long term danger to national sovereignty. The word „federal“ even had a different resonance with the two sides. So, „fusion“ with another group was not a possibility. For a while, the British Conservatives made what they could of the situation, and with some individual items of success. For example, in leading the „freedom of the skies“ campaign, which was to revolutionise air transport and its costs; promoting human rights world wide; support for „the West“ in the closing decade of the Cold War; reconsideration of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); and animal welfare issues.

In order to overcome the problems of co-operation between the groups, the four centre right spokesmen in the various parliamentary commit-

tees met routinely and the four group chairmen had a monthly working lunch before the start of each plenary.

There was an increasing feeling that this was not enough and although the European Democrat Group (EDG) managed to attract the Alianza Popular (later rebranded as „Partido Popular“) after Spain’s accession in the mid 1980s (who were loath at that moment to be bracketed with the CDs, as they were keen to shed the appearance of any confessional involvement) the feeling of isolation grew at that time. There was encouragement from the European People’s Party (EPP) to think again about joining them. A big consideration on their part was that the addition of the British Conservatives to the group would make the group the largest in the EP, thus overtaking the Socialists. This prime position is important in very many respects, e.g. as regards having first choice of positions under the D’Hondt system,⁴⁴⁶ financial allocations, economies of scale as regards to staff deployment etc. Co-operation between the two groups had been fruitful and the two sides had grown to know each other well. But federalism was a massive stumbling block on both sides, for opposite reasons. There was embarrassment on the British side whenever the CDs delivered themselves of high-sounding federalist rhetoric; this embarrassment was mirrored on the other side whenever Mrs Thatcher or some other Conservative leader would thunder against the federalist threat to the supremacy of Westminster in ruling the UK.

Eventually it was agreed that the federal issue was in practical reality a long way down the track and that in the meantime, this bone of contention could be „parked“ as an issue on which the two groups could agree to disagree. This agreement was more easily achieved at the EP level, where the two lots of politicians were personally in close touch and through daily exercise had both been „europeanised“ by comparison with their fellow party members „back home“, where positions on issues such as federalism tended to be dealt with in a black and white way.

It therefore took fully two years to hammer out an agreement at both EP and national levels. One factor which helped was that the Conservative Party at national level had, in 1986, joined the EDU, a broad and

446 | *D’Hondt-Verfahren, nach dem belgischen Rechtswissenschaftler Victor d’Hondt (1841–1901) benanntes Verfahren, um Wählerstimmen in Abgeordnetensitze umzurechnen.*

loose association of centre right parties formed in the image of the European Socialist Union. The broad outline of the eventual agreement was that the British Conservatives did not join the EPP as full members, but as associates. That was in theory an important distinction, but in practice it meant that group meetings, group spokesmen and group staff were now all „joint“. Both sides gained from this arrangement, not least in the economies of scale as regards human and financial resources and, since the D'Hondt principle was applied within the enlarged EPP-ED group, the British Conservatives lost nothing from their previous resources. The biggest advantage of the new situation was that co-operation was no longer a last minute affair, but something which was built up in good time within the normal operations of the group. The British Conservatives had a much better opportunity of „educating“ their allies on issues which were of importance to them and had thus a better chance of support whenever it mattered. The enlarged group gained greater clout within the EP, and the British Conservatives also gained greater clout thanks to their „membership“ (however subtly defined) within the group. They also could call on EPP support to counter any unwelcome move on the part of the British Labour Party, who had hitherto enjoyed an advantage over them by dint of being members of the Socialist group. These advantages were spelt out to the Conservative Party at home by William Hague,⁴⁴⁷ who had been instrumental in finalising the „marriage settlement“.

Why was this membership not sustained?

Firstly, at national level, towards the end of Mrs Thatcher's premiership – and indeed partly under her „patriotic“ influence – the Conservative Party became more eurosceptical, thus putting pressure on the position of the party's MEPs. John Major⁴⁴⁸ famously had to deal with the 30 or so „bastards“ who held the Westminster voting balance and after the election which he won, more of the new Conservative MP's were of the „bastard“ variety. Controversy surrounding the Treaty of Maastricht, which pushed European integration along a further stage increased

447 | *William Hague (geb. 1961), britischer Politiker der konservativen Partei, 1995–1997 Minister für Wales, 1997–2001 Vorsitzender seiner Partei, seit 2010 Außenminister seines Landes.*

448 | *John Major (geb. 1943), britischer Politiker der konservativen Partei, 1990–1997 Vorsitzender seiner Partei und Premierminister seines Landes.*

anti-EU feeling throughout the party. And many of the MEPs elected to the EP in 1994 reflected this tendency.

This last development led to internal tensions within the Conservative „delegation“ in the EPP. Many of the older hands were unhappy about the „nationalistic“ stance adopted by the newcomers and some even left the Conservative Party because of that (Edward McMillan-Scott,⁴⁴⁹ who followed other defectors such as Peter Price,⁴⁵⁰ Bill Newton Dunn,⁴⁵¹ and James Morehouse). The more the EU appeared to be going down the path of „ever closer union“ the more difficult it became for Conservative MEPs to sit comfortably in the EPP, particularly as the „voices off“ in the UK began to advocate withdrawal from the EP group.

Things came to a head during the next Conservative Party leadership contest. There was little to choose between the two front runners, either in their measure of general support or in their Euroscepticism, but at the very last throw of the dice, Cameron promised to pull the party's MEPs out of the EPP. It could be argued that this tipped the balance in his favour.

How to make good this promise presented serious difficulties. An immediate exit from the EPP would have left the Conservative MEPs in the wilderness and early soundings with other groups did not reveal and significant allies. The British Conservatives could not stand alone, as they did not fulfil the numerical and nationality criteria for the formation of a parliamentary group and would have had to sit with the ragbag of the „Unaligned“ – „les non-inscrits“. So, for two years the Conservative MEPs, many of whom wished to stay within the EPP permanently, had to live under the shadow that only until the next EP elections, could they stay there, after which they would have to find a new home on their side of the political spectrum. The official line was that the party would seek allies who wished to maintain the „positive“ aspects of the EU, mainly in the trading sphere, whilst „reforming“ the

449 | Edward McMillan-Scott (geb. 1949), britischer Politiker der konservativen Partei, seit 2010 Liberal Democrats, seit 1984 Mitglied des EP.

450 | Peter Price (geb. 1942), britischer Politiker der konservativen Partei, seit 1997 der Liberal Democrats, 1979–1994 Mitglied des EP.

451 | Bill Newton Dunn (geb. 1941), britischer Politiker der konservativen Partei, seit 2000 der Liberal Democrats, 1979–1994 und seit 1999 Mitglied des EP.

EU, by repatriating many powers from Brussels to national parliaments (especially, of course, Westminster), protecting national sovereignty and watering down to vanishing point the federal objectives of economic and, above all, political union. Ironically, it was William Hague who had to recant from his earlier advocacy of the joining with the EPP and take the lead in the search for new group allies in other nationalities.

This search turned out to be more difficult than Mr Hague had thought. The basic fact was that the vast majority of those who were ideologically akin to conservatism were happy to remain within the EPP (who had in the meantime be strengthened by the addition of the Gaullists.) Hopes were high in British Conservatives' Headquarter regarding the arrival of the ten new Member States, decided on at the turn of the century and a reality in 2004. Most of the centre right parties in central and eastern Europe, however, opted for the EPP. That meant that the British Conservatives were left with „scraps“ from amongst the newcomers. Seven Member States are represented within the new group (called the „European Conservatives and Reformists“) by a single MEP and apart from the 26 British members, no nationality in the group has a membership in double figures. This membership was not without controversy, especially as regards the Latvian and some of the Polish MEPs, who were attacked in some parts of the media as being „far right“ and more akin to National Front parties in their policies and behaviour. In terms of their position in the EP, the British Conservatives are now back, at one level, to where they started in 1979, that is to say, a dominant force within a group made up of themselves and a few isolated (and not very influential) MEPs from other nationalities. Indeed, proportionally, they are much worse off, having fewer than half their 1979 membership, and that within a much larger EP.

Numbers aside, the big disadvantage of the current situation is the considerable loss of influence. Within the EPP they had the opportunity to influence the biggest group in the parliament; now they are more like Plaid Cymru⁴⁵² backbenchers at Westminster – in theory individually equal with others, but with little overall clout as regards important decisions.

Looking ahead, the EU will probably face a constitutional crisis arising out of its present economic crisis. The Europe of the future could well be made up of a core number of Member States, linked by an enhanced degree of integration in both economic and other spheres, including constitutional issues, with an outer ring of associate States, whose main interest would be free trade within a single market and an insistence on restored national sovereignty. It is clear that for the foreseeable future the British Conservatives would prefer the UK to be in the latter group. Whether that position will change once the true cost of being in the second division has been faced up to, remains a matter of speculation.