

Parties forming the European Conservatives and Reformists Group

Along with the Conservative Party from the United Kingdom, parties and MEPs from seven other EU Member States are forming a new group in the European Parliament, to be known as the European Conservatives and Reformists. This includes parties from countries from both 'old' and 'new' Europe.

In addition to major delegations from the Czech Republic and Poland, the group will also be joined by two former finance ministers, Mr Roberts Zile from Latvia and Mr Lajos Bokros from Hungary, who has been described in the *Financial Times* as 'praised by most financial analysts for saving the country from a Mexico-like financial crisis'¹. Additionally, the group will include the former senior Commission official and author of the *Life of a European Mandarin* Derk Jan Eppink.

The core of the Group currently numbers 55 MEPs from eight different EU countries. It includes the largest party in the Czech Republic, the party of the President of Poland and MEPs from parties in coalition governments in Finland, the Netherlands and Latvia. It will be the fourth largest group in the European Parliament².

For the first time in the European Parliament there will now be a mainstream group in the European Parliament that stands for a Europe of nation states, not a federal Europe, and for free markets.

The Czech Republic: Civic Democrat Party (ODS)

ODS, led by Mirek Topolánek, are a liberal conservative party and the largest party in the Czech Republic. ODS is the champion of liberal economics and sound public finances in Czech politics. As a party that emerged from the pro-democracy dissident movements against Communist dictatorship, they have a proud record of speaking out on human rights issues³. ODS believe in a strong transatlantic alliance and oppose a federal European Union.

They won 35 per cent of the vote and 81 seats out of 200 in the 2006 elections for the lower house of the Czech Parliament and currently hold 35 of the 81 seats in the Senate, making them the largest party in that house as well.

In the European elections, ODS once again maintained its position as the largest party: its vote rose by one point to 31 per cent, winning the party 9 out of the 22 seats available. ODS grew out of the leading Czech pro-democracy movement, the Civic Forum, as political movements evolved into political parties in 1991. The party led the Czech government from 1992 to 1998, during which time it liberalised the post-communist

¹ *Financial Times*, 9 April 2002

² The minimum threshold for the formation of a group in the European Parliament is 25 MEPs from at least seven different EU Member States.

³ e.g. *Economist*, 30 August 2007

Czech economy with enormous success. The Czech economy is now one of the best performing and stablest in central and eastern Europe.

The party lost office in 1998 but regained it in 2006 after it re-emerged as the largest party in the elections that year, which left a perfectly hung (100 each) parliament between ODS and their minor coalition partners the Christian Democrats and the Greens, and their opponents the Social Democrats and the Communists. Despite such difficult parliamentary arithmetic ODS were able to sustain their government until May 2009, during which time they were able to reform public services and put the public finances on a more sustainable footing.

The Czech Republic is now in the hands of a technocratic caretaker government until fresh parliamentary elections in the Autumn.

Poland: Law and Justice

Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) has established itself as one of Poland's two largest parties. Law and Justice is a conservative party and, as such, has championed a market economy and sound public finances. The party is noted for its belief in the importance of the family in society and helped build its reputation by making the fight against corruption a priority. Law and Justice believe in a strong transatlantic alliance and opposes a federal European Union, where they have earned a reputation as tough negotiators for Poland's national interest.⁴ Law and Justice have played a particularly active role in promoting human rights and democracy in the former Soviet Union.

Law and Justice won 32 per cent of the vote in the last parliamentary elections in October 2007, obtaining 166 out of 460 seats in the lower house and 39 out of 100 in the Senate. They also hold the Presidency of the Republic of Poland (see below). In this year's European elections, they more than doubled their number of seats, winning 15 and 27 per cent of the vote.

Law and Justice emerged out of the pro-democracy dissident movement Solidarity, in which many of its leading figures played a significant part. It was founded in 2001 as the Solidarity Electoral Action party splintered and has been led by the twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński. It led a coalition government between 2005-7.

The party's most prominent figure is the former Mayor of Warsaw and Minister for Justice Lech Kaczyński, President of Poland since December 2005. With his twin brother Jarosław he starred as a child in the well-known Polish children's film *The Two Who Stole The Moon*. Having trained as a lawyer he became a leading Solidarity activist, initially as a legal adviser, for which he was imprisoned by the Communist authorities under martial law as an 'anti-socialist element'. He is noted for being the first Polish head of state ever to attend a Jewish service in a Polish synagogue. Rabbi Mati Pawlak, 'the

⁴ Charles Crawford, UK ambassador to Poland 2003-7: 'a sui generis Polish party ... [who] drive a hard and very irritating bargain on EU issues (charlescrawford.biz, 9 June 2009)

first native Pole to serve as a rabbi in Poland since the fall of communism ... credits Kaczynski's support for the Jewish community with creating a spirit of tolerance that has spread to other authorities nationwide.’⁵

Belgium: Lijst Dedecker

Lijst Dedecker (LDD) is a fairly new conservative liberal party in Belgium, founded in January 2007 by senior figures from VLD, the Flemish liberal party, after that party had moved to the left – principally by MP and former senator Jean-Marie Dedecker and Professor Boudewijn Bouckaert, Chairman of the think tank ‘Cassandra’. It has enjoyed growing political success since its foundation: in the June 2007 Belgian general election it straightaway won 5 seats in the lower house and one senate seat. In the regional Flemish elections it immediately won 8 seats. It has now won its first seat in the European Elections, which will be taken by **Derk Jan Eppink**. Mr. Eppink is a former senior European Commission official, close to former Commissioner Frits Bolkestein, one of the greatest champions of free markets in Europe the EU has ever had, and author of the best-selling *Life of a European Mandarin*. Mr Eppink, a respected former journalist, is Dutch and the first non-Belgian to be elected on a Belgian European list.

Like all other Belgian political parties it is restricted to one of Belgium’s linguistic communities, in LDD’s case the Flemish.

LDD is the most enthusiastic supporter of free markets and free trade in Belgian politics. It opposes unbridled European Federalism, deeming it unrealistic and undemocratic. LDD coined the term ‘Eurorealism’: a more democratic and humble EU, focusing on core-tasks, reducing excessive bureaucracy but not opposed to the EU itself. LDD believe in the EU but is of the view that ‘the EU needs to go on a diet’.

Netherlands: Christian Union

Christian Union are a Christian social party. They are junior partners with Christian Democrat and Labour parties in the current Dutch coalition government. The party’s leader, André Rouvoet, is a deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Youth and Families. The party also provides the Minister for Defence and the Minister for Transport, Public Works and Water Management, with additional responsibility for managing climate change.

The party holds six seats in the Dutch Second Chamber of Parliament, four in the First Chamber and is represented in the European Parliament by **Peter van Dalen**.

The party believes in a strong society and environmental responsibility. It has been praised by Greenpeace as the greenest party in the Netherlands.⁶ It supports the European Union but opposes a federal future for the EU and wishes to see the principle of

⁵ *Ha’aretz*, 21 December 2008

⁶ <http://www.greenpeace.nl/>

subsidiarity – that decisions should be taken at the lowest possible level – adhered to far more strictly.

Hungary: Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF)

MDF is a conservative party in Hungary. It emerged as the leading pro-democracy movement in Hungary as the Iron Curtain crumbled and provided Hungary's first democratically elected Prime Minister after the fall of Communism, József Antall (May 1990 until his death in December 1993). The party is currently led by Ibolya Dávid, minister for justice from 1998 to 2002 and then the only woman in the cabinet. Her party was then the junior partner in the coalition government of 1998 to 2002.

It received 5 per cent of the vote and won 11 seats at the last Hungarian general election in 2006 and in this year's European elections won a similar share of the vote and one seat, which will be taken by **Lajos Bokros**, a former Finance Minister and one of Hungary's leading economists whose 'Bokros package' of austerity measures in 1995 is widely credited with saving the Hungarian economy at the time.

MDF is the only party in Hungary that has consistently advocated free markets and trade and sound public finances.

Latvia: Latvian National Independence Movement (TB/LNNK)

TB/LNNK are a Latvian conservative party, formed out of a merger of two such parties in 1997. Both had arisen out of the pro-democracy movement in Latvia in the late 1980s. The party has been a member of Latvia's coalition governments for the majority of time since Latvia won its independence from the Soviet Union: from 1995 to 2004 and again since 2006. The party provided Latvia's Prime Minister from 1997-8. They currently hold the transport ministry in the five-party coalition government (Kaspars Gerhards).

TB/LNNK support a strong transatlantic alliance and oppose a federal future for the European Union, believing in a Europe of nation states. TB/LNNK advocate free markets and fair competition.

Although Latvia's politics remains highly fragmented, TB/LNNK won seven per cent of the vote and eight out of 100 seats in the last Latvian general election. In the European elections the party maintained that share, electing the economist and chairman of TB/LNNK **Roberts Zile** as one of Latvia's eight MEPs. Mr Zile is a former minister of finance and of transport.

Hannu Takkula MEP from Keskusta

Mr **Hannu Takkula**, an MEP since 2004 for the Finnish Centre Party Keskusta, has left the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) to join the European Conservatives and Reformists group. He believes that the new group better represents the

vision of an open, modern, flexible and liberal Europe than the increasingly left-leaning ALDE.

Keskusta is the largest party in Finland and the leading party in the coalition government, providing the Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen and seven of the other 19 members of the cabinet.