

Representing Britain, Not the EU *Robert Goodwill MP for Scarborough & Whitby*

It's understandable that so few of the general public are aware of how the European Union, let alone the European Parliament, works. The lack of media attention to the European Parliament's activities and the lack of clarity over how the Parliament functions are being used by some to, at best, cloud the issue of where British Conservatives sit in the European Parliament and at worse deliberately mislead people. David Cameron's desire to remove the Conservatives from the centrist European People's Party is not only principled, but also reflects the will of a nation whose resounding belief is that Britain is "in Europe, not run by Europe."

Unfortunately, Brussels is not so far removed from our lives as many would like to think. The EU has led to over 80,000 pages of regulations. Over two thirds of our laws are now delegated to Brussels. These regulations directly affect British business by increasing costs, which in turn raise the price of goods and services to British consumers. In recent years, Britain has fallen in its international competitiveness.¹ This is due, in no small part, to the regulatory restraints imposed by the EU economy and driven by the European Social Model so beloved of the European People's Party .

In recent years, the European Parliament has gained new powers and its influence has grown considerably. It has increased its co decision powers over legislation and arguably over the European Commission. The European Parliament is no longer an institution we can marginalize.

Currently, British Conservatives sit with the European People's Party and European Democrats (EPP-ED), which is the largest group in Parliament. The EPP-ED is comprised of the EPP, who are largely centrist, integrationalist members, and the more eurosceptic British and Czech European Democrats. Whilst the ED was promised limited amounts of autonomy when William Hague negotiated the deal in 1999, little of this has been delivered. The EPP maintains budgetary control over the entire group, whilst its federalist members dominate the group's agenda. In stark contrast to Conservative principles, the EPP-ED has supported the Working Time Directive, the EU Constitution, the Euro and a EU seat in the United Nations.^{2,3,4} As the majority of Britons do not support the EU Constitution nor the Euro, the EPP is not a political group that reflects British desires, principles or beliefs, let alone those of Conservatives.⁵

¹ According to the OECD, the UK has the lowest growth rate of all the major English-speaking economies—America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland. The World Economic Forum's competitiveness league shows the UK slipping a further two places to 13th.

² "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

³ "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

⁴ "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.

⁵ A MORI poll indicates that Britons would reject the EU Constitution in a margin of 78% to 28%. A second MORI Poll reveals that only 28% of Britons would support the Euro. <http://www.mori.com/europe/index.shtml>

Some MEPs from the old guard have threatened not to leave the EPP. They claim that the EPP carries weight in the assignment of high profile jobs, the allocation of reports – “rapporteurships” and the like. However, this is just another example of the wool being pulled over our eyes. Yes, committee chairmanships are allocated by a pecking order system between the political groups proportional to the number of seats they gained in the European elections. These positions are allocated after the election and again at the half way stage of the session - the next being in December this year. Whilst a Committee Chairman does have some influence over the agenda and admissibility of some amendments, this may not be the most effective way to represent British interests. In any case, a new group of 50 or so members would still qualify for a Vice-President of the Parliament and the Chairmanship of a committee like Agriculture or Fisheries.

Group-size isn't everything when it comes to procuring dossiers. For example, Johannes Blockland MEP, a Dutch member of the Independence/Democracy group (a much smaller group) has secured four reports, including the batteries and shipping wastes directives. Blockland, despite being in a smaller group, has been extremely successful in scooping up important directives because larger groups, such as the EPP, are focused on saving their points to bid for larger reports which may well then be allocated to a German or Italian member. Which assignment is more influential, oversight of a small number of large issues where there is lots of international attention and scrutiny, such as the chemicals directive, or multiple low-profile issues that slip under the radar?

Influence in the European Parliament is not limited to committee chairmanships and rapporteur assignments. Speaking time is another opportunity to voice the concerns of member states. Giles Chichester MEP, our chairman of the Industry Committee has spoken 11 times in plenary, whilst Mr Blockland has spoken 60 times since the last election.

The EPP hasn't done Mr Chichester or Timothy Kirkhope, the Conservative Delegation Leader any favours in securing speaking time in plenary sessions. During the British Presidency, Tony Blair came to address the Parliament on three occasions. Ironically, being forced to sit with the unattached MEPs allowed whipless Roger Helmer MEP the opportunity to be the first Conservative speaker on each visit, on two occasions he was the only Conservative speaker. Being part of the “influential” EPP afforded not one British member the opportunity to speak during Blair's last two visits.

Enlargement is another important area where we have been misled about the EPP's value. Prior to enlargement, the EPP embarked on “missionary” activity in Eastern Europe, mopping up national parties' support even though some would have naturally aligned themselves with the British Conservatives. Our money, funds allocated to each MEP from the EU's budget, was used to promote “European ideals” framed by federalist members of the EPP. Meanwhile, in Brussels, Conservative members have little say as to how their budget allotments are used in the hiring of staff. Conservative MEPs are hamstrung in their ability to hire sympathetic staff because of EPP concerns that they are eurosceptic. Whether dealing in or outside of Parliament, Conservatives are having their guns spiked by the overarching federalist agenda of the EPP.

David Cameron's wise decision to leave the EPP would not only provide Conservatives with more resources, independent control over their finances, a seat at the Conference of Presidents, and a seat on the front row of the Parliament, it will also enable Conservatives to better represent British beliefs and to protect British interests.⁶ There are sister parties in Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltic states as well as in "old Europe" who are crying out for us to take the lead. Time is of the essence if we are to secure the support of colleagues who have been marched up the aisle only to be jilted at the altar in the past.

Naturally, Mr Cameron is under pressure from senior figures within Conservative ranks and from powerful people on the European stage to abandon his pledge to withdraw from the EPP and to found a new grouping opposed to the federalist agenda and committed to an open, free-market Europe based on cooperation not coercion. He must resist tired and threadbare claims that the Conservatives will lose influence in Europe if they leave the EPP.

Mr Cameron's leadership of the party has been marked by his readiness to embrace change and to promote a bold and consistent approach to European policy. Nowhere is that more true and necessary than in his attitude towards the EPP and his quest to make common cause with parties who share his 'New Europe' vision. Nor should he be sidetracked by those who would counsel delay in the hope of maintaining the status quo. Now is the time for action, not prevarication.

Elected in May 2005, Robert Goodwill is the MP for Scarborough and Whitby. Prior to Westminster, he was a Member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2004 where he also served as the Deputy Leader for the British Conservatives from 2003 to 2004.

⁶ <http://www.brugesgroup.com/forms/EPPMisalliancePaper.pdf>.