



Roger Helmer writes

The EPP: Cameron capitulates

**The Tory Party is taken hostage
by a few Europhile MEPs**

THE DECISION of the Conservative leadership to delay its withdrawal from the European People's Party (EPP) until 2009, announced by David Cameron and William Hague on 13th July, is indefensible, humiliating and wrong. It is impossible to put a positive gloss on it, so I shall not attempt to do so. A week is a long time in politics. Three years to 2009 is much the same as never.

During his leadership campaign, Cameron repeatedly stated, in public and in private, that he was committed to breaking this link with the hyper-federalist EPP which has vexed Conservative leaders since 1997. And he was very clear on timing. It would be immediate. It would be a first-week task. It would be "during his honeymoon period".

Later, the timescale changed, but it became "Months not weeks, months not years". Now, it's years. Three of them. Far from fulfilling his pledge, as he has claimed, he has betrayed it - and us.

He also said that "You don't divorce one day and marry the next", indicating that an interim period as independents would be seemly for Conservative MEPs between leaving the EPP and forming a new group. He did not say (though perhaps he should have done) that such a move would have enhanced our credibility with future partners.

Four times since 1997 we have gone to other MEPs and said "If we leave the EPP, might you join us?". We can't cry wolf again. They want to see the colour of our money. Once we leave the EPP there will be many MEPs, some we perhaps haven't even thought of, who will flock to our banner.

And while we are using metaphors from marriage - what husband tells his wife he wants a divorce, but not for three

years? Just imagine how poisonous the relationship would be in the interim! Yet that is the course on which we are embarked. We've had little enough support from the EPP in recent years. We shall get none now, as they wait for us to leave.

Back in 2001, Iain Duncan Smith declared he would leave the EPP at the 2004 election. He even wrote the letter. But of course by 2004 he was no longer in a position to deliver. In any case, he would have missed the vital jockeying for positions and committees that takes place in the parliament in the six months prior to the election.

As recently as June 26th, David Cameron wrote to a prominent Conservative in my region as follows: "I have made clear that the Conservative Party under my leadership will not remain

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a member of the EPP-ED in the European parliament, but will seek to form a new group . . . we expect it to be completed in some months, not weeks, not years". He has repeatedly said "We must be consistent. We cannot say one thing at home and do another in Brussels". But the potential partners are there. The group could have been formed. We have chosen not to do so.

In June on the BBC's *Any Questions*, Jonathan Dimbleby pressed William Hague: "Let's be clear. If you fail to form a new group, will you still leave the EPP?". And Hague answered quite unequivocally: "We expect and intend to form a new group, but we shall leave the EPP whether or not". Yet we allowed the creation of the new group, and the trial-

by-media of potential partners, to stand in our way.

If Cameron had in fact made leaving the EPP a first-week task, the new group would have been in place by now. We should have saved months of adverse press coverage and inner turmoil. We should have denied the EPP leadership the chance to suborn potential partners - which in the event they exploited with great skill.

Now four successive Conservative leaders have gone into bat on the EPP issue - Hague, IDS, Howard, Cameron - and each in turn has retired hurt.

It seems incredible that the MEP tail has been allowed to wag the Party dog; that the fuss threatened by a few petulant and reactionary MEPs in Brussels should outweigh the undoubted anger of Westminster MPs and party activists. It is not even the whole of the delegation. Around a dozen of them have decided to put their personal interests and prejudices ahead of their party and their Country. They should be ashamed.

My fear is that party activists will defect to the UK Independence Party, along with millions of Conservative votes in the 2009 Euro-elections.

In 2004, Conservative Euro-candidates were required to commit explicitly to membership of the EPP. For the last eight months, Dave has been insisting that we should leave the EPP in 'months, not years'. Now we are told that MEPs who choose to leave the EPP before 2009 will be disciplined, but that in 2009 they will be disciplined if they do not leave it. And Dave says we must be consistent!

It seems that candidate selection for the 2009 euro-elections will take place in autumn 2007. That will be the time for party members to pass their own verdict on this decision.

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