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PRESS RELEASE

The EPP issue “a struggle for the soul of the Conservative Party”

Quentin Davies speaking at a Conservative Group for Europe meeting in Bournemouth at the Local Government Conference tomorrow (6 July at 7.30 p.m.) will say inter alia:

“Since the Bromley by-election, a vital struggle is being waged for the soul of the Conservative Party. The issue around which the struggle revolves is curiously not a great policy controversy like Clause 4. It is the EPP.

Human beings define themselves by those with whom they choose to be associated. Does the Conservative Party belong with the great mainstream centre-right parties of Continental Europe, the German, Dutch and Portuguese Christian Democrats, the French UMP, the Spanish Partido Popular, the Swedish Moderate Party, the Italian Forza Italia etc? Or does it belong with populist/nationalist parties in Eastern Europe with origins that reach back to the soft fascism that prevailed in countries like Poland and Latvia before World War II when they last enjoyed national independence, combined with a motley ragbag of mavericks, like the Italian pensioner’s champion Carlo Fatuzzo and Kathy Sinnott, an extreme Irish nationalist with a very clerical agenda – someone to the Right of De Valera - who also currently sits alone in the European parliament? Should we yield to the implied blackmail of UKIP and redefine ourselves in this way?

The argument that we need to sit with less “federalist” parties is quite bogus. The agreement reached by Michael Ancram on behalf of Iain Duncan-Smith’s Shadow Cabinet entirely preserves our freedom to speak and vote on constitutional and Treaty issues in any way we wish.

Even more crucially, are the supposed benefits of leaving the first group for the second worth the price of breaking both the signed agreement with the EPP, and the electoral pledges given by every Conservative candidate at the last European election to sit with the EPP-ED Group during the currency of this Parliament?

Does the Conservative Party break agreements? Does the Conservative Party break electoral pledges? My answer to both questions throughout my political career would always have been an unhesitating and resounding “no”. That is I trust for most of us primarily a matter of personal honour and professional integrity. But even if it were neither of those things, it would surely be a matter of political survival. How can we possibly retain an ounce of political credibility if we become a Party which dishonours pledges and tears up signed agreements?

There is a marked difference of tactics between the two sides in this struggle. The Eurosceptic Right are openly making threats – unless the agreement with the EPP is torn up immediately they will unilaterally storm out of the group.

The One Nation and Europhile wing of the Party have never made threats. Are they right to be so old-fashioned and gentlemanly? May it one day be said of them as someone said of Austen Chamberlain “He always played by the rules. And he always lost”? What kind of Party will we be if blackmail from outside and threats from within determine our collective decisions?

It is no good simply regretting that David Cameron has raised this issue. He has, and we now have to find the best way forward. Since he gave no date by which he would carry out his promise to leave the EPP that promise and the Party’s obligation to the EPP (and MEPs’ own electoral pledge) can be reconciled if he confirms that he will remain in the EPP-ED Group until 2009. I hope and pray that he takes that course.”

**Quentin Davies MP**

Chairman of the Conservative Group for Europe

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