A Loveless Marriage: The Conservatives and the European People’s Party

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ABSTRACT

The Conservatives are allied members of the European People’s Party–European Democrats (EPP–ED) group in the European Parliament. But the link with the pro-European EPP has been a contentious issue within the Conservative Party. In deciding whether to remain within the EPP–ED, the Conservatives have to balance issues of domestic party management with their policy and office objectives at the European level. In this article we first assess David Cameron’s commitment to form a new group, and then analyse the advantages and disadvantages of Conservative membership of the EPP–ED by examining roll-call votes and modelling two scenarios for a new group in 2009. We conclude that the pros and cons of forming a new group are finely balanced.

THE Conservative Party has found it difficult to find ideological allies in the European Parliament (EP) as relatively few centre-right parties in the European Union (EU) share its free market, intergovernmental perspective. Conservative MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) have been allied members of the European People’s Party–European Democrats (EPP–ED) group since 1992, the largest group in the EP since 1999. It is the parliamentary arm of the EPP, a transnational political party with Christian Democrat roots that support a federal Europe, and which the Conservatives have never joined. The growth of Euroscepticism within the Conservative Party in the 1990s brought the differences with the EPP into sharper focus and made the link more contentious. David Cameron pledged to pull Conservative MEPs out of the EPP–ED during the 2005 Conservative leadership contest only to announce in June 2006, after a troubled search for allies, that a new group would not be formed until after the next elections to the EP in 2009. The current arrangements are akin to a loveless marriage in which the two sides reside in different parts of the same house, argue over money and appear more aware of their differences than what they have in common. One side sought to woo new partners but when they played hard to get, postponed the divorce and hoped to restore amicable relations in the interim.
For the Conservatives, the future of this partnership will be decided by the balance of policy and office objectives at the European level, and domestic party management objectives which, at least indirectly, may affect the party’s electoral prospects. For the EPP–ED, keeping the Conservatives, the EP’s third largest national party delegation, inside the group helps them achieve policy and office goals in the form of committee and EP leadership positions, rapporteurships and voting weight in the Conference of Presidents. Contrary to the widespread view of Cameron’s pledge to leave the EPP–ED as foolish, we show that the picture is more complex and the judgements are finer than often assumed. In this article, we analyse the advantages and disadvantages of Conservative membership of the EPP–ED by examining roll-call votes and modelling two scenarios for the formation of a new group in 2009. We then examine Eurosceptic claims that the EPP acts like a cartel, dominating the centre-right in the EP. Finally, we conclude that the pros and cons of forming a new group are closely matched. To put the analysis in context the first section, which draws heavily on non-attributable interviews with Conservative politicians and party and group officials, assesses recent developments in the relationship between the Conservatives and the EPP and sets out the reasons why the formation of a new group was postponed in 2006.

**The Conservatives and the EPP, 1979–2005**

From 1979 to 1992 the Conservatives were the largest party in the European Democratic group which also included Danish conservatives and from 1986 to 1989 the main Spanish centre-right party, the Alianza Popular (now Partido Popular). It was the third largest group in the 1979–1984 and 1984–1989 terms. The poor performance of the Tories in the 1989 European elections and the defection of the Partido Popular to the EPP saw the group slip to 34 seats. The national Conservative leadership, supported by most MEPs, sought closer relations with the EPP group. An initial membership application was rejected because of EPP concerns about Margaret Thatcher’s Euroscepticism. However, membership was secured under John Major who saw the issue largely in terms of the influence and resources that would follow from being part of a large group in an EP that had greater powers following the Single European Act. With left–right ideological rivalry between the EPP and the Party of European Socialists (PES) more pronounced, EPP membership also narrowed the numerical gap between the two.

The Conservatives became allied members of the EPP group in April 1992 accepting its Basic Programme, which highlights the EPP’s Christian Democrat heritage and supports the social market economy and a federal Europe. This commitment helped secure support from
those within the EPP who were unhappy about extending the group’s membership in the EP to include parties from outside the Christian Democrat tradition. But Conservative MEPs were permitted to vote differently from the group line, as set out in an exchange of letters between the group leader and the leader of the Tory delegation. The party continued to campaign on its national manifesto in European elections. Conservative MEPs were required to re-apply to join the EPP as allied members after each European election, doing so in 1994 without controversy.

However, domestic concern at the EPP link grew as the Conservatives became a more Eurosceptic party both at Westminster and at grassroots level. Considerations of party unity and ideological consistency became more prominent for Conservative leaders when addressing the issue. The predominance of pro-Europeans in Tory ranks in Brussels also prompted Eurosceptic efforts to boost their representation in the delegation and push for exit from the group. But William Hague and delegation leader Edward McMillan-Scott opted for a revised relationship with the EPP after the 1999 elections. The Malaga Declaration signed by Hague at an EPP summit changed the group’s name to the EPP–ED, the Conservatives being allied members in the European Democrat (ED) section with their right to vote separately strengthened.

Iain Duncan Smith became party leader with the intention of leaving the EPP–ED at an opportune moment. Rather than seeking withdrawal at the outset, he initially sought to win greater autonomy for the ED. This ‘Malaga plus’ approach was favoured by Shadow Foreign Secretary Michael Ancram and delegation leader Jonathan Evans, and kept intra-party divisions on Europe out of the headlines. Duncan Smith wrote to EPP–ED leader Hans-Gert Poettering in November 2001 asking that Tory MEPs be given more money and greater freedom to promote distinctive policies, and that parties from central and eastern Europe be allowed to join either the EPP or the ED sections. Were concessions not forthcoming, the Conservatives would leave the group.

When Poettering rejected these demands, Owen Paterson, Duncan Smith’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, began discussions on forming a new group with interested parties. The most significant were the Czech Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and Polish Law and Justice party (PiS) who, with the Tories, signed the June 2003 Prague Declaration setting out their commitment to national sovereignty and free enterprise. Fellow ED members the Portuguese Partido Popular and Italian Pensioners’ Party were also courted whereas the PiS was expected to recruit parties from the Baltic states. Had Duncan Smith remained leader, his allies maintain that a viable new group would have been formed after the 2004 elections; others are less certain as much work remained to be done.
Michael Howard reverted to a policy of renegotiated membership of the EPP–ED. Howard believed that the Conservatives would have more influence as part of the EPP–ED, but sought greater autonomy within the group and also wanted to shut down intra-party wrangling on the issue before the 2004 EP elections. Under a deal agreed with Poettering in 2004, the group’s constitution was changed. A new Article 5(b) allowed the ED to ‘promote and develop their distinct views on constitutional and institutional issues in the new Europe’. MEPs applying to join the group could do so on the basis of either the EPP programme under Article 5(a) or the ED element under Article 5(b). One of the eight EPP–ED vice-president posts would be filled by an ED member (currently Struan Stevenson). Conservative Party Chairman Liam Fox wrote to all prospective MEPs requiring them to commit in writing to the deal for the duration of the 2004–2009 EP. All 27 MEPs who won seats in 2004 did so, but some made their misgivings clear. On returning to Brussels, many MEPs noticed little change.

Cameron and the EPP
The issue of group membership was reopened in the 2005 Conservative leadership election when Eurosceptic MPs made their support conditional upon a commitment to leave the EPP–ED. Liam Fox made the first public commitment to pull out and set up new group (Daily Telegraph, 30 September 2005). David Cameron had already given similar private assurances to Eurosceptic MEPs and MPs but his public pledge still surprised many. Withdrawal from the EPP–ED was one of the few specific commitments Cameron made during the contest and this helped him secure sufficient support from the right of the party (e.g. from much of the Cornerstone Group) to see off the challenge of Fox and then David Davis. Whether Cameron needed the EPP pledge to win is a moot point. He may have already established sufficient momentum, but his campaign team was happy to face Davis rather than Fox in the membership ballot. Many on the right were wary of Davis (a former Minister for Europe) who put forward a broad Eurosceptic platform but, fearing that it would be difficult to renege on the 2004 manifesto commitment and form a new group, said that the decision on EPP–ED membership should be left to MEPs.

On becoming leader, Cameron handed responsibility for the issue to Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague and his deputy Graham Brady. The commitment to leave the EPP–ED was soon nuanced: the Conservatives would not pull out within weeks but leave only when a viable new group could be formed. Hague suggested that this would take months but not years. This angered some Cameron supporters who maintained that his initial pledge had been to ‘leave during the honeymoon, as soon as he was elected leader, while the press were still writing about his wife’s dress’ (Daily Telegraph, 14 July 2006).
With little progress made in the search for partners, Cameron and ODS leader Mirek Toplanek announced in July 2006 that they would create a new group but not until after the 2009 elections.

They also launched the Movement for European Reform (MER) to develop their agenda outside of the EP. Its first conference in March 2007 attracted representatives from 18 parties although only the Bulgarian Union of Democratic Forces was added as a full member. The MER’s role is not yet clear. It is an extra-parliamentary organisation without a formal link to the ED section of the EPP–ED or to the International Democratic Union, an alternative centre-right grouping to the EPP. Although the MER is expected to pave the way for a new group in the EP, this is not its sole purpose. A maximalist outcome would see the MER develop into a European political party (under Article 191 of the Nice Treaty). It is more likely that the MER will be little more than a transnational network that allows the Conservative leadership to limit criticism of the delay to the new group and claim that it is not isolated in Europe. Cameron’s policy drew rebukes from Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy, and the December 2005 EPP summit (which Cameron did not attend) agreed to sever bilateral links if the Conservatives left the EPP–ED in midterm. But party officials were confident that relations with other centre-right parties would improve as the prospects of a Tory government grew.

Two key factors explain the postponement: the difficulty in persuading other mainstream parties to join a new group in 2006 and the extent of opposition among Conservative MEPs.

Finding Allies. Rule 29 of the EP’s Rules of Procedure stated in 2006 that a group must have a minimum of 19 MEPs from at least one-fifth of the Member States (i.e. five). This rose to 20 MEPs from six Member States when Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007. The Conservative leadership made it clear that a new group must consist of mainstream centre-right parties. But most centre-right parties were already full members of the EPP and it was highly unlikely that any would leave the EPP–ED in midterm, if at all. The EPP’s missionary work in eastern Europe had proved highly effective in signing up centre-right parties, some of which, such as the Polish Civic Platform, were ideologically close to the Conservatives. Conservative efforts to recruit allies had been hampered by limited resources and uncertainty about its group status. Attempts to subsume the European Democrat Union (EDU), part of the International Democrat Union, within the EPP were resisted but the EDU was moribund by 2005.

The ED section was the obvious starting point for recruitment. Along with the Tories, it consisted of Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) MEP Jim Nicholson, who takes the Conservative whip, nine ODS members
and the sole MEP from the Italian Pensioners’ Party, Carlo Fattuzo. The UUP would follow the Conservatives into a new group (Belfast News Letter, 14 July 2006) but would not help with the nationality requirement. Fattuzo is unwilling to leave. Expelled from the EPP in 1993, the Portuguese Partido Popular was courted by the Conservatives in 2003 and joined the ED in the following year. But its two MEPs subsequently rejoined the EPP.

Once again, the most likely candidates were the ODS and PiS, but domestic politics lessened their prospects of joining a new group. Both entered uneasy coalition governments in 2006. The ODS national leadership appeared willing to leave the EPP–ED but not until after the June 2006 Czech elections. ODS voters are more pro-European than its leadership, leaving the latter concerned about alienating its supporters.10 It was also divided: the leader of the ODS delegation in the EP, Jan Zahradil, was more enthusiastic about a new group than party leader Topolanek. The party announced in July 2006 that it was postponing plans to form a new group as it was concentrating on domestic coalition negotiations (EU Observer, 10 July 2006). Warnings from German Chancellor Angela Merkel of damage to Czech standing in the EU concentrated minds. Topolanek had also angered the PiS leadership by denouncing its populist platform.

Despite links with the Conservatives, the seven PiS MEPs had joined the Union for a Europe of the Nations (UEN) group. Eurosceptic Tories depicted the PiS as a mainstream party with a pro-nation state, Atlanticist outlook but its social conservatism, economic nationalism and support for the Common Agricultural Policy sit uneasily with Cameron’s ‘modern compassionate conservatism’. Doubts about its suitability intensified when the PiS entered a coalition government with the socially conservative League of Polish Families and agrarian Self-Defence Party. When the ODS indicated it would not leave the EPP–ED in 2006, the Conservatives ruled out forming a new group with the PiS as their main ally and did not invite them to become a founder member of the MER. Despite these sleights, the PiS is still regarded as a strong candidate for a new group in 2009.

Without the ODS, the chances of forming a group of some 45–55 members receded, although the Conservatives could still have got the minimum number required under EP rules. Eurosceptics believed that when the Tories left the EPP, parties who had doubted their intentions would then enlist. However, a group without the ODS would have been a fragile alliance of small parties and independents with limited ideological congruence, damaged by the refusal of some pro-European Conservatives to join, and in peril of defection and collapse.

Smaller parties mentioned as possible members of a new group included the Latvians For Fatherland and Freedom (LNNK), a nationalist party whose four MEPs sit in the UEN, and the Centre Party of Finland (KESK) which has four MEPs in the Alliance of Liberals and
Democrats for Europe (ALDE). From the Independence/Democracy group, Irish disability rights campaigner Kathy Sinnott and two MEPs from the Swedish June List (with one defector from that party) were targets. The protectionist Movement for France (MPF) and fundamentalist Dutch Christian Union/SGP ruled themselves out although the Conservatives were, as in 2003, unlikely to embrace them. The Bulgarian Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) joined the Movement for European Reform in March 2007, but the prospects of it joining a new group receded when, first, it was temporarily suspended from the EPP transnational party and secondly, party chairman Peter Stoyanov resigned after the UDF failed to win a seat in the EP in Bulgaria’s May 2007 elections.

A DIVIDED DELEGATION. Opposition from within the Conservative delegation contributed to Cameron’s decision to put off the creation of a new group. The decision on where Conservative MEPs sit in the EP is taken by the national party leader but he/she must be sensitive to the balance of opinion within the delegation and, particularly, the views of the delegation leader. Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard had been responsible for changes to policy on the EPP link but had worked closely with delegation leaders. Timothy Kirkhope was re-elected as leader of the Conservative MEPs on the day of Cameron’s leadership victory. With Kirkhope supporting the status quo and his challenger Chris Heaton-Harris in favour of leaving the EPP–ED, the contest confirmed that most MEPs opposed Cameron’s policy. Kirkhope’s 18 votes to 7 victory suggested that Eurosceptics had made little headway in persuading pragmatic colleagues of their case.

The post-1999 Conservative delegation is divided into three camps: one is pro-European and pro-EPP, another is Eurosceptic and anti-EPP, and a third group is pragmatic and loyalist. The delegation has long contained a significantly higher proportion of pro-Europeans than the Conservative parliamentary party or wider membership. The number of ardent pro-Europeans has declined over time due to retirement, defection and deselection, but some current Conservative MEPs (e.g. Christopher Beazley and Caroline Jackson) are strongly pro-European. Key leadership positions within the delegation continue to be held by MEPs who support the EPP link.

The 1999 arrival of the ‘H-block’—Roger Helmer, Daniel Hannan, Chris Heaton-Harris and Martin Callanan—brought into the delegation MEPs who campaigned for withdrawal from the EPP–ED and, in the case of Helmer and Hannan, the EU. Helmer was suspended from the EPP–ED and had the Conservative whip withdrawn in May 2005 when he intervened in an EP debate to support a motion of censure against Commission President Barroso. He became a cause
celebre for party activists until the Conservative whip was restored in September 2006—but Helmer was not re-admitted to the EPP–ED and sits as a non-inscrit (i.e. non-attached) MEP.

If the Conservatives are to leave the EPP–ED without the delegation splitting, the party leadership must assuage the concerns of the delegation leadership; the pragmatic centre would then fall into line. Cameron did not meet with the delegation until December 2006 although Hague took on board concerns aired by pro-EPP and pragmatic MEPs. Had a viable new group been formed in 2006 as many as six Tory MEPs would have refused to leave the EPP–ED. They included some contemplating retirement, for whom threats of deselection carried no weight, and senior figures who stood to lose their posts in the group, the delegation and ultimately the EP. But positions in the EP (e.g. committee chairs) would not necessarily have been forfeited for the remainder of the 2004–2009 term.17

One senior Conservative we spoke to noted that ‘there is no such thing as a new decision, or even a new process on the EPP . . . everything is just regurgitated’. Given this, what is striking is the party leadership’s limited and belated learning. Cameron did not handle the issue particularly effectively in the first months of his leadership, antagonising both pro-EPP and anti-EPP MEPs. He had little experience of EU institutions and may not have appreciated the difficulties in forming a new group or that it would become a defining issue for the Tory right. But when the options open to Cameron diminished in the first half of 2006, his decision to postpone the formation of a new group was the least costly. Establishing a group without the ODS would have been risky. Sitting as non-inscrit members—favoured by some Eurosceptics as it would break the EPP link and give the delegation leader more speaking time—would have meant an embarrassing loss of influence and status. Until the formation of the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty group in 2007, the most high-profile non-inscrits were extreme right anti-system MEPs such as Jean-Marie Le Pen. Most Tory MEPs would have refused to go non-inscrit. Nor was joining an existing group an option: the UEN contained parties the Conservatives had courted but also some whom they would not work with, including the Alleanza Nazionale, and others who might not welcome them, such as Fianna Fáil.

Postponement removed much of the venom that the issue had generated and avoided a split in the delegation. Eurosceptic reaction was muted: there was anger but little desire for action that would have resulted in loss of the whip and possible deselection. Only Helmer, while outside the delegation, offered a stinging public rebuke.18 Others made use of the freedom given by Cameron to backbenchers allowing them to campaign for British withdrawal from the EU. Most of those favouring the EPP–ED link have publicly supported the new position while extolling the benefits of remaining within the group until 2009.
But Quentin Davies MP, chair of the Conservative Group for Europe, cited Cameron’s decision to ‘break a solemn agreement’ with the EPP–ED as a key reason for his defection to Labour in June 2007.19

Having traced recent developments in the Conservatives’ relationship with the EPP–ED, we turn next to an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of this link in the 2004–2009 EP term.

**Assessing the EPP link**

National parties would struggle to achieve their policy objectives by operating independently in the EP. Transnational party groups allocate committee positions and speaking time and act as agenda-setters by determining the time given to different elements of the legislative agenda. By working together in such groups, national parties can reduce the transactions costs of time and effort and problems of enforcement that would result from negotiating coalitions on a vote-by-vote basis.20 However, the control of committee and party offices that resides with group leaders is rarely a match for the power of deselection that lies with national parties. When there is significant conflict between the group and national party, MEPs usually side with the latter.21

The advantages of transnational party groups are amplified in the case of large groups. Between them, the EPP–ED and PES have access to the majority of committee chairmanships and control a majority of votes in the Conference of Presidents, which has the power to decide on plenary agendas and the membership and jurisdiction of parliamentary committees. Since the Single European Act, other rules of procedure in the EP previously requiring a minimum number of members or a group for an action to be carried out, have been changed such that they require the support of a minimum number of members higher than the smallest that can form a group.22 These rule changes mean that, in terms of the internal organisation of the EP and its legislative agenda, membership of a large party group is beneficial. Furthermore, changes to the EP’s Rules of Procedure require the support of an absolute majority of members, which is difficult to achieve without the support of both of the two biggest groups.

For the Conservatives, the crucial argument is whether policy objectives (in the EU and domestically)23 and party management considerations can be served better by remaining within the EPP–ED or by forming a smaller group in which they are the predominant party. Pro-EPP–ED Conservatives claim that the current arrangements bring them influence without obligation. Conservative MEPs enjoy many of the advantages of being an allied member of the largest group in the EP without being obliged to follow the EPP line. Opponents of EPP–ED membership argue that the ED section lacks real autonomy, Conservative policies are at odds with those of the EPP and that a new group would bring institutional benefits. We now assess the main pros
and cons of establishing a new group first by examining voting behaviour in the 2004–2009 EP term, secondly, by creating two hypothetical versions of a new group based on the current distribution of seats in the EP and finally by addressing Eurosceptic claims that the EPP acts as a cartel.

COALITION PATTERNS IN ROLL-CALL VOTES. Spatial mapping of national parties in the EP has confirmed that there is a significant gap between Conservative MEPs and much of the rest of the EPP–ED: they are located to the right of the EPP and are more Eurosceptic. Analysis of coalition patterns in roll-call votes paints a similar picture: on around one-third of roll-call votes in the fifth EP term, the Conservatives voted differently from the EPP position. But they voted with the EPP on two-thirds of roll-calls and are closer to it than any other group. The Conservatives are in broad agreement with the group position on important areas such as sound finance, labour market reform and competitiveness and Iraq and Atlanticism. The group outlook has changed as pro-market parties from Spain, Italy, Scandinavia and eastern Europe have joined while some Christian Democrats, such as those in the Netherlands, have moved to the right. Parties from eastern Europe in particular look to the Conservatives to provide a lead; they have urged Tory MEPs to remain in the EPP to promote their agenda. Eurosceptics note that the EPP still describes itself as a party of the centre rather than the centre-right and favours the European social model. They also argue that the differences between the Conservatives and the EPP on a second axis, further European integration versus national sovereignty, are profound. The EPP supports the strengthening of the EU’s supranational institutions and policy competences whereas the Conservatives want a flexible Europe of nation states and the repatriation of some policy competences.

We analyse voting behaviour by looking at roll-call votes on four major topics in the 2004–2009 EP: its resolution on the European Constitution, an EP report on accession talks with Turkey, the REACH directive on the regulation of chemicals and the Services (or Bolkestein) directive on liberalising the market for services. These issues cover constitutional questions and the regulation of the single market, the two main dimensions of politics in the EP. We examine how the Conservatives, their potential allies and two EPP founding parties voted across the four pieces of legislation.

The final resolution endorsing the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe was adopted in January 2005 with 500 votes in favour, 137 against and 40 abstentions. The EP was relatively united on this issue but a majority of MEPs who voted from the UK, Czech Republic and Poland rejected the Constitution. All of the Conservatives, ODS, PiS
and MPF members who took part voted against the resolution. The EPP–ED was split with all ED members voting ‘no’ except for Luis Queiro (Portuguese Popular Party) and Carlo Fatuzzo (Italian Pensioners’ Party) who voted in favour.

The second column of Table 1 shows the proportion of votes on which a majority of Conservatives voted with a majority of the other parties on this issue. The majority positions of the Conservatives and ODS were the same for all roll-call votes. The bulk of Conservatives also voted with a majority of the French MPF for around four-fifths of the votes and the respective figure for the Conservatives and PiS was nearly 70%. On only just over 30% of votes did most Conservatives vote with a majority of the German CDU/CSU or Dutch Christian Democrats (CDA). On this basis a new group based around the Conservatives, ODS, PiS and MPF would vote similarly on constitutional issues.

In December 2004, the EP voted by 407 to 262 to support a non-binding report calling for talks on Turkey’s accession to the EU to begin ‘without undue delay’. Unusually, the final vote was taken by secret ballot, reflecting the controversial nature of the issue. In a heated pre-vote debate, the CDU/CSU opposed accession talks whereas the Conservatives spoke in favour. Majorities in the Conservative and CDU/CSU delegations again coincided on around one-third of the votes whereas the ODS and Conservatives were much closer (see Table 1, column 3). On many of the votes, these two parties sided with much of the Socialist and Liberal groups. Conservatives voted more frequently with the Finnish Centre Party, part of the ALDE, on Turkey than on the three other issues we analysed. But the Conservatives differed far more from the PiS and MPF than they did on the Constitution.

1. Coalition Patterns among Conservatives and Other Parties: Four Cases from the 2004–2009 Term

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>EU constitution</th>
<th>Accession talks with Turkey</th>
<th>REACH directive a</th>
<th>Services directive b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CDU/CSU</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>58.1</td>
<td>90.1</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODS</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP (Fatuzzo)</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PiS</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>78.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNNK</td>
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<td>60.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finnish Centre</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>73.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of roll-call votes</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
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Notes: Figures show the percentage of votes in which a majority of the Conservatives voted with a majority of the each of the other parties. aFigures for the MPF on REACH exclude first reading votes as only one MPF member took part in these (69 of 82 votes). bFigures for Fatuzzo on the Services Directive exclude first reading votes as he did not take part in these (81 of the 93 votes).
The EU’s directive on the registration, evaluation and authorisation of chemicals, known as REACH, had its first reading in the EP in November 2005, at which there were 69 roll-call votes, and its second reading in December 2006, with 13 votes taken by roll-call. REACH will force companies that produce or import any of about 30,000 chemicals to register them with a new EU chemicals agency and prove that the substances are not a threat to the environment or human health. Firms must replace very high-risk chemicals with safe substances if the latter are available.

The final vote at first reading saw most of the PES, ALDE and EPP–ED vote in favour; 402 MEPs voted yes, 145 were against and 37 abstained. The Conservatives were split: among those voting, six were in favour, including all but one of the party’s representatives on the Environment committee, and nine were against. Most of the CDU/CSU voted against the draft, following opposition from the large German chemical industry, as did the ODS and PiS. Looking at coalition patterns (see column 4 of Table 1), the biggest differences were between the Conservatives and the MPF, LNNK and Finnish Centre Party. Conservative majorities voted the same way as their fellow EPP–ED parties on \( \geq 90\% \) of the votes, with the PiS not far behind.

One of the most controversial legislative proposals for opening up the single market in recent years is the Services Directive, which aims at making the cross-border provision of services easier. It provoked major disagreements in the EP particularly over the ‘country of origin’ principle, that is the possibility of, say, a British builder setting up a company in Germany but operating under UK law. Many central and eastern European countries wanted a liberal form of the directive but France and Germany favoured a more restrictive approach. The report produced by the EP’s Internal Market committee was relatively liberal, against the wishes of the German PES rapporteur Evelyn Gebhardt, and included the ‘country of origin’ principle. Conservative MEP Malcolm Harbour, the shadow rapporteur, managed to build a majority of support in committee for this more liberal position. But the final version of the text agreed by the EP was diluted. The ‘country of origin’ principle was watered down such that labour laws of the destination country will apply as will restrictions on the basis of public policy, security, social security and the protection of health and the environment. However, many barriers to the cross-border provision of services will be removed. The final vote on the deal agreed at first reading, which provided the basis of the legislation (EU Observer, 15 November 2006), saw two Conservatives abstain with the rest voting in favour. The Finnish Centre Party also supported the deal. The ODS abstained while majorities of those voting from the PiS, LNNK and MPF voted against the proposals. Looking at all 93 roll-call votes (see Table 1, column 5), the Conservatives were closer to the parties from central and eastern Europe than to the Christian Democrats.
Voting patterns in roll-call votes on the EU Constitution, REACH and Services directives confirm the close relationship between the Conservatives and ODS. Majorities of the two parties voted the same way in at least 88% of votes in each of the cases considered here. There is also a high level of congruence in the voting of majorities of the Conservatives and the PiS, except for the votes on Turkish accession talks. The issues where the Conservatives are furthest from their Christian Democrat colleagues are those dealing with the EU’s constitution and membership. In contrast, the cases included here that deal with regulating the internal market see more similarities in voting between the Conservatives, other members of the EPP–ED and the PiS and LNNK. Conservative links with the MPF are limited to the votes on the Constitution and similarities with the Finnish Centre Party fluctuate across the cases.

There are at least two possible interpretations of these results. One is that the Conservatives do indeed have the best of both worlds as part of the EPP–ED as they exercise their right to vote separately while gaining the benefits of membership of a large group. Furthermore, the areas where the Tories and Christian Democrats are furthest apart are those where the EP has less power and which take up less of the EP’s time, i.e. foreign affairs and constitutional questions. An alternative interpretation highlights the similarity in the voting behaviour of the Conservatives, the ODS and the PiS, who could form a coherent core of a new group. But such a group would be unlikely to include the MPF, and the Tories’ overlap with the LNNK is less pronounced.

POSTS IN THE EP. Pro-EPP Conservatives claim that the current arrangements give the delegation greater throw-weight. Large groups have access to most committee chairmanships and rapporteurships, and their votes are weighted more heavily in the Conference of Presidents. Pro-EPP Conservatives thus claim that they have access to more influential posts than would be the case if they were outside the group. In the second half of the 2004–2009 term, these include one of the Vice-Presidencies of the EP (Edward McMillan-Scott); the chair of a significant committee (Neil Parish on Agriculture) and three committee vice-chairs (Philip Bradbourn, Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs; John Purvis, Economic and Monetary Affairs; Timothy Kirkhope, Constitutional Affairs). Added to this is the fact that the D’Hondt system, which is used to distribute posts in the EP, is among the least proportional of the list electoral formulae and tends to favour larger parties or groups. For instance, under D’Hondt, the EPP–ED was awarded eight committee chairs in the second half of the 2004–2009 term rather than the seven to which it would be entitled under a purely proportional distribution.
To ascertain whether the Conservatives would gain institutional benefits from forming a new group, we use two hypothetical groups to assess the numbers and quality of committee chairmanships and vice-chairmanships that the Conservatives and other parties would be allocated if a new group were set up in the 2004–2009 term. Although the options for a new group after the 2009 polls will be subject to election results, these models are useful as an indication of the number and choice of committee leadership positions associated with different sized groups. We have modelled two variants of a new group given the uncertainty and secrecy about which parties would join a new formation. The larger of the two hypothetical groups includes a range of parties, from ten member states, mentioned above as potential partners for the Conservatives (see Table 2). The smaller one contains six nationalities, the minimum requirement, and works on the more realistic basis that some pro-EPP MEPs refuse to leave the EPP–ED (see Table 3). In both cases, the new group would be the fourth largest in the current EP but only by two seats from the Greens in the case of the smaller.

The numbers of committee chairs and vice-chairs for the relevant national parties under two possible formations of a new group are shown in Table 4 alongside the actual situation in the second half of the 2004–2009 term. The allocations have been calculated using the D’Hondt formula. Note that it is difficult to be precise about predictions as party groups often look at the whole distribution of offices, including the EP presidency and vice-presidencies and the Quaestors, when making decisions about committee offices. On this basis, groups may agree adjustments to the D’Hondt results. For example, in the first half of the 2004–2009 term, the Independence and Democracy group chose not to take its committee chair allocation in favour of obtaining a vice-chairmanship on a more ‘interesting committee’ (EU Observer, 21 July 2004). Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the Conservatives or other new group members would opt not to take up a committee chair.

### 2. Larger Hypothetical New Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Member state</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Original group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>EPP–ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODS</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>EPP–ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law and Justice (PiS)</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>UEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNNK</td>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>UEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre Party</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>ALDE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mouvement pour la France</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>I/D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partido Popular</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>EPP–ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Democratic Forces</td>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>EPP–ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioners’ Party</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>EPP–ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy Sinnott</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I/D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Assumes all Conservative and UUP MEPs join the new group.
Table 4 shows that the Conservatives would hold one committee chair in each of the two new group scenarios, and they would also have at least one vice-chair in the larger of the two. However, the choice of committee chairs would be more limited in either of the new groups. The possibility of gaining the chair of a major committee such as Environment, which was chaired by Caroline Jackson in the fifth EP and by the ODS in the second half of the sixth term, is greatly curtailed. In the bigger of the two new groups we can assume, based on the extent to which committees are legislatively active or considered prestigious and the allocation of chairmanships under a new structure, that the following committees would be unavailable to a new Conservative-led group: Foreign Affairs, Legal Affairs, Budgets, Environment, Budgetary Control, Economic and Monetary Affairs and Employment. Of the committees available at ninth choice, the Industry and Transport committees have been most legislatively active. The smaller of the two new groups would have 12th choice, with Culture or Agriculture the more legislatively active.

A potential problem for the Conservatives is that they would constitute around one half of a new group. If positions were assigned within a new group purely using the D'Hondt formula, then several parties would lose a committee vice-chair. The ODS currently holds the chair of the Environment committee and a vice-chair; a PiS MEP chairs the Petitions committee, the Finnish Centre Party has three vice-chairs, while Kathy Sinnott and the LNNK each hold one vice-chair. The requirement to cover six member states means the Conservatives may be in a weak bargaining position with those smaller parties needed to make up the number of nationalities. Parties such as the PiS, which would lose a committee chair, would most likely expect to be compensated with, say, a vice-chair regardless of the outcome of D'Hondt calculations within the group.

The Conservatives would stand to lose other positions of influence in the EP. Rapporteurs prepare reports on bills that set out the EP’s position and propose amendments. Key rapporteurships held by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Member state</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Original group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>EPP–ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODS</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>EPP–ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law and Justice (PiS)</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>UEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNNK</td>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>UEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioners’ Party</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>EPP–ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy Sinnott</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I/D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Assumes that Jim Nicholson (Ulster Unionist) is included but six Conservatives stay in the EPP.
4. Distribution of Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs under Two New Group Scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Conservatives Chairs</th>
<th>ODS Chairs</th>
<th>ODS Vice-chairs</th>
<th>PiS Chairs</th>
<th>PiS Vice-chairs</th>
<th>LNNK Chairs</th>
<th>LNNK Vice-chairs</th>
<th>PP Chairs</th>
<th>PP Vice-chairs</th>
<th>MPF Chairs</th>
<th>MPF Vice-chairs</th>
<th>Centre Party Chairs</th>
<th>Centre Party Vice-chairs</th>
<th>UDF Chairs</th>
<th>UDF Vice-chairs</th>
<th>Sinnott Chairs</th>
<th>Sinnott Vice-chairs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EP 2007</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larger</td>
<td>1 (8th choice)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller</td>
<td>1 (12th choice)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The distribution of chairs has been calculated using the D’Hondt formula.
Conservatives in the current term include James Elles on the 2007 EU budget, Jonathan Evans on competition policy and Geoffrey van Orden on Bulgaria’s EU application. Rapporteurships are bought by groups in an auction system in which each group is allocated a quota of points based on its total number of MEPs. This means that large groups are best placed to gain rapporteurships for the most important bills and tend to be over-represented in the distribution of rapporteurships.31

The Conservatives also hold influential positions within the EPP–ED: seven Conservatives are group coordinators in EP committees, including Philip Bushill-Matthews (Employment and Social Affairs), Giles Chichester (Industry) and Malcolm Harbour (Internal Market). Group co-ordinators act as the spokesperson for the group in their subject area and play an important role in shaping the group’s position. Joining a new group would, of course, mean losing the chance to influence EPP policy from within. The Conservatives would also be expected to distribute group positions among member parties. Had a new group been formed in 2006, ODS delegation leader Jan Zahradil may have been offered the position of group leader as compensation for his party’s loss of EP posts.

THE EPP AS A CARTEL?. Having assessed the options for forming a new group in the EP, we now turn our attention to a critique offered by some Eurosceptic Conservative MEPs which likens the EPP itself to a cartel.32 This critique operates on two main levels. First, it argues that the EPP transnational party and EPP–ED group have acted to expand and protect their dominant position as the voice of the centre-right in Europe. Secondly, it claims that large groups in the EP have worked together to bolster their positions. However, this perspective has yet to be developed fully by Conservative Eurosceptics, although Daniel Hannan has likened the funding of pro-European groups in the EP to ‘cartel democracies’ where state funding prevents new parties from challenging established ones.33 As we will see, the analysis of the EP undertaken by political scientists also casts some doubt on its utility.

Eurosceptic Conservatives contend that the relationship with the EPP–ED primarily serves the interests of the EPP by allowing it to maintain its pro-integration, social market ideology as the predominant perspective within the EP. This approach argues that the EPP has offered (limited) incentives to the Conservatives because of the benefits the EPP derives from the numbers and resources of the third largest delegation, and its desire to preserve its hegemonic status as the voice of the European centre-right. As part of the EPP–ED, the Conservatives’ ability to pursue an alternative position is limited. Conservatives are permitted to vote against the group position on institutional matters but this means that dissent is contained and minimised
within the group rather than allowed to flourish outside of it. The Conservative voice is muted and the delegation has little prospect of overturning the pro-integration majority in the group or the EP. On economic policy, the Conservatives find their message compromised, e.g. when the Services Directive was diluted despite the EPP–ED group co-ordinator being a Conservative MEP. To achieve the requisite legislative majority, the EPP–ED and PES often broker compromises that reflect their shared attachment to further integration and the social market economy.

Anti-EPP Conservatives also claim that the ED has not been allowed to develop into an effective unit. It lacks a substantive identity, meets irregularly and has little control over its finances or staff. Eurosceptics are frustrated by the EPP’s top slicing of just under 50% of the ‘3701 money’ allocated to Tory MEPs (at some €65,000 per MEP per annum) for administrative and information purposes, part of which is then spent by the EPP on pro-European campaigns. A new group, they argue, would bring financial benefits because it would control a budget totalling around £5 million, some of which could be spent on research and campaigns promoting an alternative vision of Europe. Eurosceptics also complain that the EPP has withheld the finances needed for the ED to promote its distinctive position, refusing, for example, to release funding for a Conservative–ODS event in Prague. Finally, Eurosceptics believe that the ED’s lack of success in recruiting parties is because, in some cases at least, potential allies have been dissuaded by offers of resources and threats of isolation made by the EPP.

Within the EP, the cartel perspective claims that the large groups, primarily the EPP–ED and PES, have acted together to develop rules and procedures in the EP (e.g. the weighting of votes in the Conference of Presidents) which favour them and penalise small groups and non-inscrits. Smaller groups complain that the EPP–ED and PES use their numerical strength to maximise their influence within the EP, e.g. by agreeing to support each other’s candidates for the post of EP President. Claims about EPP–PES collusion on legislative votes are, however, problematic: the two groups have voted together less often since pro-market parties joined the EPP–ED in the mid-1990s. The prospect of either group operating as an agenda-setting cartel is also limited because the legislative agenda of the EP is largely set by the Commission. Beyond the EP, some argue that the criteria transnational political parties must meet to receive EU funding, particularly the requirement for representation in at least a quarter of member states, prevents smaller parties from gaining access to EU funds and thus restricts competition. But, again, there is limited supporting evidence.

The arrival of new parties from central and eastern Europe since the 2004 enlargement of the EU is gradually changing the EPP–ED’s character and outlook. Many new parties were uncomfortable with the
leadership style and values of former group leader Hans-Gert Poettering (1999–2007). The election of the pro-integration, protectionist French MEP Joseph Daul as group leader suggests continuity. Yet Daul was chastened by the narrowness of his victory (134–115 on the fourth ballot) over the Swede Gunnar Hökmark, who won significant support from pro-market parties and those from central and eastern Europe.

Conclusions
In recent years, the Conservatives’ rocky relationship with the EPP–ED has undergone a number of renegotiations and attempts to leave. We have shown that the pros and cons of forming a new group are finely balanced. There are institutional advantages to being in a large group in the EP. Policy and office objectives can more likely be achieved with access to influential committee and EP leadership positions and rapporteurships, more of which go to the largest groups in the EP. The behaviour of MEPs in roll-call votes examined here suggests that the Conservatives differ most from the Christian Democrats on issues where the EP has less power and which constitute less of its workload. Being part of the EPP–ED does not stop them from voting differently to EPP parties when necessary. Furthermore, leaving the group would reduce the chances of obtaining the chair of one of the most legislatively active committees and might entail giving up other positions to smaller parties in return for their membership of a new group. If a small new group were to be formed, it would be fragile and, if the nationality requirement is only just met, vulnerable to defection. On the other hand, in terms of voting, the four cases presented here suggest congruence between the Conservatives, ODS and PiS as the core of a new group. If it managed to attract more mainstream parties, then a new group could challenge the EPP’s monopoly of the centre-right and shake up the group system in the EP (e.g. if the UEN was seriously weakened). In addition, if domestic party considerations prove more important to the Conservatives than policy or office objectives at the EU level, then leaving the EPP–ED would be the favoured option, regardless of posts lost in the EP.

Cameron claimed in July 2006 that ‘a new group is not an aspiration, it is a guarantee and it will be delivered’. But pro-European and Eurosceptic MEPs have their doubts because much could change over the next two years. Problems in recruiting parties could be more pronounced if those identified as probable members lose seats in the 2009 elections or get cold feet. Topolanek has not ruled out the possibility of the ODS staying in the EPP–ED. The EPP may also make additional concessions in an effort to persuade members of the ED section to remain within the group. The salience within the Conservative Party of the issue will determine its future development. Conservative candidates for the 2009 European elections are likely to be required to
commit to the party’s policy of forming a new group. A revised selection process offers some protection to incumbent MEPs, who will be vetted by a Regional Selection College and then ranked by party members on a separate ballot paper from the list of newcomers, but the post-2009 cohort is expected to have a higher proportion of Eurosceptics as some pro-European MEPs have indicated that they will not stand again. Cameron’s belief that instead of being ‘reluctant room mates of the EPP’, the Conservatives should be ‘friendly neighbours’ is a genuine one. However, if Cameron is in Downing Street by 2009, then the issue may fall some way down his list of priorities.

1 This research was supported by British Academy research grant SG-40183. We are grateful to the MEPs, MPs, and party and group officials who granted us non-attributable interviews. We also thank Matt Clark for his D’Hondt calculator program.


4 Between 1973 and the first direct elections to the EP in 1979, the group was called the European Conservatives.


8 D. Cameron, ‘I Want Us to be the Champions of Change and Hope’, Daily Telegraph, 14 July 2006, www.europeanreform.eu


11 For brief pen-pics, see Conservative Group for Europe, Meet the New Allies: Alternatives to the EPP-ED Group, Briefing no. 2, March 2006, www.cge.org.uk/

12 MEPs Robert Atkins and James Elles claimed that group status is a joint decision of the party leader and delegation leader. This is an informal convention; the party leader has ultimate authority.

13 Seven Conservative MEPs signed a letter welcoming the policy to leave the EPP–ED (Daily Telegraph, 1 October 2005): Callanan, Deva, Hannan, Heaton-Harris, Helmer, Sumberg and van Orden. Thirteen MEPs were signatories to a counter-letter supporting EPP–ED membership (Daily Telegraph, 5 October 2005): Ashworth, Atkins, Beazley, Bowis, Bushill-Matthews, Chichester, Elles, Evans, Harbour, Jackson, McMillan-Scott, Purvis and Stevenson. Dover and Kamall subsequently indicated that they would join a new group; Bradbourn (then chief whip), Kirkhope (leader), Parish, Sturdy and Tannock favoured the status quo.


15 Eurosceptic MEP Teresa Villiers was briefly deputy leader having stood on a joint ticket with Jonathan Evans in 2001.

16 Poettering stated that Helmer could not remain a member of the EPP–ED during the debate in the chamber. His suspension was then confirmed in a group meeting; Helmer voted in favour of his own exclusion.


19 Q. Davies, Letter to David Cameron, 26 June 2007, www.quentindaviesmp.com/node/55


23 Strøm, op. cit. n 2.


26 Ibid.

27 This figure rises to ten if Ulster Unionist MEP Jim Nicholson is included.

28 The final second reading vote was not taken by roll-call.


30 Since 2007, the number of vice chairs per committee has increased from three to four.


35 Ibid.


37 Lightfoot, ibid., p. 309.


40 Activist discontent about the selection process can be gauged from the ConservativeHome website www.conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/europe/index.html

41 D. Cameron, ‘We Have a Future to Fight For’, speech at launch of Movement for European Reform, 13 July 2006, www.europeanreform.eu/index.php/we-have-a-future-to-fight-for/