

How David Cameron Fooled the EU: The Conservative-Liberal Coalition's First Year in Europe

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Introduction

It's become something of a tradition. Successive British prime ministers have sought to act constructively in Europe only to be tripped up by domestic eurosceptics. In the run-up to the 2010 general election, this pattern seemed about to end, and at the European Union's expense. David Cameron had been giving signals that he would not struggle against the sceptics in his party but rather fight alongside them. Constructive relations seemed less of a priority to him than an aggressive renegotiation of Britain's relationship with the EU. In his first year in office, however, British policy fell into a familiar mould. Cameron infuriated domestic eurosceptics by failing to push robustly for a renegotiation of the UK's membership. This was not exactly constructive engagement, but it was nevertheless welcomed by other EU governments. Yet, Cameron's European policy in the first 12 months of office was less benevolent than it appeared. The present chapter suggests that such self-controlled disengagement was an actively eurosceptic policy, albeit one distinct from the rather shrill approach taken by Conservative backbenchers.

The Run-up to the 2010 General Election: Cameron's War Cry

In the years running up to the May 2010 general election, David Cameron took an aggressive line on the European Union and Britain's place in it. Commentators, accustomed to British politicians talking big on Europe before meekly recognising the need to 'engage constructively' initially set little store by his statements – here was a man exploiting the tactical advantages of loud euroscepticism to win over a party hostile to many of his policies. Yet, a more circumspect analysis suggested a different reality. A growing number of commentators argued that Cameron's policy on Europe was distinct from that of his predecessors: they argued that Cameron actually meant what he was saying. Over the course of Cameron's five-year preparations for the general election, there was mounting evidence that Britain was about to elect its first actively eurosceptic prime minister.

During his bid to secure election as leader of his party in 2005, for example, Cameron had made a pledge to withdraw the Conservatives from their relationship with the European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament. From a purely tactical point of view, this provided a means of undermining his rival for the post, David Davis, and most commentators suggested Cameron was grabbing a short term tactical advantage at the expense of the party's real influence in the European

Parliament (Lynch/Whitacker 2008; Maurer et al. 2008). After all, he was placating right-wing Conservatives who objected to the 'federalist thinking' associated with the EPP but undermining his party's very cosy position within the powerful group.¹ Cameron, it seemed, was prepared to gamble away his party's influence in the European Parliament for the sake of his own narrow gains.

Yet, with time, more circumspect analyses emerged to suggest that this was more than mere opportunism. Cameron was not, it seemed, simply pandering to Conservatives who disliked his broader agenda for modernising the party. As Cameron, now duly elected leader of the Conservatives, began to make good on his pledge to withdraw from the EPP and to forge a new group in the European Parliament, analysts sensed that he was driven not by self-serving opportunism but rather by a genuine desire to reform European affairs. Tactical considerations were still present of course: the task of founding a new group in the European Parliament was one of the few means Cameron had in opposition of proving his mettle. And it also marked a means of taking the wind out of the sails of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Yet, a sensitive analysis of the emerging group – named the European Conservatives and Reformists – suggested a coming together of like-minded individuals (Bale et al. 2010). Analysts argued that the new group was founded as part of an effort to promote Eurorealism and pro-market liberal conservatism – even if not all members embraced such values.

The long ratification process that accompanied the Lisbon Treaty provided the backdrop to the next chapter of Cameronian European policy. Cameron had been elected to the leadership of his party just as the EU's draft Constitutional Treaty was being rejected in France and the Netherlands. By the tail-end of 2007, when the Lisbon Treaty was agreed upon, he was calling for a popular referendum on the new treaty's ratification. To many commentators, this again looked like rather irresponsible opportunism. The principal focus of Cameron's activities at the time was domestic and party political: he was seeking to 'decontaminate' the party brand and present the Conservatives in an altogether softer light. And he was doing so in the face of deep hostility from the right wing of his party (some had gently suggested their new leader might just be the anti-Christ) (Evans 2008: 302). By calling for a referendum on the new EU treaty, Cameron was felt to be throwing a bone to the more traditionalist ranks of his party, and on an issue of little everyday importance to the public.

And yet, more circumspect analysis suggested that Cameron was actually pursuing his convictions. He was not simply playing politics at

¹ The Conservatives were treated as equal members of the EPP when it came to influencing group policy, but were given special leeway when it came to being bound to group positions (Gagatek 2004).

the expense of the stability of the country's relationship with the EU. Cameron was proposing a referendum because he genuinely wished to block the Treaty's application to the UK. This was, after all, a period where the Conservatives might well have found themselves unexpectedly in government. With EU-wide ratification of the Lisbon Treaty incomplete, they would thus have been obliged to honour the commitment to a referendum (Porter/Pierce 2007). The idea that Cameron was behaving like a harlot – enjoying power without responsibility – and demanding a referendum because the costs would be borne by the then Labour government, seemed weak. Moreover, Cameron's policy was deemed by some analysts to have helped realise Conservative goals in Europe. His demands for a referendum were felt to have strengthened the government's hand in EU negotiations – particularly on points which appealed to the Conservatives (Helm 2007).

The final chapter of Cameron's pre-government European policy opened in late 2009. With the Lisbon Treaty ratified, David Cameron conceded that a referendum would be rather futile. There was no way the UK could reverse facts. Cameron had, he said, put pressure on the Czech President to delay his country's ratification of the treaty long enough to permit a British referendum following a change of government, but his pleas had gone unheeded (Charter 2009). The reversal of his pledge to hold a popular vote was met with considerable criticism from a British public frustrated at promises of a referendum on Europe being whipped away from them (For example Carlin et al. 2007). Within the party too, there was criticism, but many eurosceptics signalled that they would be placated by an alternative approach that had a similar outcome (Kirkup 2009). At the end of 2009, Cameron therefore pledged to renegotiate the UK's relationship with the EU should his party be elected.

This was once again reminiscent of just the kind of short-termism that had been the hallmark of so many of Cameron's predecessors. Cameron, it appeared, was trying to get out of an immediate scrape with a promise which would come back to haunt him in the long term. Most analysts pointed, for example, to the difficulties involved in any renegotiation of competencies. Cameron had suggested that no new dedicated round of EU treaty change would be necessary – the UK would simply make its demands during upcoming treaty negotiations on Croatia's EU accession and be quickly and easily accommodated. Most analysts demurred. This readjustment of British EU membership would surely require a process of its own, and possibly trigger prolonged negotiations as other member states reopened the question of their relationship with Brussels. Given that the Conservative party had long criticised the EU for running from one round of institutional change to the next – and that every other actor in the EU was relieved to have put the latest round of treaty change behind it – it was hard to see how Cameron would realise his pledge without creating considerable ructions. And yet, he was soon to be found loosely promising

to reverse the transfer of competencies to the EU in areas such as social law and home affairs (Porter/Kirkup 2009).

Once again though, commentators pointed to what they saw as fundamental differences between David Cameron and previous Conservative leaders – differences which showed Cameron to be following his principles. For one thing, Cameron seemed a rather more complete eurosceptic than previous Conservative prime ministers had been (Hannan 2008). Margaret Thatcher and John Major had at least been able to appreciate the economic and market side of European cooperation, even if they disliked Delors's burgeoning social agenda (Grant 2008). Cameron, by contrast, found little to like in the EU set-up, and was expressing a genuine desire to extricate his country from political Europe. For another thing, Cameron's ideological completeness was increasingly reflected in his party as a whole. The old generation of pro-European Conservatives was slowly disappearing, and it was widely felt that the intake of new MPs following the upcoming general election would be both more uniformly eurosceptic and more ambitious in their readiness to take on the EU, thanks to their inexperience of the ways of Brussels.² The list of pledges released by Cameron in November 2009 was therefore taken seriously as a statement of intent.

In the event, the May 2010 general election brought no clear majority for the Conservatives, and both David Cameron and the then prime minister Gordon Brown began courting the Liberal Democrats. Despite the fact that many in Britain's third party felt naturally drawn to Labour thanks to their social democratic tradition, Cameron prevailed. In double-quick time the eurosceptic Conservatives had formed a coalition government with the chirpily pro-European Liberal Democrats, eschewing the looser option of a parliamentary pact.

Once again, there was a chorus of voices from analysts opining that the formation of a coalition would open the way to opportunism from Cameron: rather than implement his commitment to renegotiate Britain's constitutional settlement with the EU and to create a domestic 'lock' on the transfer of any further competences to Brussels, Cameron would use his coalition partners as an excuse to take an emollient tone.³ The EU could therefore look forward to a further few years of a British prime minister seeking to engage constructively in Europe by wrong-footing his own party. The coalition's term of office would be characterised by a government buying its capacity to cooperate with its European partners by means of a series of concessions to domestic sceptics – concessions which would slowly cut off all room for manoeuvre. Same old story.

And once again, voices emerged to counter this assumption. They suspected that on some aspects of European affairs, the Liberal Democrats

² For an analysis of the cohort effect, see Bale (2006).

³ For a flavour of this, see Shipman (2010).

would actually provide robust support to the Conservatives rather than tempering their euroscepticism. The outgoing Labour government had, after all, also understood itself to be pro-European. And it had principally interpreted this to mean it had a right to make strident demands on its European partners, not to mention lecturing other governments on the reform of their economies. There was every reason to believe the Liberal Democrats would display much the same *gaucherie*. Outside the big constitutional issues regarding repatriation of powers then, there would be little to separate the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in their approach to Europe (Brogan 2010):

“Nick Clegg has had no difficulty in impressing when on his European tour. With his colloquial Spanish and easy German, he stood out after the monoglot years of Labour and Gordon Brown. Yet European politicians who assume that Mr Clegg represents a parallel diplomatic track to Mr Cameron are in for a rude awakening. Anyone in Whitehall or Brussels who hopes to play the Prime Minister off against his deputy will discover that policies and minutes will be in both of their names. Indeed, Mr Clegg is intent on playing the role of the bad cop, and using his European credentials to deliver some difficult messages about the need for EU economies to sort themselves out. He wants a public debate about the Union's economic problems, even if it risks dragging Britain into a discussion of what the solutions might be.”

Analysts thus looked to the pledges made by the Conservatives in November 2009 in order to divine the new government's policy. These pledges included an undertaking to put to a popular vote further treaty changes entailing a transfer of power to the EU and a promise to hold a proper parliamentary debate about the use of ‘*passerelle clauses*’ (treaty articles which permit governments to cooperate more closely on certain matters without resorting to treaty change). Besides these measures which they termed ‘*unilateral*’, the Conservatives also set out their desire to renegotiate the terms of Britain's membership on issues such as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (‘*a full opt-out*’), social and employment law (‘*restoration of control*’) and justice affairs (‘*greater protection against encroachment*’), exploiting the inevitable treaty negotiations that would accompany future EU enlargement (Cameron 2009).

Most enticingly for commentators who relished the idea of a proper bust-up between the UK and the EU, the Conservative leader also seemed ready to make demands of the EU should the EU make demands of the UK: Cameron believed the negotiations on the EU's multiannual budgetary framework (which began in June 2011) would provide an opportunity to pull back national competencies (Daily Telegraph 2009). In other words, if continentals wanted British cash they would have to pay for it.

One Year in Office: Britain's Policy of the Empty Chair

Taking stock twelve months on, predictions of a new, robustly eurosceptic Britain fell short of the mark. There had been no serious demands for a

return of competences. And there had been no continuity with Labour's previous hectoring style. Indeed, the reality was that European policy had scarcely figured on the British government's agenda. Few outsiders could actually say what the government's European policy was. The coalition programme, the most obvious port-of-call for such queries, offered few insights. It merely picked up on a selection of the Conservatives' 2009 pledges, albeit couching them in some softer mood lighting. Gone were the sharp words about European criminal law and the repatriation of powers on social affairs; in was some rather woolly language about the protection of national sovereignty (UK Government 2010):

"We will ensure that the British Government is a positive participant in the European Union, playing a strong and positive role with our partners, with the goal of ensuring that all the nations of Europe are equipped to face the challenges of the 21st century: global competitiveness, global warming and global poverty. We will ensure that there is no further transfer of sovereignty or powers over the course of the next Parliament. We will examine the balance of the EU's existing competences and will, in particular, work to limit the application of the Working Time Directive in the United Kingdom. We will amend the 1972 European Communities Act so that any proposed future treaty that transferred areas of power, or competences, would be subject to a referendum on that treaty – a 'referendum lock'. We will amend the 1972 European Communities Act so that the use of any passerelle would require primary legislation. We will examine the case for a United Kingdom Sovereignty Bill to make it clear that ultimate authority remains with Parliament. We will ensure that Britain does not join or prepare to join the Euro in this Parliament. We will strongly defend the UK's national interests in the forthcoming EU budget negotiations and agree that the EU budget should only focus on those areas where the EU can add value. We will press for the European Parliament to have only one seat, in Brussels. We will approach forthcoming legislation in the area of criminal justice on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country's security, protecting Britain's civil liberties and preserving the integrity of our criminal justice system. Britain will not participate in the establishment of any European Public Prosecutor. We support the further enlargement of the EU."

Besides these rather general statements, the coalition programme offered few clues about the government's day-to-day approach or priorities. And the truth was that, since coming to power, the Conservative-Liberal coalition had not developed a policy on Europe so much as a *modus operandi*. The British government quite simply avoided all possible contact with the EU in a bid to avoid diversions from its pressing domestic agenda. Any sense of EU engagement, be it constructive or antagonistic, evaporated. London gave other governments to understand that, if the EU pretended the UK was not there, the UK would happily reciprocate. It was a new take on the policy of the empty chair. As one analyst correctly guessed as the government took office,

"[i]f the Coalition agreement is a fair guide to the next five years, the predominant tone of the Coalition's European policy will be one of [...] standing aside from the European Union" (Donnelly 2009).

One word in particular illustrated the British government's approach to European cooperation: 'obstacle'. Numerous EU laws were found to run

counter to the government's domestic agenda. They stood in the way of plans to localize British VAT rates, lower petrol tax in rural areas, alter working-time legislation, change equality laws and repeal superfluous national regulation (Spectator 2010). But rather than viewing these EU obligations in their true sense as pertaining to an active two-sided relationship, David Cameron presented them as rather abstract and static obstacles put in place in order to be overcome. The government seemed to believe that the country must simply move ahead with domestic reform efforts, and manoeuvre itself around these invasive laws (Gaskell/Persson 2010). The last thing Cameron wanted was for his MPs to get the impression that they could only progress domestically if they first reformed the European Union.

This *modus operandi* saw the UK remove itself from positions of influence within the EU.⁴ When offered involvement in Eurogroup-meetings for example, the British government tended to back away. In this regard, the withdrawal of his party from the EPP by David Cameron was something of a precedent: membership of the EPP would only have given the UK leverage to exert itself in Europe – leverage which would have been vastly overestimated by the greenhorns in his party. Instead of remaining connected and trying to make the EU a more amenable place, Cameron disconnected and renounced influence. This pattern continued throughout the first year, with Cameron removing all sources of temptation from his party colleagues, even at the expense of the government's direct influence in the EU. This self-controlled approach suggested the UK government was at ease with the idea of a two-tier Europe in a way that its predecessors had not been.

Whilst the UK government was quite active in building partnerships with its counterparts in other EU member states, this alliance-building tended to deal somewhat peripherally with EU affairs. Meetings with key figures such as the German Chancellor dealt with a whole range of issues such as the G-20 and NATO (Stern 2010). The intensified Anglo-French cooperation on defence matters occurred despite rather than because of the EU, even if the EU's already fragmented defence arrangements were able to accommodate such initiatives (Simón/Rogers 2010). Meanwhile, the London summit with Scandinavian and Baltic states gathered countries which are predominantly outside the Eurozone and which hold something of an 'outlier' status on EU affairs (Hutton 2011). Where the government did voice its support for further European integration, it tended to pass the buck to other member states (Economist 2010; Keegan 2011).

Moreover, even when in a position of potential influence, the government sat on its hands. A briefing published by the House of Commons library summarised the early behaviour of British ministers – behaviour which seemed designed to communicate that the EU had nothing to fear

⁴ For an early analysis, see Parkes (2009).

from the UK (Miller 2011):

“[i]n spite of reports of pessimism in other EU Member States at the prospect of a Conservative-led government, David Cameron’s first appearance at a European Council summit gave rise to optimism. Benedict Brogan, of the Daily Telegraph, who stated that before the election ‘the chancelleries of Europe could scarcely disguise their disdain for these Tory barbarians who appeared eager to smash the euro-consensus’, reported in mid-June 2010 that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Caroline Spelman, ‘stunned her new colleagues on the agriculture and fisheries council by chatting in fluent French and German, and showing a mastery of her brief’, that George Osborne had ‘reassured his fellow finance ministers [...] with a sombre assessment of the British fiscal position, and delighted them by dropping Gordon Brown’s persistent demands for a written commitment to the need for fiscal stimulus’.”

The UK’s purposeful disengagement from European issues helped Cameron avoid making concessions to sceptics in the party: he seldom made demands on the sceptics, so had to offer them nothing. By way of example: the European Union Bill, the legislative proposal designed to realise the coalition programme’s commitments on Europe, was widely taken as proof that Cameron had resisted the more radical groups in his party. Cameron was deemed to have resisted the pressure from his own party to toughen up the Bill, to the degree in fact that the Bill was all but meaningless. The Bill made only loose declarations about the sovereignty of Parliament, leading to a good dose of criticism from sceptic MPs such as Bill Cash (Fox 2011). On the thornier issues mentioned in the Conservatives’ 2009 policy document – above all the repatriation of Britain’s competencies in areas like social affairs and justice policy – analysis suggests that Cameron successfully thwarted the sceptics (Miller 2011).

The Response of Britain’s EU Partners: Indulgence

Given that this is a coalition government with a deep ideological split on Europe, the reasons for adopting such a modus operandi were clear. Conservative backbenchers were spoiling for a fight with the EU. Cameron refused to give them reason to. But, if that was Cameron’s aim, there was an obvious weakness in his approach. The European Union is not the static obstacle course that the prime minister portrayed. EU membership would inevitably demand active exertions from the British government. Analysts therefore begun betting how much goading Conservative MPs would put up with before they demanded the government actively assert the national interest, as they see it. Would it be the negotiations on the EU’s budgetary framework or the institutional wrangling over EU enlargement that roused the sleeping Tory tiger? Would it be the decision about whether the UK chooses to remain part of EU justice and home affairs policy, a decision tabled by the current treaty for the run-up to the next general

election?⁵ Would it be the possible advent of Scottish independence and the need for the rump-UK to renegotiate its relationship with the EU?⁶

Yet, predictions of a definitive break with Europe ignored the good will that Cameron enjoyed in Europe. Against the odds, David Cameron could still look forward to a measure of indulgence from his counterparts on issues such as the EU budget and the question whether the UK remains a part of EU home affairs cooperation. This was because Cameron's disengagement from the EU was viewed by his continental partners as an active commitment to European cooperation and one which should be supported and rewarded (Independent 2010a). Having witnessed his withdrawal from the EPP and expected the worst, they looked upon Cameron's first year of European policy as an act of supreme self-control. This in turn allowed Cameron to convert a position of weakness into one of entitlement. Whereas other governments were simply expected to meet their responsibilities to the EU, Cameron could actually demand concessions when Europe came knocking. With all the other EU members scrambling to resuscitate the Eurozone, the British premier not only succeeded in extricating his government from any such duties, he also identified Europe's financial crisis as a good opportunity to get something back from the EU (Forsyth/Nelson 2011).

This was a considerable achievement – of sorts – on the part of the British prime minister. Other EU member states ought by all rights to be irked by Britain's almost complete disengagement from European affairs. With the European Council strengthened by the Lisbon Treaty, there is increased pressure on all EU governments to behave constructively, and there is little sympathy for a government that fails to do so (Kremer/Parkes 2010). With the EU being buffeted by the deepest crises in the bloc's history – not just the Euro but also the principle of free movement are undergoing existential strains – governments really had no excuse for disengagement. Yet, Cameron was exerting something akin to 'remote control' over Brussels. He successfully hived the country off from any sense of responsibility, pointing out that the UK was something of a smiling second-tier member of the EU (Economist 2010). This allowed him to keep the UK outside most of the rescue measures (Grice 2011), whilst allowing him to extract concessions from other governments on questions such as economic governance and financial regulation as if the UK were a fully paid up EU member (Parkes 2011).

The source of this special treatment was clear. David Cameron successfully presented himself to his European counterparts as a passive victim of a European set-up which seemed tailor made to enrage his party

⁵ For further background on the British opt-out from justice and home affairs, see Peers (2009).

⁶ On the implications of Scottish independence for the UK's relationship with the EU, see Happold (1999).

– he was a man making a selfless commitment to the EU's stability by keeping the UK on the sidelines of Europe and preventing his country from pursuing its own destructive urge. Cameron thus exploited the low expectations across Europe of his premiership as well as the pungent legacy of a series of tricky British governments in order to foster the idea that he was doing his EU partners a favour by keeping his parliamentarians in check and resisting their urge to embark on a destructive reform of the Union. His disengagement from Europe was viewed as roughly equivalent to the concerted engagement expected of all other countries, and he is offered concessions as a payoff for his willingness to keep the UK on the sidelines. This all begs the question: how well have other governments assessed Cameron and his motives? How constructive is Cameron's disengagement really?

A New Kind of Euroscepticism: European Policy Through the Domestic Lens

Viewed from mainland Europe, Cameron's behaviour seems a logical continuation of a familiar pattern in British European policy. European governments are accustomed to watching as British prime ministers struggle bravely with eurosceptics in their party. Successive UK prime ministers have sought to engage constructively with Europe, but have found themselves throwing short-term concessions to domestic sceptics – concessions which gradually reduced the government's scope for manoeuvre and ended in disaster. This policy of ever decreasing circles has become something of a norm. Indeed, other capitals assume that most British European policy occurs without the agency of the government itself – Whitehall simply being tossed about on a sea of unfortunate populism. They therefore welcomed Cameron's efforts at disengagement as a means of re-establishing a measure of agency.

Yet, anyone ignorant of this back history would find it extremely odd that such disengagement should be viewed as positive commitment, especially since Cameron and his closest cabinet colleagues usually exhort above all else active membership of a community and participation (BBC 2010). Given their efforts to encourage the British people to build the 'Big Society' at home, the Cameroons ought to view the kind of disengagement from the community which Cameron showed at the European level as anti-social and unsustainable. Seen in the light of this domestic agenda, it would not be far fetched to call Cameron's first year of European policy a double standard. After all, numerous scholars have stressed the influence of domestic 'frames' on countries' pursuit of European policy (Medrano 2003). Academics believe national actors apply to their European policy the standards and assumptions that inform their domestic politics. Cameron pursued a policy at the European level which ran directly counter to the standards and beliefs he is pursuing at the national. Rather than situating the current government's European policy in the context of

previous British governments' European policy, it is therefore worth exploring its relationship to Cameron's domestic political 'frame'.

The eighteenth century ideologue Edmund Burke provides the lens through which Cameron's Conservatives view the world around them.⁷ Burke's influence underlies the 'Big Society', and gives today's Conservatives an instinctive dislike of ideological attempts to steer and alter society from the top down. Such attempts, the Conservatives believe, amount to nothing more than a dangerous and meddling desire to tidy up a complex social reality. The Burkean vision of politics is one that instead emerges organically out of a messy society, one in which popular tradition and convention, rather than legislative intervention, rule supreme. For Burke, rules and institutions should not be set in stone. Indeed, change and development form the guiding principles of Burkean thinking. But, believed Burke, change should not be radical. After all, politics is a pact between current and future generations. Each generation has a duty to avoid permanent, institutionalized arrangements that would reduce future generations' room for manoeuvre.⁸

With its penchant for top-down elite-driven interventions, as well as its heavy institutionalisation and its excessive rule-making, the EU would break most of Burke's principles. It is probably for this reason that Conservative ministers have criticized the EU as conducive to mission creep (foreign relations) and for its muddle-headed attempts to tidy up complex social relations (gender equality) (Waterfield 2011). And yet, the Conservatives have not reacted to these irritants in line with their own Burkean principles. One would expect them to remain open to European cooperation, even as they rail against the artificiality of the work of the eurocrats. And one would expect them to try to gradually reform the EU so that it moves away from top-down rule-making and towards convention and ethos. Yet, the European policy offered by Cameron is distinctly non-Burkean. At the very same time as he is trying to create a Burkean 'Big Society' at home, one in which the last government's rules and interventions are slowly replaced by active social engagement, in Europe he is behaving in a distinctly disengaged and antisocial manner.

Moreover, it is not just this passivity in Europe which is so un-Burkean. The British government has actively strengthened the EU's un-Burkean traits. The government's European Union Bill is a case in point. It foresees a British referendum should further powers be transferred to the EU. Yet, the very idea of a referendum would make Burke spin in his grave: plebiscites lend themselves both to ideologically-driven simplification and to permanent settlements. Moreover, the language which Cameron uses to describe the EU invites a permanent, negative settlement. Cameron talks of the EU's use of a 'ratchet clause' to gain new powers. Everyone else in

⁷ See, for example, Independent (2010b).

⁸ For a recent analysis of Burke's thinking, see Crowe (2005).

the EU knows these clauses by the rather more neutral name of 'passerelles' (Donnelly 2011: 8). Elsewhere too Burkean adaptability is in short supply. The Conservatives have permanently ruled out the prospects of British accession to the Schengen Area and the eurozone. Had they left open the prospect of future membership, the government would at least have bought itself some leverage in negotiations on Schengen and economic governance (Donnelly 2011: 7-8). This kind of permanent settlement is not the stuff of Burkean pragmatism. Through such measures, Cameron is creating an EU that the UK cannot properly engage with or influence.

Conclusions: An Increasingly British Europe, Opposed by the British

Cameron's distinctly un-Burkean approach to the European Union came at a time when the EU was actually developing Burkean traits. Other governments were, for example, increasingly advocating a process of slow and gradual adaptation in the EU's constitutional development and a move away from big-bang treaty changes. It was the UK which was blocking this rather Burkean approach (Donnelly 2011). Moreover, as the European Council emerged as a more important political forum, nudging the European Commission further to the sidelines, a less formalistic understanding of cooperation and integration also emerged. In the development of the Schengen Area in 2011, for example, member states rejected mechanistic, top-down policies designed to bypass the tensions between them. Governments stressed instead ethos and the meaning behind the formal rules. This was clear when they denied Bulgaria and Romania access to the Schengen zone for their failure to live up to the spirit rather than the letter of the accession rules. It was clear when the member states opposed legalistic efforts to regulate complex values such as 'solidarity' and 'fairness' in asylum and border control, preferring instead to fight it out between themselves (Parkes 2011). The UK appeared ill at ease with such developments.

Why would a party that opposes the EU for its rigid legislative rules actively constrain its own engagement through rigid rules and permanent settlements? One possible explanation is inescapable. Burkeans, as Cameron pertains to be, have a strong understanding not only of how to allow society to flourish but also of how to stifle it – this involves institutionalization, artificial rules and referendums. Does Cameron prefer to stifle British engagement in the EU rather than opening himself to an adaptation that would likely see his party cede power? It raises the intriguing possibility that David Cameron's first year of European policy was actively eurosceptic, but in a way distinct from the shrill variant advocated by his backbenchers. Whatever the case, this approach is making proper British engagement in the EU increasingly untenable. It leaves the UK heavily influenced by developments within the EU but formally constrained in its scope to influence it back.

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