



# Cameron's Europe policy

Roger Liddle and Simon Latham

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**Coy on how he might approach EU integration, David Cameron is playing a high stakes game which could have long-term implications for Britain and Europe**

David Cameron's close friend, confidant and shadow Schools Secretary, Michael Gove, once said of the Conservative leader: "He's not rabidly ideological. He is the kind of poker player who waits and reads the other players and bets when he knows the alignment is in his favour."

On Europe, Cameron is often tempted into playing his hand aggressively. According to the Tory leader's biographers' Francis Elliot and James Hanning, it was Cameron who crafted Norman Lamont's infamous "No one would die for Europe" speech to the Conservative Political Centre before the 1992 Tory Conference. In this respect, as Elliot and Hanning note, Cameron's Euroscepticism has always been loyally Thatcherite.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Cameron's Conservatives remain out-of-kilter with the realities of European integration. Today's conventional wisdom is that the EU has to find a new rationale, now that the old one of ending war and division in Europe has been achieved with such conspicuous success – as the recent celebrations to mark the twentieth anniversary of the downfall of the Berlin Wall underlined. Globalisation is widely regarded as providing the obvious basis for this new rationale.

To state the case simply, as Europeans do we want the future of our world to be determined by a new G2 of China and the United States? Or do we favour a G3 where the nation states of Europe find the will to act together in concert?

At one level, these developments are good news for British Euro pragmatists: a school of thought which has always recognised the political constraints on Britain's commitment to European integration, but also forewarns of the utter folly of ending up, to use Lyndon Johnson's phrase, on "the outside pissing in".

At a deeper level, however, the surface logic of the "Global Europe" argument is not as reassuring for the pragmatic sceptics. For cooperative action on global issues – trade and international

economics, energy and climate change, international development, and immigration and security – intrudes on sensitive matters of national sovereignty, far more so than EU regulations of a bygone age which led to Douglas Hurd to rail against Europe reaching into “the nooks and crannies” of ordinary daily life.

Today, both Labour and the Conservatives claim they want to make a success of British membership – according, at least, to their own leaderships’ perceptions of what kind of EU they find Britain to be a member of. But this consensus is undoubtedly fragile.

Indeed, in David Cameron’s most candid speech on Europe to date – it was designed to clarify his party’s position on the now ratified Lisbon Treaty but rather obfuscated their prior commitment “not to let matters rest there” in the event of ratification – he argued for a “never again” strategy, which under a Tory government would use parliament to install a “referendum lock”, a “Sovereignty Bill”, and stop “the use of ratchet clauses”, in order to reverse the “steady and unaccountable intrusion of the European Union into almost every aspect of our lives”. Cameron concluded that on “Britain’s relationship with Europe – what people want from their politicians is some straight talk and plain speaking”, but Cameron’s version of straight talk will at best jar abrasively with our EU partners, if he sticks to the tone of his most recent Conference speech about progressives on the left of British politics falling “in love with an institution that no one elects, no one can remove, and that hasn’t signed off its accounts for over a decade.”

Our argument is that, for Cameron the poker-player, there are three possible future scenarios for Britain’s EU policy under a Conservative government. The first is as easily discardable as a high-card or no-pair hand, since it is geared around the development of a “*more committed pro-Europeanism*” that would be conceived as a result of a conclusive settlement of our EU membership as the best available means for Britain to project its values and interests in a global age. It might in time lead to a higher priority for European defence and foreign policy-making, not to mention a reconsideration of whether it is in Britain’s interests to join the euro.

The second policy scenario is “*unsteady she goes*” conditional Europeanism. It is the agenda which best characterises government policy under New Labour since 1997 and is very much a flush of a hand – for a cautious Cameron government as much as the pro-European lobby in British politics – since it would represent a continuation of current government policy towards the EU. In this scenario, Britain would cautiously support Europe, while also at times being awkward and even confrontational in its engagement on certain issues, for although Britain increasingly relies on the EU to achieve its global policy objectives such as trade, international economics and climate change, big policy tensions remain in areas such as financial regulation, the EU budget and the EU’s future institutional development.

The final and most scary scenario for pro-Europeans is one of “*stand-off, stalemate and possible crisis*”. This is the straight flush that many Thatcherite Eurosceptics yearn for. As a policy agenda, it could lead to a period of withering EU effectiveness akin to the one which occurred at the time of Margaret Thatcher’s “I want my money back” row with our then EC partners over the Community’s budget in the early 1980s. It could also provoke an existential political crisis in Britain’s relations with the EU.

The ominous question that looms over a possible Conservative government is which hand David Cameron is dealt, how he feels the game has aligned, and how aggressively he wants to play. This is a big test of what kind of Prime Minister Cameron might be. Is he an old fashioned Tory pragmatist, as the few remaining pro-Europeans in his camp still hope or someone made of an altogether harder ideological mettle?

**Roger Liddle is the chair of Policy Network and was Tony Blair's special adviser on Europe from 1997-2004. Simon Latham is the principal adviser to the chair of Policy Network.**

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