



CAMERON IS LOOKING FOR ALLIES, IN EUROPE TOO

In Great Britain this was above all the election period, which for the first time in the nearly 40 years gave no Party an absolute majority of seats. The coalition Government is not the one that a certain kind of press wanted, that is the already tested alliance between Labour Party and Liberal Party (which had been seen, albeit briefly and with a negative outcome at the end of the 1970s, as well as in Scotland a few years ago). Cameron has crowned his dream of ascending to Downing Street, cultivated ever since his election to the leadership of the Conservatives at the end of 2005. But his deputy-leader is Nick Clegg, leader of the Lib-Dems who, after having been the star of the election campaign, has managed to capitalise on a rather modest result (a few more votes, but fewer seats as compared with the 2005 elections) taking to Government almost half of his Parliamentary group. And who, even just a few days before the vote, boasted of a position diametrically opposed to that of Cameron on Europe and immigration. In the past few weeks the press has focused greatly on the vote of 6th May and on the first actions of the new Government, which soon had to draft a strict financial recovery plan (1). But a lot of emphasis has also been given to Cameron's debut in Europe, which has undermined at least a few of the fears on the eve of his elections. Less than one year ago the leader had greatly annoyed Merkel and Sarkozy by withdrawing the Conservatives from the PPE. Later he had continued to stigmatise the approval of the Lisbon Treaty, stressing the aim to "bring home powers from Brussels," a distinguishing sign of Conservatives rhetoric concerning Europe for over 10 years. How can this position be conciliated with Clegg's Europhilia? Perhaps by remembering the danger of the Europe issue for Cameron Party, which in its last experience of Government spit over it, thereby paving the way to 13 years of Labour Government.

1. Before the vote...

As is well-known the British press takes sides before the elections. The electoral endorsements had been quite representative of the climate of opinion prevailing on the eve of the vote. If we make an exception for the papers that had for some time openly been backing Cameron (the *Daily Telegraph* was

Conservative even when, in the early years of New Labour, many were supporting Blair), the conversion of the Times should be noted (which had not supported the Tories since 1992) and the *Financial Times* (2), besides the Economist, from Labour to Cameron, while the position of the *Independent* was more elaborate (in its Sunday version) and the *Guardian*, which invited their readers to choose strategically, from constituency to constituency, in anti-Tory terms (3). Reading these articles we could make out how, during the election campaign, the Tories lead had become dangerously reduced. The prospect of a coalition was, however, above all thought of in Lab-Lib terms. And it is indeed on the European issues that it seemed that the gap between Conservatives and Lib-Dems was unbridgeable. And yet....

2. A tandem at Downing Street

In the *Financial Times*, the historian Peter Clarke compared with the new-born coalition with the eruption of the Icelandic volcano: it could not be predicted, it was not expected to last, everyone thought it was a disaster (4). Certainly, the coalitions are something practically unknown of in British politics of the last 70 years. They were virtually the rule in the half-century between 1885 and 1931, while Labour was being founded and started putting the Liberals progressively with their backs to the wall. Today's average British elector does not have memories of tandems or government cohabitations therefore. Here then the newspapers try to answer the readers' naive questions: will the two Parties merge? Obviously not, and they even kept their respective candidates for the by-election on 27th May in the constituency of Thirsk and Malton which led to the Parliamentary plenum. If anything, what has immediately seemed to be at play is the capacity of the two leaders to give a concrete shape to the slogan of New Politics. Which, in the case of the relation with the European partners, above all means finding an acceptable compromise between the distant positions of the two coalition partners, who have an important role also because they represent the central wings of their respective Parties: thanks to their protagonism they have so far managed to put in the background the differences between Tories and Lib-Dems.

On Europe, as has been underlined by the more careful commentators, Cameron has been lucky. Certainly the Eurosceptical wing of the Party will be vigilant, and will make itself heard in the next few months. But it has been the alliance with

Clegg that has allowed him to combine the pragmatism that had led to the coalition agreement to back down on some key issues in the Conservative campaign, such as further opt-outs on justice or the human rights charter, while the idea of the examining the project for a UK Sovereignty Act will probably mean it will be shelved. At the same time Cameron can state that he has kept three fundamental, which in reality today cost him practically nothing: staying outside the Euro, the need not to pass majority laws without the pronouncement of Westminster (but it is already like that), and that there will be a referendum in the case of a new European treaty: but who is thinking of that today, after the labours of Lisbon? (5).

In the meantime, the two other important elections in the two-month period, in the Netherlands and in Belgium, have seen in one case the rise of the extreme Right-wing and, in the other, the serious prospect of a fracture in the country (6). Whichever party is in office, in Great Britain the general theme however is always the same one: that of feeling with one foot inside and one foot outside of Europe. According to Timothy Garton Ash, Great Britain cannot call itself out, seeing that the loan granted to Greece early in May is guaranteed by the European budget that it contributes. The former Chancellor Darling, as his last move, gave the green light to the plan, albeit excluding a direct contribution of the country, differentiating himself in that from Poland and Sweden which, whilst not being in the Eurozone, took part in it (7). In early June, the *Economist* was urging the Cameron government to reflect seriously on the implications of the opt-outs, and on a relationship that, after thirteen years of Labour government, is still ambivalent (8).

Taking the coalition agreement by the letter, in general it seemed as though the Conservatives had prevailed on the European issues, with the already cited No to the Euro (and with the preparations to its introduction), or to any further sovereignty concessions, with a referendum on every possible future treaty, defence of the national interest on the talks for the European budget, single site for the European parliament in Brussels. This leads us to think to a more Eurosceptical orientation as compared with that of the Brown Government, increasing the curiosity over Cameron's first steps in Europe.

3. Eggs and bacon for Cameron in Brussels

If, however, we judge from the debut of the new Prime Minister, which occurred in the European Council on 17th June, it seems as though pragmatism came out on top, so much so that the most Eurosceptical commentators have gone so far as to argue, some ten days afterwards, that Cameron is on the verge of capitulating to the construction of a European economic governance, without all that this means in terms of vigilance over national budget policies and the regulation of the financial system (9).

In the meanwhile, however, much of the press has given a positive welcome to the European pragmatism of the first few weeks of the Cameron-Clegg Government. The first signal of a relaxation was the appointment of David Lidington to the Europe post, instead of the person occupying the post in the Shadow Government during the last three years of Tory opposition, the Eurosceptic Mark Francois (10). At the European Council the forecasts of those who thought that the new coalition, at least in the very short-term, would not have encountered big difficulties, seemed to be confirmed. At least in this regard it is worth pointing out the opinion of a veteran of British and European politics like the former Commissioner and long-standing Conservative Minister Leon Brittan (frequent writer for the *Financial Times*), who stepped in to give his reassurance as to the solidity of the Cameron-Clegg electoral pact precisely on Europe, which he himself considers to be one of the most delicate aspects. Brittan noted, however, that even Great Britain ought to understand that on two themes, the environment and energy, it has every interest to consolidate the birth of a European position (11).

Certainly, it would be risky to say that Cameron in Brussels felt at home. In a Europe in which people have gone so far as to question the survival of the Euro (12) and in which the divergences between France and Germany dominate (13), Cameron has exchanged the favour of the English-style breakfast with a (pro)active attitude: no problem in acknowledging the appropriateness of a tax on banks (which, moreover, he is planning at the national level as well); good for him that the only controversial point, i.e. the appropriateness of the preliminary opinion of Brussels on the British budget, has been avoided owing to the Franco-German divisions on the issue. Cameron thus seems to have as his primary goal that of avoiding conflicts, well aware of the fact that there will soon be reasons for debate at the European summits, in particular on the CAP and the budget

(14).

4. The musical chairs of the Presidencies and Van Rompuy's role

What will Europe do to emerge from the crisis? If France and Germany fight, on 30th June the Spanish Presidency semester ended, necessarily a low profile one owing to the serious economic difficulties of the country, according to some, also for the skill of Herman van Rompuy to at last cut out for himself a visible role in his Presidency. In particular, we should point out the opinion of one of the leading experts on European issues, Tony Barber, always highly balanced in his analyses, who in the *Financial Times* (15) underlines the metamorphosis of the grey and all but charismatic Belgian politician. At the time when it is his country's turn to take over the semester Presidency shift, he has earned credit in the management of the crisis, first by chairing two Council meetings of the Eurozone (a task not envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty), then by managing to be appointed head of a task force that by October will have to decide on how to reinforce the governance of the Eurozone. According to Barber (whose opinion seems to be rather isolated as compared with the rest of the British press), his rise is due to three factors: the crisis of the Franco-German axis, the Spanish crisis (which did not allow Zapatero to lead a first-rate Presidency semester), and the loss of sheen of Jean-Claude Juncker, who has allegedly dissatisfied Sarkozy, by many now seen as Van Rompuy's main sponsor. The calendar of the upcoming Presidencies – Belgium, Hungary and Poland – leads us to think that his further reinforcement might be possible, and this might lead to his confirmation after his first two-and-a-half year mandate.

(1) *The meaning of austerity*, The Economist, 26-06-2010.

(2) *The case for change in the UK*, Financial Times, 04-05-2010; *Vote of confidence* The Times, 01-05-2010.

(3) *Vote for change. Real change*, The Independent on Sunday, 02-05-2010, *The liberal moment has come*, The Guardian, 01-05-2010.

(4) *Britain is no stranger to successful coalitions*, Financial Times, 17-05-2010.

(5) C. Grant, *Will the Conservatives' charm offensive endure?*, Centre for European Reform Bulletin, June-July 2010.

- (6) *Dutch dilemma*, Financial Times, 11-06-2010; *The Belgian Conundrum*, Financial Times, 16-06-2010.
- (7) T. Garton Ash, *Britain and Europe are living separate crises. Underneath, it's the same one*, The Guardian, 13-05-2010.
- (8) *No laughing matter*, The Economist, 05-06-2010.
- (9) B. Waterfield, *David Cameron will back down in fight with EU, say officials*, The Daily Telegraph, 30-06-2010.
- (10) N. Watt, *David Lidington appointed Europe minister in sign of Tory thaw on EU*, The Guardian, 14-05-2010.
- (11) L. Brittan, *Yes, they can work together- even on Europe* The Times, 13-05-2010.
- (12) *Will the euro survive?* The Times, 20-05-2010.
- (13) C. Grant, *Merkel and Sarkozy must learn to work together*, Financial Times, 19-05-2010; J. Lichfield, *Franco-German relations cool over eurozone crisis*, The Independent, 09-06-2010.
- (14) *Cameron's surprisingly constructive approach*, The Independent, 18-06-2010, *Cameron's first EU summit: Dave meets the neighbours*, The Guardian, 18-06-2010.
- (15) T. Barber, *Nimble-footed Van Rompuy avoids mousetrap*, Financial Times, 23-06-2010.