



## **AFTER LISBON: FACES (PARTLY) NEW, BUT OLD PROBLEMS?**

As the first few blows in the long campaign for the spring political elections are starting to be traded, on the European side the last two months of 2009 can be read through the analysis of the main novelties, interconnected between themselves: the final approval of the Lisbon Treaty, the subsequent nominations of the new Community leaders and the Barroso Commission, the consequences on domestic policy of the new European institutional set-up. The latter has above all influenced the political proposals of David Cameron, who the opinion polls are still ranking in pole position as the next British Prime Minister, even if there have been some signs of a drop in popularity as compared with the past few months, together with Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who has had to be on the look-out for the attacks on his leadership coming from within the Labour Party.

### ***1. Cameron: a difficult pragmatism between hair-splitting and postponements***

At the start of November, after the early reactions to the previous month's Irish referendum, the European issues had for a few days gained the front pages of the British press. This was above all thanks to the signature of the Czech President Klaus, which has put an end the laboured approval of the Lisbon Treaty. As can be legitimately expected from an increasingly Euro-sceptical press, there has been no lack of apocalyptic headlines on the consequences of Klaus's signature: from those like the *Daily Express* who hypothesised the end of Great Britain (1), lamenting the strong loss of sovereignty, to the by now classical attacks of the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sun* and other tabloids.

However, what has been most widely discussed is the true novelty that follows from the passing of the Treaty: Cameron's new pragmatic position, as he has understood that it is no longer possible to become entrenched behind the promise of a referendum, the penalty being further isolation on the international level, after the exit from the PPE which has irked his main European partners a good deal, starting with Merkel and Sarkozy. Indeed, as Charles Grant pointed out in a long and interesting essay on the web site of the *Centre for European Reform* (2), unlike what might have been expected, the Conservative leader's position the inside the Party is not one of the most extreme, actually quite the

opposite. With the pro-European wing of the ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer Kenneth Clarke increasingly in a minority position, Cameron has had to come to terms with an increasingly Euro-sceptical Party, as testified by the letter of David Davis, already his opponent for the Party leadership in 2005, published in the *Daily Mail* the day after the Tory leader's announcement of the abandonment of the referendum pledge (3).

If Davis accused Cameron of betrayal, proposing a referendum on the renegotiating of the relationship with the EU, from Grant's essay that I have just cited it clearly appears that the if Conservative Party wins the upcoming elections, it will have to focus on points that are even more precise than the ones specified by Cameron in his announcement on 3<sup>rd</sup> November. In particular, instead of airing unlikely opt-outs in areas such as social policies, justice, internal affairs, fundamental rights (which would further annoy the European partners), the Tories should focus on the defence of national interests in the talks on the budget and the financial regulation of the City. This position, which gives credit to Cameron for having been able to clearly propose a series of issues on which the relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU remains unresolved, partly transpires in the comments of the different newspapers, which have made of the postponement the distinguishing feature of their analysis of Cameron (4). In summary, therefore, the Party's position remains controversial (5). Moreover, Cameron must deal with opinion polls that are starting to show some cracks in his image (6). In this context, the scoop of *The Times* at the end of November is significant (7). The United Kingdom is the only country where a Euro-sceptical Party like the UK Independence Party (UKIP) managed to come second in last June's European Parliament elections, with as much as 16.5% and 13 MEPs. Well, according to a reconstruction that has not been refuted, last summer, a few weeks after the vote, the person who in late-November was going to become the Party leader, that is Lord Malcolm Pearson, is thought to have proposed the disbanding of the UKIP to the Tories, or not presenting candidates at the upcoming national elections (UKIP has no MPs in Westminster). Cameron refused any agreement, and it is possible that in the lengthy election campaign that is starting to get underway in these very weeks, the European issue will be present in a way seldom seen before.

## ***2. From the nominations lottery to the choices: the surprises Ashton and Van Rompuy***

In this context, what attention has been addressed to the nominations for the new European leadership? Here, too, we have some British peculiarities, starting from the fact that for some time, and at the beginning of November, the figure of Tony Blair was still looming, even if his political future (as the storm clouds over his past start gathering, especially on the Iraq war) remains highly uncertain. Hence, on the eve of the summit, as the Eurostat data showed that the British economy was finding it harder than the Eurozone to get out of the recession (to the extent that some have spoken of Great Britain as the new sick man of Europe (8),) the main newspapers were analysing the ideal profile for the new Mr. Europe. It is curious that *The Times* should refer to that, in its editorial on the importance of the “precedent”, following the argument according to which the nomination of a charismatic person might have risked dictating an obligated line for the future. Seeing that the idea is situated in the context of Euroscepticism, the consequence could not have been that of supporting a minor candidate to the detriment of Tony Blair, whose presence on the scene, together with the alternative to the current Foreign Minister David Miliband, for the roles of President of High Representative for Foreign Policy, made Great Britain a rather special case. In other words, that of a country which, on the one hand, keeps one foot inside and one foot outside the EU, and on the other, perhaps owing to its reluctant participation, when it comes down to nominations, it may turn out to be useful to mix up the complex alchemies of the Brussels agreements or serve as a convenient little sweetener reserved to the minor countries. Perhaps this is the interpretation that can be given to the choice of Herman Van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton for the two Community leadership posts created by the Lisbon Treaty.

Most of the press has expressed some puzzlement over the two names (9), also stressing the disappointment voiced on the other side of the Atlantic (10), even if there has been no lack of discordant voices. So in the *Independent* (11) and the *Financial Times* (12) the possible virtues of the compromise found with people certainly not from the front-line were underlined, but they should nonetheless be allowed to get down to work before expressing strong judgements. This opinion applies above all to Van Rompuy, whose mediation skills as the Belgian Prime

Minister for the 11 months prior to his appointment gave him a virtually unanimous licence as a capable mediator, in a context that in many ways can be held to be similar to that of the Community itself.

Apart from the judgements on the new President, the two issues on which the comment were the most intense are: the nomination and the first steps taken by Catherine Ashton as new person in charge of the European foreign policy and the new Barroso commission, in particular on the polemic following the assignment of the portfolio for the internal market and the financial services to the Frenchman Michel Barnier. In the former case, it appeared clear that the appointment of a person with little experience (who in her first meeting with the press launched the slogan of 'silent diplomacy' (13)), and who as a first step seemed to want to jealously keep her staff as commissioner, thereby risking some friction in the complex Community governance (14), may turn out to be problematic. In the latter case, since the British national interests are directly involved, there has been the usual rather hysterical ballet on the consequences of the concession to a Frenchman of the keys to the City: also and above all because Sarkozy made his own contribution by declaring that it was a question of a symbolic event of great bearing, a triumph for France (15).

On the whole, however, the new Commission that will take over on 1<sup>st</sup> February, after the examination of the European Parliament, has aroused some rather positive reactions, even if certainly not enthusiastic ones (16). In the background, the prevalent reading key is the one that sees the resurfacing of the Franco-German axis: the fact that it is a marriage of convenience (17), or the first trials of a renewed Merkel-Sarkozy relationship that in the first two and a half years had not always been so happy, we can better tell only as 2010 unfolds.

### ***3. The EU seeking its identity***

At the end of the year, with the formalisation of the membership application by Serbia (18), and the changing in the guard of the semester Presidency between Sweden and Spain, a half-positive half-negative balance has been emerging for the EU's future. Certainly, the age-old institutional question has finally been resolved, not however without stirring up some hints of polemic among the majority of British commentators, who have negatively evaluated the fact that the European citizens were not directly consulted. Hence, in the

*Financial Times*, in an editorial dedicated to the future of the EU (19), it was underlined that after Lisbon it is now necessary, among the many anxieties and little real progress, for the EU to start focusing on the “real problems” that lie ahead of us. The dossiers to be dealt with are both many and complex. The first one concerns the economic revival. In order to ensure solid growth it is necessary for the Commission to be able to control the Member Countries’ protectionist instincts, to make sure that competition and commerce are not throttled by national interests. The EU must develop its own capacity to act more as a global actor, which the recent Copenhagen summit has proven to be reduced. The revival will obviously start from the economy: according to some experts the coordination of the reaction to the acute crisis phase has been too slow. Belonging to the Eurozone can be seen in a good and a bad light: certainly positive for many countries, but also a constraint, owing to the impossibility to vary interest rates. Lastly, the financial newspaper concluded in this effective summary, it is necessary not to delude ourselves into thinking that the decision-making process is more effective now that the new appointments have been made, seeing that the chosen people seem to highlight that the leading Governments do not want to grant too many powers to Brussels.

In this framework, the consequences of the European events on the Brown leadership somehow appeared when the Prime Minister managed to thwart – we don’t know for long – the umpteenth attempt to overthrow him by some of the MPs in his own Party. According to some newspaper reconstructions (20), among the reasons that have led the ex-Ministers Geoff Hoon and Patricia Hewitt to plot unsuccessfully during the Christmas holidays there was also the unfulfilled expectation of the former to take the place in Europe that had instead been given to Lady Ashton. But here we are entering the election campaign and within the sphere of the punches thrown below the belt that 2010 will definitely be full of.

(1) G. Milland, *Britain: the end*, The Daily Express, 04-11-2009

(2) Si veda il link: [http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/essay\\_936\\_dec09.pdf](http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/essay_936_dec09.pdf)

(3) D. Davis, *A referendum Mr Cameron COULD give the people*, The Daily Mail, 04-11-2009

(4) *Conservatives and Europe: Battle postponed*, The Guardian, 05-11-2009

(5) *Cameron sets out his European stall* Financial Times, 05-11-2009

- (6) J. Curtice, *Now Cameron has reason to worry*, The Independent, 01-12-2009; si veda anche il sito che raccoglie sistematicamente sondaggi apparsi sulla stampa britannica e previsioni in termini di seggi per il prossimo parlamento  
<http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/>
- (7) A. Thomson, R. Sylvester, S. Jagger, D. Charter, *Cameron rejected UKIP pact on EU referendum*, The Times, 28-11-2009
- (8) S. O'Grady, *Britain the economic "sick man of Europe"*, The Independent, 14-11-2009
- (9) *European disappointment*, The Times, 20-11-2009, W. Rees-Moog, *A gross insult to the people of Europe*, The Times, 23-11-2009
- (10) Q. Peel, *Us underwhelmed by Brussels appointments*, Financial Times, 23-11-2009
- (11) *Safe and boring – but the new EU line-up does the job*, The Independent, 21-11-2009
- (12) W. Münchau, *Van Rompuy is the right man for the job*, Financial Times, 23-11-2009
- (13) C. Ashton, *Quiet diplomacy will get our voice heard*, The Times, 17-12-2009
- (14) *Too many cooks*, The Economist, 19-12-2009
- (15) *The City has little to fear from EU*, Financial Times, 03-12-2009; *European Union: Sarko and the City*, The Guardian, 11-12-2009
- (16) *Change in Brussels*, Financial Times, 28-11-2009
- (17) W. Münchau, *A Franco-German marriage of convenience*, Financial Times, 16-11-2009
- (18) *Balkan odyssey*, The Times, 23-12-2009
- (19) *Europe must find a life after Lisbon*, Financial Times, 22-12-2009
- (20) J. Chapman, *What a time for a rebellion! Coup was doomed to failure because plotters hadn't got crucial Cabinet support first*, The Daily Mail, 07-01-2010