



Political Studies Association

European Elections in the UK Media Briefing

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European Elections in the UK: The Conservative Party

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The Conservative Party

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In 2009, the Tories topped the poll, getting just under 4.2 million votes or nearly 28% of the total, and giving them 26 seats. Their best performance was in the South East region, where they picked up nearly 35% of the vote, giving them four out of the ten seats there. Their worst was in Scotland, where they scored 17% and won only one out of the six available, although their performance in the North East of England (at 20%) wasn't that much better.

The Conservatives are unlikely to do as well this year: polling suggests that they will not only come third but may not even achieve 25% of the vote. In fact, even if they were to poll around the same percentage nationwide in 2014 as they did in 2009, they would still be in trouble because Labour and UKIP look set to perform so much more strongly than they did last time around. David Cameron's party, then, is bound to come away with fewer – probably far fewer – seats than it won five years ago. In the absolute nightmare scenario, the Tories would be reduced to barely double-figures. In the worst-case it will be around 15 seats. They will be hoping, and probably expecting, however, to get a little closer to 20 than that. Anything over 20 would still be embarrassing but could probably be spun as something other than devastating – especially if the quirks of the regionally-divided proportional electoral system mean that David Cameron can at least claim to have beaten Nigel Farage in seats, if not in votes.

Whether the reaction on the Conservative backbenches and at the grassroots will be worse if UKIP tops the poll or if Labour comes first instead is a moot point. Rationally, the second of these two outcomes should probably worry the party more than the first. But many Tories have long since left rationality behind when it comes to Europe and to UKIP. There will be bedwetting if not blood. Right wingers will demand policy changes and even those who are less zealous will call – some on the record, most off it – for Cameron to get a grip. The most obvious way he can appear to do this is by holding a reshuffle in which Grant Shapps is relieved of the Chairmanship and some media-friendly right-wingers (plus some supposedly working-class Tories) are promoted into the Cabinet or at least on to the front bench. If Number Ten plays things true to form it will – assuming it hasn't already shot its bolt during the campaign itself – respond too by hardening (or at least appearing to harden) its stance on renegotiation with Europe and conjuring up yet more 'tough, new' measures on immigration, ideally ones which involve limiting benefits that can be claimed by migrants from EU member states.

The hope has to be that this will buy Number Ten enough time for the bounce that Farage will undoubtedly get from giving Clegg, and now Cameron, a bloody nose to fade. If UKIP's leader has also managed to do the same to Ed Miliband by beating Labour into second place, then things might be a little easier. In that event, it may be possible – especially now that the economy seems to have turned the corner – to persuade the party and Tory-supporting commentators (some of whom, after all, will still want to look on the bright side) that the 'real losers' of this election are Labour and the Lib Dems. Polling – once things have

calmed down – may well support this, particularly if it looks like a lot of those who lent their support to UKIP did so only temporarily, largely in order to give the government a good kicking before settling down again in the run-up to the general election in a year's time.

It remains a possibility that Cameron will surprise everyone with a genuinely dramatic move, such as declaring in terms that he would like to be shot of the Liberal Democrats sooner rather than later. But it remains only an outside possibility. Rather more likely is a renewal of previous speculation as to who will take over from Cameron should he lose the general election. This is damaging because distracting – but probably not fatally so. After all, nobody seriously thinks anyone else but the current occupant of Number Ten will be leading the Party into the next election.

We should also remember that each of the political groups in the European Parliament will be campaigning on the basis of a named candidate for the role of President of the European Commission for the next 5 years. Since none of those candidates is a Brit, and since the UK electorate's scepticism means that even pro-European parties are unlikely to fight particularly 'Europeanised' campaigns, this presidential contest is unlikely to impact on the campaign here – except in one sense. Since they are not a member of any of the big party groups putting up a candidate for the presidency, the Conservatives, like UKIP, do not have a dog in this particular race, which is bound to increase the temptation for some Tories to cite it as an example of the supposedly remote, self-deluded and self-aggrandizing second-raters who want to run Britain from Brussels. Mr Cameron can't do much about this but he has to be careful. Too much overt criticism by Tories of the EPP's choice, Jean-Claude Juncker, may well irritate other centre-right leaders. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, for instance, may not be Juncker's biggest fan; she may even prefer the Commission's top job to go to the SPD's Martin Schultz, the Socialists' standard bearer. However, she may need to work with Juncker, as will Cameron. And, even if Luxembourg's former premier does not get the job, Merkel won't be particularly comfortable supporting the UK Prime Minister's reform agenda if his party has spent weeks bad-mouthing the EPP's pick.

There is another crucial (but currently underplayed) respect in which Dave has to worry about Angela. She is absolutely determined that the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) – the German Eurosceptic party which, despite its limitations, presents a challenge to her CDU – not be lent legitimacy and credibility by being invited by Tory MEPs to join their European Conservatives and Reformist (ECR) group in the European Parliament. The trouble for Cameron is that the ECR, in order to conform with EP rules that official recognition and funding only goes to groups with at least 25 MEPs from at least seven member states, may, in the wake of a contest that is likely to wipe out some of its existing components, be casting around desperately for some half-way respectable allies. All this could mean Cameron having to choose between, on the one hand, a Tory delegation in Brussels stranded, friendless and powerless, outside the group system or, on the other, sacrificing virtually any chance he has of enlisting Merkel's help with his renegotiation efforts. These elections are easily dismissed but they matter to the Conservatives – not just domestically but because domestic politics and diplomacy are now inextricably intertwined.