

High Noon for Europe?

Speech for Surrey European Movement 25th June 2009

I am sure that all of us remember the 1952 film “High Noon” with Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly. It is a superb film that grew out of the Cold War. Gary Cooper is the honourable man who stands up for what is right regardless of the odds against him. You may however have missed the fact that the Solidarity movement used the image of Gary Cooper in its key election victory on 4th June 1989 which substantially contributed to the collapse of Communism.

To what extent does Europe face its own “High Noon” thirty years later in this summer of political confusion and constitutional log jam across Europe? In particular what role does the European Movement need to play at five minutes to noon?

It now looks as if the Irish will vote in favour of the Treaty of Lisbon at their second referendum in late September or early October. They have been offered very reasonable guarantees, not least over the continued presence of an Irish Commissioner. While it never pays to take the Irish electorate for granted, I think we may assume that any remaining threats to the Treaty will not come from Dublin. After a successful Irish ratification, two remaining signatures are needed – those of the Polish and Czech Presidents. Let us assume that the Labour Government in the UK will see out its mandate until May 2010. Whether under Gordon Brown or Alan Johnson is, for these purposes, irrelevant. The Eurosceptic hope of derailing the Treaty depends therefore on delaying ratification until after David Cameron becomes UK Prime Minister in June 2010. Those of a suspicious mind might believe that the establishment of the new European Conservatives & Reformers Group this week in Brussels has this as a secret protocol. Lawyers are divided about the legality of such a move by the Czech and Polish Presidents. One thing is clear. The events of the next six months will cause David Cameron to make clear whether his approach to European affairs is one of tactical cynicism or deeply held Euroscepticism. If the final decision on the ratification on the Treaty of Lisbon is delayed until after the British General Election the fate of Europe will depend on whether or not a Cameron Government has an overall majority or is dependent on Liberal Democrat support. I gather that the betting on the UK Election outcome shows 25% of people believing that he will need Liberal Democrat votes. If that proves not to be the case, we will need a strong European Movement in the UK to re-fight the fundamental question of British membership.

The European Election results, and subsequent Parliamentary manoeuvring, tells us much about the impact of continued British indecision on Europe. The ECRG met for the first time in Brussels on Tuesday. I gather that it was not a happy occasion. In addition to the Poles and the Czechs five other one man parliamentary delegations have joined the new Group. There is as yet no formal Group structure or constitution. There are severe linguistic and policy divergencies on everything except opposition to the Treaty of Lisbon. Strangely of course once the Treaty is passed and seen to be the small tidying up exercise that it truly is rather than the juggernaut of Eurosceptic imagination, the question of Federalist or non Federalist is unlikely to be a determining issue in the next ten years. There are those who believe that the new Group is unlikely to survive beyond the mid-term of Parliament in January 2012.

Supporters of the new Group claim that they will be “king makers” in the arithmetic of the new Parliament. Few in Brussels however share this view as the departure of the Conservatives from the EPP has left the EPP more likely to engage in a traditional “Grand Coalition” with the Socialists, which would make the Conservatives “hermits” rather than “king makers”. As always the key parliamentary arithmetic concerns votes at Second Reading when success needs an absolute majority rather than the simple majority needed at First Reading. As anticipated the Socialist Group have changed their name to the “Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats in Europe” (PASDE) and taken twenty one Italian Democratic Party members from ALDE. The new Group now has 183 MEPs.

The EPP Group has 264 members down from 277 in the previous Parliament, having gained the Neo Fascists who are now part of the “Peoples of Liberty” Group formed by Mr Berlusconi. Strangely therefore the EPP Group which the Conservatives have left is now more right wing than the Group which they joined in 1989! It has reverted to Franco-German dominance mitigated only by strong Polish and Italian influence. In yesterday’s elections the remaining Conservative parties in the EPP failed to secure any Vice Presidencies!

