



Absent friends

Britain would benefit from more constructive engagement with Europe

article by Charles Grant, Progress, 01 February 2008

In his first six months as prime minister, Gordon Brown has got some of the big decisions about the EU right. He has shown courage in deciding to ratify the Lisbon treaty through parliament, rather than by referendum, for which he has incurred the wrath of Eurosceptic commentators. Brown has also – wisely – put time and effort into building relations with the EU's two pre-eminent leaders, Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel.

But there have been problems. Brown and some of his senior ministers spend as little time in Brussels as possible. Yet European commission president Jose Manuel Barroso is an influential figure and is often on the same wavelength as the British – he is pro-market, Atlanticist and pragmatic in his approach to building Europe. Other governments, notably the French, take the commission very seriously and lobby hard for their interests in Brussels. To quote one top commission official: 'Sarkozy is frequently in Brussels and often calls up Barroso for a chat – the French are pulling at one end of the rope all the time. It is a shame that the British are not there to pull at the other end.'

The British should also engage more with the EU's smaller countries – which between them have a lot of influence and votes. Many pro-British leaders of small member states complain that the British ignore them, while the French and others make an effort to cultivate relationships. This problem is not new – earlier British governments have tended to treat small countries arrogantly – but Brown needs to fix it. He should tell his ministers and top officials to spend more time building networks of influence on the continent.

Some specific issues require Brown's attention. One part of the new treaty that needs to be implemented is the 'external action service', which should merge the foreign policy bureaucracies of the commission and the Council of Ministers. This sensible innovation should prevent the commission and council competing against each other on foreign policy, and provide ministers with a common analysis of problems. But the Foreign Office is instinctively hostile. Seeing the new service as a rival, British diplomats are unwilling to give it money or good people. This is short-sighted: given Britain's expertise in foreign policy, it has the potential to be as influential as any country in shaping the external action service. Brown should tell the Foreign Office to take a constructive approach.

European defence is a sensitive area, given that Britain's sceptics will portray any new move as an attempt to create a 'European army'. Sarkozy wants France to become a full member of NATO – but his condition is an enhanced EU role in defence. This initiative offers the prospect of an end to the sometimes destructive rivalry between NATO and the EU. But Brown has told his officials not to talk about defence institutions. Britain must not miss the opportunity to get France back into NATO. Hopefully, once the Lisbon treaty is ratified, he will engage with the French on European defence.

Within Britain, Brown needs to get on the front foot on Europe. So long as he and his ministers appear defensive, and are reluctant to make the case for the EU, the middle ground of Britain's European debate will shift in an ever more sceptical direction. Brown should order his ministers to go and make the case for Europe, in their own particular areas: whether the subject is energy, the environment, development or deregulation, they need to explain that Britain can achieve much more when it works with the EU than on its own.

The speech that Brown delivered at a Business for New Europe conference on 14 January was an important step in the right direction. He spoke warmly of the EU and praised its role in tackling climate change. Let that be an example to all the senior figures in the government.

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