

The Conservative Party and European Integration since 1945: At the Heart of Europe?

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In *The Conservative Party and European Integration since 1945: At the heart of Europe?*, N. J. Crowson sets out to analyse the thought of the Conservative Party faithful on Europe, and to investigate the role that the party played in the formation of policy at the highest levels of the leadership. Crowson seeks to move beyond the more traditional explanation of foreign policy formation as an elite phenomenon, and to recognize that the broader party could play a role in forging European policy (p. 6). In order to do so he takes a bottom-up approach, using Conservative Party archives as a source for establishing the terms and boundaries of the debate on European integration at the constituency level, and asking 'how and why Conservatives' attitudes to European integration have evolved' (p. 13). While the book presents a detailed investigation into shifting Conservative attitudes at the individual, group, and party level with lucidity and verve, the book is not as forthcoming on the question of what influence the activists and broader party may have had on the formation of European policy.

The first two chapters set out a chronological framework for the rest of the book, neatly divided at the Labour government's 1975 referendum on staying in the Common Market. Drawing on a wide and up to date range of secondary sources, as well as Conservative Party archives and contemporary newspaper articles, the first chapter traces Conservative responses to early plans for European integration and to the efforts of 'the Six' to create supranational organizations of their own. It explains the decisions of successive

Conservative governments first to remain removed from this process of integration, then to build an alternative Europe in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and, finally, to pursue full membership despite two French vetoes, clinching the decision to lie ‘at the heart of Europe’ through support for the ‘yes’ campaign in 1975. While describing the Conservatives as ‘the party of Europe’ throughout this chapter, Crowson illustrates the long-standing divisions within the party, setting the scene for its transformation into ‘the party of scepticism’ (p. 44). The evolution of these divisions into full-scale ‘civil war’ is traced in the second chapter, which details the growing split in the parliamentary party and cabinet over issues like direct elections to the European Parliament, the British budgetary contribution, the Single Market, the Exchange Rate Mechanism, the Maastricht Treaty, the single currency, and the European constitution. In office and out, as the Conservative Party turned over leaders at an accelerating rate (Thatcher, Major, Hague, Duncan Smith, Howard, and Cameron) Euroscepticism became increasingly prominent in the party, either on the merits of specific issues or as part of a more general opposition to the ceding of sovereignty to Europe. Despite the fact that Eurosceptic positions at times even took centre stage, as with Hague’s 2001 campaign to save the pound, Crowson is careful to note that those with more positive opinions towards European integration continued to play an important role in Parliament and even cabinet: Conservative MPs did not turn wholesale to an anti-European stance. Perplexingly, in neither of these two chapters, amounting to almost exactly a quarter of the book, do local activists or associations make much of an appearance. Indeed, at the start of chapter two, Crowson acknowledges that the debate on Europe, ‘was confined to within the parliamentary party until the 1990s’, and that the issues that so exercised MPs and (shadow) ministers, ‘were not issues that really registered with the party’s grass roots’ (p. 45). This comment is rather revealing: perhaps the explanation for so few scholars investigating the role of activists and constituency associations in shaping policy on Europe is simply that they played a marginal or non-existent role?

Chapter three moves on to contemplate the issues arising from European integration that have particularly exercised Conservatives, from Atlanticism and the end of Empire to the single currency and the enlargement question. Crowson illustrates clearly that Conservative opinion has been divided on many of these issues, with some MPs, for example, fighting to retain national sovereignty—which they see as a tangible entity—and others, like Geoffrey Howe, arguing that it is a more ephemeral beast that may be strengthened through participation in European institutions (pp. 87–89). Once again, however, Conservative activists and local associations are largely absent from what is, in the main, a discussion about Conservative debates on Europe at the elite level. The broader party does merit mentioning, particularly in the section on referendum demands, but again, Crowson explicitly recognizes the lack of clout or leverage that the broader party had: he argues that the attraction of the referendum route for many local associations was a reflection of their, ‘failure to win the policy argument within the party structure’, and consequent effort to appeal over the heads of the party elite to the people—an effort that also failed (p. 89).

The next three chapters fit together neatly, addressing the identities and chosen fora of ‘the Conservative Europeanist’ and his or her efforts to ‘sell Europe’, and then turning attention to the Conservative sceptic. Crowson marks the lack of cohesion among Conservative Europeanists, deriding the terms ‘pro-European’ and ‘Europhile’ as implying too great a consensus among those who supported the process of integration for different reasons and to different extents—a disunity marked by the proliferation of organizations that they formed or utilized to express their position. This fragmentation perhaps helps us to understand Conservative leaders’ difficulties in ‘selling Europe’ to the parliamentary party, to the activists, and to the broader party. Crowson suggests that fear of the potential electoral consequences, as well as the divisions already discussed, restrained the party leadership from promulgating a strongly positive message on Europe. Until the mid-1990s, the best the party could do was to present itself consistently, if weakly, as the party of Europe. Crowson implies that Conservative leaders held back from taking a more pro-European position, perceiving the wider party to be hostile, and instead sought to explain existing policy in a reactive pattern. He does not argue that activists or the broader party influenced policy; nor does he suggest what, if free of the fear of a potential electoral backlash, the party leadership’s message on Europe might have been. His reflection of the clear and growing divisions within the leadership, culminating in the sceptical stances of Hague, Duncan Smith, and Cameron, suggests that a more powerfully pro-European message would have been impossible regardless of views within the wider party. The relationship between sceptics in the broader

party and in the parliamentary party and leadership is not, however, clarified.

Chapter 6 addresses the other side: the Conservative sceptic. Crowson argues that, before the 1990s, Conservatives sceptical of the advantages of European integration to Britain lacked leadership. Like the 'Europeanists', the sceptics were not a tightly-knit group, and they opposed British membership or the deepening of integration for a range of reasons: a desire to protect the British constitution and sovereignty; a preference (now obsolete) for the Empire/Commonwealth; concerns about British agriculture; and more individual interests. Although initially sceptics came from both the left and right wings of the party, by the 1970s most were right-wingers, bolstered from the early 1990s by those who considered themselves to be Thatcher's heirs, and by a larger group that supported European integration for reasons of party loyalty but privately voiced doubts or hostility. Six and a half pages are dedicated to the role of activists in this sceptic movement. The central arguments are somewhat obscure here. Having previously asserted that the wider party was more sceptical than the parliamentary party—or, at least, having stated that the leadership *believed* the wider party to be more sceptical—Crowson now seems to provide evidence to the opposite. He demonstrates both that sceptical MPs had to try to convince more pro-European activists and associations of the merits of their cause, and that pro-European activists and associations sought to rein in sceptical MPs, at least until 1997. However, tactics were largely managed at the parliamentary level, engendered by a proliferation of committees and pressure groups, and influenced by a message that changed several times through the decades. One reason for the divisions among sceptics was the lack of an obvious and attractive alternative: despite the existence of a largely hostile press in Britain, sceptics have been unable to rally behind a single leader and a single cause.

The final chapter stands separately to address 'Conservatives in Europe'—more literally, the participation of Conservatives in European institutions. Beginning with personal and party links among Conservatives in Britain and like-minded politicians and parties in Europe, the chapter goes on to investigate particular organizations, starting with general comments on the Council of Europe and the European Parliament and moving on to the institutions of the European Community/Union. The structure of this chapter is slightly odd, with two separate sections, for example, on the European Parliament. It addresses both Conservative participation in the various institutions, and also Conservative thinking about their nature and future.

In his conclusion, Crowson notes again the varying stances taken by Conservatives on the issue of European integration, and draws parallels with earlier party debates on foreign and economic policy (splits over the Corn Laws, free trade versus protectionism and appeasement are recurring themes through the book). He suggests that the wider party was ignorant about, rather than hostile to, integration, and implies a failure on the part of the leadership to recognize this difference. Nevertheless, the scepticism about Europe that has been predominant in the party since once more entering opposition in 1997 has a long history, surviving throughout both parties' efforts—and failures—to find a satisfactory role for Britain in Europe. Crowson ends by suggesting that electoral success will compel the Conservative leadership to take a more pragmatic and positive view on participation in Europe once again (p. 226).

There are a number of stylistic points to raise about what is otherwise a beautifully presented book. There are a surprising number of typographical errors, and the term 'European Union' is regularly used anachronistically with no explanation. There is no helpful list of abbreviations. More significantly, while each chapter provides an important scrutiny of a particular aspect of the Conservative Party and European integration, from the narrative history to the positions of specific individuals and groups to the party's interaction in Europe, the chapters are not clearly tied together. The central themes of each section are not restated at the end of each chapter, and there is no linkage to the central themes of the next, so that the cohesion of the whole suffers. The conclusion does not remedy this lack, so that one is not left with a sense of closure: the research questions set out in the introduction do not appear to have been fully answered.

More specifically, Crowson appears in the introduction to have approached this research with two goals. One, tracing the evolution of Conservatives' positions on Europe, has been achieved: he describes and explains the shifting stances of individuals, groups, and the parliamentary party with great clarity. The second goal is linked intrinsically to Crowson's methodology and it is not achieved with the same success.

The aim to, 'explore the role of the Conservative activist, and to understand his or her relationship with the parliamentary party, the party organization, and the leadership' (p. 8) is not fulfilled: by far the greater part of Crowson's analysis focuses on the party elite represented in Parliament, cabinet, and the various European institutions. Where activists and local organizations are mentioned, the analysis is inconclusive: Crowson presents evidence that the wider party too had its 'Europeanists' and its 'sceptics'. He argues that more than anything, activists and party members sought information and direction from Central Office, rather than seeking to shape the foreign policy process themselves. As has been seen, Crowson argues that the wider Conservative Party was not necessarily as hostile towards Europe as the leadership seems to have believed, at least until the 1990s. The strand of scepticism in the parliamentary party emerged and developed independently, it seems, or, at least, it is not clear in which direction the causality runs. Was the party elite forced to take a more sceptical stance because the wider party (and electorate) became increasingly hostile? Or has the predominance of scepticism among current leaders freed a previously timid but hostile portion among the wider party to rear its head? Either way, the book is emphatically not about the influence of activists on party foreign policy.

Tied to this activist-leadership issue is a methodological problem. The book is based on a minute survey of national and regional Conservative Party archives, together with the private papers of a number of Conservative politicians, interviews, and a wide range of secondary reading. The author makes a deliberate choice to avoid the government documentation available in The National Archives, seeking to avoid both the 'tyranny of the archives' and the mere replication, in greater detail, of contemporary accounts (p. 8), and also reflecting his decision to produce a broad, rather than elite-focused, analysis. The flaw in the decision to avoid government archives is that it makes it difficult or impossible to assess the extent to which Conservative Party thinking at the constituency level actually influenced policy making at the top level, particularly during the years since 1945 when the Conservative Party was in government: at the most basic level, omitting the elite *omits the elite*. Assessing the party debate at the constituency level is a valid and legitimate academic enquiry (and one not fully answered here), but the author claims also to address how party thinking 'impacted upon its leaders' (p. 6). How can that claim be fulfilled when a key part of the archival puzzle is ignored?

European integration has long been a divisive issue, cutting across the party lines of both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party so that individual MPs have left both parties on the basis that they were too pro- or anti-European. This mirroring suggests that a cross-party analysis of the issues raised by Crowson would be a valuable addition to the literature. Despite these divisions, after 1961 both parties, when in government, found membership to be the only and best option for the UK. Equally, both parties (particularly the Conservatives since 1997 and Labour during the 1980s) have clearly perceived an advantage in taking a more sceptical stance when out of office. This dichotomy raises challenging questions about the role of electoral politics and of the realities of office in shaping policy, and highlights further issues raised here, such as the extent to which European integration for the UK has been an elite project imposed on a largely oblivious population.

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