

[Comment] 26 and a half members

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - It is hard to analyse the European election results so soon after they have been announced. Judgements might be influenced by the campaign and the count which will, in truth, be soon forgotten while the electoral arithmetic will be with us for the next five years.

With that warning, the results of the European elections in the UK deserve some attention. They contain a strong message for Britain and, by extension, for the whole of Europe.

The British people confirmed their position as the most Eurosceptic in the EU. Parties opposed to membership of the EU did well, as did those who merely opposed the Lisbon treaty. In fact, overall, the share of the vote taken by opponents of Lisbon went up from 61 per cent in 2004 to 69 per cent this time. Beyond Lisbon, 36 per cent of the national vote went to parties that actually oppose EU membership altogether.

On top of that, there is the position of the British Conservative party. The Tories oppose the Lisbon treaty and have pledged to renegotiate its terms should they win the next general election for Westminster, due no later than June 2010. They got 28 per cent of the vote in the European elections compared with only 16 per cent for the ruling Labour party, so the prospect of their being able to carry out their threat is very real.

David Cameron, Conservative leader, confirmed during the election campaign that his party would use the next round of EU budget negotiations, due to start in 2011, as an opportunity to reopen the debate about Lisbon if it has already been ratified



"The British people confirmed their position as the most Eurosceptic in the EU" (Photo: wikipedia)

and come into force by the time they come to power. Those people who had hoped that the EU could put its procedural wrangles behind it in order to focus on issues of policy and substance are in for disappointment. A renewed round of institutional debate is looming large.

And what will the outcome of that institutional debate be? Britain already has opt-outs from the euro, from the Schengen provisions on free movement and from cooperation on justice and home affairs, and will be strongly arguing for more. The Conservatives are openly hostile to EU policies on agriculture and fishing, and object to the role the EU plays in social policy and some aspects of the single market. They dislike the idea of Europe playing a greater role on the world stage as a rival or threat to the position of America.

Election results elsewhere in the EU, however, show little sympathy for this point of view. While there was a rise in the Eurosceptic vote in some other countries (but not all), nowhere else is this degree of opposition to the current EU so close to government.

Of course, it can be argued that the European elections are not a perfect guide to public opinion. Turnout was low – only 34 per cent whereas a general election would see double that – and a different electoral system gives more opportunity to vote for minor and more extreme parties than dominate in a general election. When the real test of opinion comes, things will be different.

Nevertheless, pro-Europeans in Britain would be making a grave mistake if they do not take the threat seriously. The next few years in the EU may well be dominated by the struggle to reconcile the demands made by a Conservative British government with what currently constitutes membership of the European Union. If the EU can simply keep hold of its current 27 members, that may in itself constitute something of an achievement.

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