

Liberal thinking

Edward McMillan-Scott on why he had no option but to leave an increasingly eurosceptic UK Conservative party

"FROM BEING A LIBERAL CONSERVATIVE I HAVE BECOME A CONSERVATIVE LIBERAL"

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Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, left, and Lib Dem MEP Edward McMillan-Scott at the party's spring conference in Birmingham, 13 March 2010

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Edward McMillan-Scott explains why he had no option other than resigning from an increasingly eurosceptic UK Conservative party

One key reason for joining the Liberal Democrats at their Birmingham conference on 12 March is that in Nick Clegg they have a leader whom I like, admire and respect. Many here remember him as a very able and assiduous MEP. He and Chris Huhne, another former MEP, are among those, like Vince Cable, who have modernised the Lib Dems to face the challenges before us, at home and abroad.

I was expelled from the Conservative party last year after a dispute over David Cameron's controversial new EU partners, and my standing and winning re-election as the European parliament's first ever independent vice-president. My appeal

against this was a long, one-sided process which I at least undertook in good faith. My lawyers say my expulsion was unconstitutional, disproportionate and against natural justice, but advised that Cameron would rig the final hearing on 18 March. So I withdrew from the appeal, resigned from the Conservative party and have joined the Liberal Democrats.

Instead of going left to Labour, as did other pro-European MPs like Robert Jackson or Quentin Davies, I have moved to

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the centre ground, to the Lib Dems. The Lib Dems have an EU and world perspective I share, and this new political base enables me to continue my focus on democracy and human rights, the cornerstone of the EU's foreign policy and a priority for liberals. I fear that many Conservatives want to leave Europe, not lead in Europe.

It was bad for Britain when the Tory leader split from the EPP group in Europe. As David Gardner wrote in the Financial Times last week, "The decision to withdraw from the EPP... was low on substance and high on opportunism. Mr Cameron needed to secure his right flank to assure he won the party leadership, so he tossed some red meat to the Tory backwoodsmen. They will be back for more."

I was around the higher circles of the Conservative party for long enough to fear that on Europe they will say one thing in opposition and do another in government. This matters, as there is a possibility now of the first eurosceptic government in a large member state.

I leave the struggle against the anti-Europeans in the party to its remaining pro-Europeans. They should examine their consciences and speak up now – or come to the Lib Dems. The Conservative party used to quote in its candidate's manual the famous 18th century Anglo-Irish MP Edmund Burke's declaration that he was not sent to parliament as a representative by his constituents, but to exercise his judgment. Conservative pro-Europeans are unable to express themselves openly and instead the party propitiates its Ukip-tendency. The Liberal Democrats are committed to politics based on the values of fairness and change, not the pursuit of power for its own sake.

It was wrong of Cameron to associate with MEPs who have extremist pasts in his new European alliance. I have long fought against totalitarianism and the extremism and religious persecution it brings: I have personal reasons and political reasons for doing so. The rise of the right in 13 out of 27 EU countries in last year's European elections must be challenged, not accommodated. So from being a liberal Conservative I have become a conservative Liberal. And it is not a nasty party.

Over the years, I have campaigned for democracy and human rights in Europe, from the fall of the Berlin Wall in Europe in 1989 and with dissidents in the Soviet bloc before then. After the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, I have campaigned for reform in China and worldwide, from the Arab world to the remaining tyrannies like Burma or Cuba. I am able to give a voice to the voiceless as the first ever vice-president with responsibility for democracy and human rights.

For the moment, I will continue to sit as an independent vice-president, highlighting the European parliament's much strengthened role under the Lisbon treaty. In particular, as one

of the vice-presidents responsible for this area, I shall focus on the important post-Lisbon relationships we must develop between the national and European parliaments. We must all work more closely together to ensure the centrality of the European parliament in a more parliamentary Europe.

But now after the recent sudden changes in my political career, I intend to have a relaxing Easter break with my family – a welcome chance to take stock of the situation. As we gear up for one of the most exciting general elections in the UK for decades, I wish you happy Easter. ★

Edward McMillan-Scott is a parliament vice-president and a member of the civil liberties, justice and home affairs committee

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