

# EU hopes British Lib Dems will rein in Tory europhobes

(BRUSSELS) - Britain's coalition government raised hopes in Brussels on Wednesday that the eurofriendly Liberal Democrats may neutralise the eurosceptic tendencies of their Conservative partners.

"It's the best possible result for the EU because Cameron doesn't have his hands tied by the hardline eurosceptics in his own party, it was a great result for the status quo," said Hugo Brady, analyst at the Centre for European Reform.

EU Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso was equally upbeat: "I have met David Cameron several times... I am sure we are going to have a good working relationship. So I am not concerned," he told reporters.

Cameron, who took power as prime minister at the head of the two-party coalition on Tuesday, has made few friends in Brussels and elsewhere in Europe by pulling his party, then in opposition, out of the mainstream Centre Right European People's Party in Brussels.

He subsequently helped set up a new, more far-right grouping which former Conservative euro MP Edward McMillan-Scott complained "had anti-Semitic, homophobic and racist links."

The chairman of that new European Conservatives and Reformists group said they were "heartened and strengthened by Mr Cameron's presence in Downing Street."

Others hope he will return to the EPP fold.

EPP president Wilfried Martens said he expects "this will be a pragmatic government, which will respect and implement the European treaties."

In this case, he added "David Cameron's government could work well on the European level alongside the 14 EPP-led governments of the European Union," which include Germany, France and Italy.

British MEP McMillan-Scott, who left the Conservatives and joined the Liberal Democrats after the Tories quit the EPP, was cracking open the champagne at his Brussels office.

"David Cameron has been marginalised in Europe as a result of his decision. I think he has the determination and the character to accept that he made a mistake," he told AFP.

But not everyone was celebrating, fellow Liberal Democrat MEP Andrew Duff admitted he was feeling "queasy" at the idea of getting into bed with the Conservatives.

"I don't like crossing the barricades," he said.

"It's not just a stroll up a corridor, it's very, very hard to do but it's done and we'll see what happens.

"The good thing is that the Tories now implicitly accept the (EU's reforming) treaty of Lisbon and they have been forced to drop their absurd proposal in their programme that they were going to reopen the terms of British accession to the EU," he said by phone.

"Thirdly, the fact that this has happened means that their crazy guys, the extremists will be contained, constrained."

However Clegg has at the same time been forced into reining in his most EU-friendly policies, appearing in a pre-election debate to back-pedal on his wish for Britain to adopt the euro currency.

The Liberal Democrat leader is no stranger to the EU. A polyglot, he served as a Euro MP from 1999-2004 and before that was an advisor to British EU Commissioner Leon Brittan.

Marco Incerti, of the Centre for European Policy Studies, said the coalition partners would seek to "focus on the things on which there is a consensus and try to avoid as much as possible the difficult questions like Europe."

However, almost inevitably, the Europe question hit Britain square in the face within 24 hours of Cameron

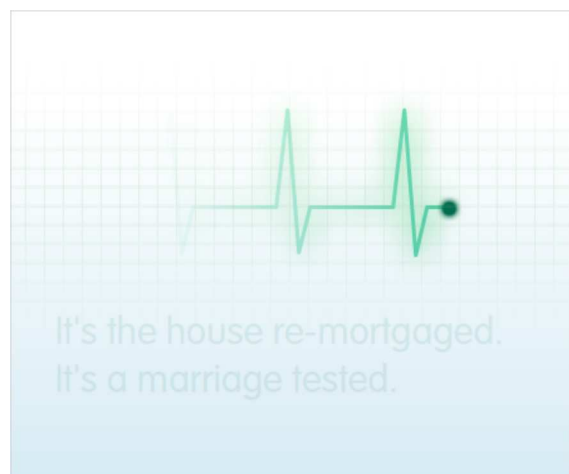
entering No 10 Downing Street.

The European Commission set out plans for Brussels to vet countries' budgets before national parliaments, in a potential power-grab that could ultimately trigger a referendum in Britain.

Few observers were expecting the europhile-europhobe coalition to last a full term in office.

"They may be able to hang on for something over a year," Incerti said.

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