



"Without fear and without favour"

Monday June 8 2009

Tories march to Euro-impotence

Cameron's resolve to choose new EU allies is plain foolish

The UK government and Gordon Brown's Labour party have received a terrible drubbing in the European and local elections – as bad as that for any ruling party across the continent. David Cameron's Conservatives could scarcely have asked for more. It leaves them in pole position to win the next general election. That could come sooner rather than later if Mr Brown cannot stop the civil war within his own party.

Yet on one vital issue, Mr Cameron continues to behave as if he will be eternally in opposition: his party's attitude towards the European Union. His determination to quit the dominant centre-right alliance in the European parliament, and thus alienate his most important potential partners in Europe – Germany's Angela Merkel and President Nicolas Sarkozy of France – is foolish and counter-productive. It is time to reconsider.

The European People's party is the largest political group in the parliament. It also brings together the largest number of heads of

Conservatives leading roles in the parliament, while retaining the right to vote differently on all questions of European integration.

But Mr Cameron is determined to quit and form a new eurosceptic group. He made the promise to win a handful of rightwing votes when he was elected Tory party leader. His potential allies (he needs six more to form a group) are an odd assortment of social conservatives, nationalists and libertarians. None is a party in power.

At home, the Tory leader has shifted to the centre on most social and environmental issues to win power. Yet his future European partners are far more conservative. The most credible – the Czech Civic Democrats – contains a substantial faction rejecting any notion of climate change. Poland's Law and Justice party, led by the erratic Kaczynski brothers, is socially very conservative, nationalistic and Catholic. The new group will be unable to vote together on a range of EU policies.

Lord Kerr, former UK permanent

Letters

Tiananmen protests were about privilege

From Mr Samuel Passow.

Sir, I want to congratulate James Kyngé ("West still miscasts 1989 protesters", June 4) for his courage in taking a dissenting view from the conventional wisdom that the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in April to June 1989 were about bringing democracy to China.

I was in Tiananmen Square from May 2-16 as a journalist covering the 22nd Annual Meeting of the Asian Development Bank in the Great Hall of the People and later the state visit by Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, for Euromoney's Global Investor Magazine.

I walked around freely and both interviewed and photographed the

university students protesting in the square.

The young students from Beijing University considered themselves the elite of Chinese society, (in those days there were very few places in higher education in China), and what they wanted was a greater voice for themselves in the ageing Communist party hierarchy to ensure their privileged status. They were not calling for democracy, or for an equal voice for the rest of their countrymen.

As a student who part took in the anti-war protests on US college campuses in the early 1970s, which also often included a variety of divergent agendas ranging from

opposition to the Vietnam war, to black power, to feminist rights, to ecology protesters, I recognised the same youthful exuberance and the desire simply to make a statement and "be heard" by well-meaning people.

It was a call to be included in the regime, not to overthrow it.

The western media's spin that it was a pro-democracy demonstration is a message we wanted to hear, both then and now, which is why it has gone unchallenged for 20 years.

Samuel Passow,
Head of Consultancy and Executive Training,
Conflict Analysis Research Centre,
University of Kent, UK

Paternalistic and damaging mistake that misses the point about democracy

From Mr Sean C. Carroll.

Sir, James Kyngé ("West still miscasts 1989 protesters", June 4) writes that he and other journalists covering the Tiananmen protests 20 years ago, by referring to the student demonstrators as "pro-democracy", may not have "got the narrative of those days quite right". Actually, he got it right the first time and now makes two mistakes and misses the whole point.

The thousands of Chinese gathered in Tiananmen (and elsewhere) were of course both pro-democracy and demanding democracy, because their protest, and their inherent request to be able to protest, is democracy in action. The right to ask for change in government or governance, and the possibility of getting it, is the essence of democracy.

True, Tiananmen was not about asking for British or American, or

French or Swiss-style democracy (all different, by the way). It is probably also true that "the students in the square had only the haziest understanding of western-style democracy". But this is where Mr Kyngé makes his second mistake – a common, paternalistic and damaging one among western media – and where he misses the point.

In referring to democracy as "western-style", he demeans China's democrats and gets the narrative really wrong. Because the desire for and the right to democracy is not western, but universal. And when China does enjoy democracy it will be both Chinese and universal and it will hail Tiananmen's 89ers as its forebears.

Sean C. Carroll,
Programme Director,
Club of Madrid,
Madrid, Spain

Autocratic regime thrives on silence

From Mr Ash Thomas.

Sir, I was pleased to see James Kyngé's excellent article show the nuances of an issue often cast in a simplistic, easy-to-digest narrative; "To say the protests were to 'demand democracy' is an oversimplification," he muses. But in a spectacular instance of obliviousness, this thoughtful conclusion was followed by a picture whose caption described the Tiananmen Square protests as "a mass pro-democracy movement". Plaudits to the FT's sense of humour.

What is less amusing is Mr Kyngé's implication that criticism of China's human rights record plays into the Communist party's hands. Surely silence and the accompanying ignorance would serve an autocratic regime better, even if it robbed them of fodder for a propaganda machine?

Ash Thomas,
Sydney, NSW, Australia