

# BREXIT AND THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

*The article explores the conception of European integration and enlargement that was consistently proposed by leading British politicians in the post-War period prior to Brexit. Two basic themes are identified in that conception: first, a clear preference for a project of both integration and enlargement; and second, an equally clear resistance to the formation of a European superstate as the final goal of that project. The article concludes that this characteristically British vision of European integration – the vision of a United Europe of States – is not exclusively British and is unlikely to disappear from the now Britain-free EU.*

Simon Glendinning\*



TPQ

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\*Simon Glendinning is Head of the European Institute and Professor of European Philosophy at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

***British Prime Ministerial Voices I: Churchill-Thatcher-Blair***

The first institutions of European union emerged in the wake of two terrible world wars of European origin. It was also, however, the period of European division that marked the geopolitics of the Cold War. In this article I will explore this European-but-not-simply-European development through the far from neutral lens of British Prime Ministerial political voices. Never shy of supposing it an excellent thing if all the rest might travel a British road, post-War British Prime Ministers mapped a direction of travel for all the rest of Europe that was remarkably consistent, and (perhaps) surprisingly ambitious.

The geopolitics of the Cold War was the framing context for Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's most strikingly pro-European speech, "The Bruges Speech", delivered in 1988. Happy to challenge the assumptions of at least some of her audience, she insistently affirmed that "our [Britain's] destiny is in Europe, as part of the Community", but she went on even more insistently to recall that still only part of all of Europe was part of that Community:

The European Community is one manifestation of that European identity, but it is not the only one. We must never forget that east of the Iron Curtain, people who once enjoyed a full share of European culture, freedom and identity have been cut off from their roots. We shall always look on Warsaw, Prague, Budapest as great European cities.<sup>1</sup>

Thatcher, like Prime Minister Winston Churchill in his call for "a kind of United States of Europe" in his speech in Zurich in 1946 (delivered when, in fact, he was no longer Prime Minister), emphasised the geopolitical significance of the (by then) European Community (EC), and its role in ensuring "prosperity and security" for Europeans "in a world in which there are many other powerful nations and groups of nations".<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, the European project was most clearly framed by the contemporary circumstances of the Cold War, not, as it had been for Churchill, the memory of World Wars. Seventeen years later, Prime Minister Tony Blair, speaking to the European Parliament in 2005, distanced himself from Thatcher's "market philosophy", but like Thatcher he argued that "enlargement" of the (by then) European Union (EU) to include the (by then) post-communist central and eastern European countries was an issue for the EU's "economy" and "security". However,

<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, speech to the College of Europe, "The Bruges Speech", 20 September 1988. <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332>

<sup>2</sup> Sir Winston Churchill, speech to the University of Zurich, "The Zurich Speech", 19 September 1946. [https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/address\\_given\\_by\\_winston\\_churchill\\_zurich\\_19\\_september\\_1946-en-7dc5a4cc-4453-4c2a-b130-b534b7d76ebd.html#:~:text=On%2019%20September%201946%2C%20Winston.and%20liberty%20throughout%20the%20continent](https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/address_given_by_winston_churchill_zurich_19_september_1946-en-7dc5a4cc-4453-4c2a-b130-b534b7d76ebd.html#:~:text=On%2019%20September%201946%2C%20Winston.and%20liberty%20throughout%20the%20continent)

the political significance of this geopolitical development had shifted. European integration was no longer either a Post-War or a Cold War security project, but a politically progressive one: the “extraordinary historic opportunity” offered by enlargement belonged to a politics forged “in the traditions of European idealism”, standing squarely against “outdated nationalism and xenophobia.”<sup>3</sup>

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Coming from a country whose semi-detached position seems to have been its only European constant, it is notable that the three best known British politicians of the post-War period – Churchill, Thatcher, Blair – all argued strongly for European integration and enlargement. It is equally notable that all three insisted that the problems facing Europe in their time were not about institutional “principles or conceptions” (Churchill), or questions calling for “arcane institutional debates” (Thatcher), or constitutional “subtleties and complexities” (Blair). In a time of “ruin” and “despair” (Churchill), “a time of change and uncertainty” (Thatcher), a time of “profound upheaval” (Blair), the question of Europe’s heading was, they all argued, not only economic or institutional, but first of all political and geopolitical. Moreover, for them, advancing the project of European co-operation was not about making use of difficult political circumstances to force through supposedly necessary neo-functional developments, but, in the face of such circumstances, to make the case for a moral and political choice in favour of Europe, thus requiring from Europe’s national representatives, above all, “moral leadership” (Churchill), “political courage” (Thatcher, twice), “political leadership” (Blair).

It is sometimes suggested that Britain only ever wanted to belong to an economic community, and that perception is not wholly unwarranted. However, with Churchill, Thatcher and Blair one can also see an underlying commitment to a (variously understood) political and geopolitical project. One could, of course, follow people like Hitler in thinking that the British approach to Europe is merely a (what might now be called) neoliberal attempt to further an Anglo-Saxon world hegemony. But if Churchill’s call in 1946 for a united Europe that could overcome “that series

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<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister Tony Blair, speech to the European Parliament, 23 June 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/jun/23/speeches.eu>

of frightful nationalistic quarrels”, if his hope that Europeans “in so many ancient states and nations” might be spared the tragedy of “tearing each other to pieces”, if his dream of building a political body in Europe “under which it can dwell in peace”, if all that was a call for Anglo-Saxon world hegemony, and not an attempt to rescue Europe from its bloody history, one has to take one’s leave of the conversation. The vision of what Thatcher called the “willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states” striving “to speak with a single voice”, to pool or share sovereignty where things can be done “better together than alone”, the vision of what Blair called “a union of values, of solidarity between nations and people”, may be a typically British view, but it is also, I believe, in main part – good.

### *British Prime Ministerial Voices II: Wilson-Heath-Major*

The trio of leading British politicians just reviewed gives a fair sense of the shifting geopolitical sands across the immediately post-War, Cold War, and then post-Cold War contexts. However, that simplified timeline overlooks another British Prime Ministerial trio: Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who prepared the ground for joining in the 1960s, Prime Minister Edward Heath who took the UK into the (by then) European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, and Prime Minister John Major who achieved a hard-won parliamentary majority for the Treaty of Maastricht, which brought the EU into being, in 1992. All three were just as keen as Churchill, Thatcher and Blair to stress the political virtues of European integration, and not just economic benefits. Wilson, speaking to the House of Commons in the run up to the second (and for the second time rejected) application to join the EEC in 1967, insisted that

whatever the economic arguments, the House will realise that, as I have repeatedly made clear, the Government’s purpose derives, above all, from our recognition that Europe is now faced with the opportunity of a great move forward in political unity and that we can – and indeed must – play our full part in it. We do not see European unity as something narrow or inward-looking... Together we can ensure that Europe plays in world affairs the part which the Europe of today is not at present playing.<sup>4</sup>

Heath too saw in the EEC the possibility of “an end to divisions which have stricken Europe for centuries”,<sup>5</sup> and still in the time of the Cold War stressed, like Thatcher after him, that this division was not over: “‘Europe’ is more than Western

<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister Harold Wilson, House of Commons Statement, (1967). [https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/statement\\_by\\_harold\\_wilson\\_on\\_the\\_united\\_kingdom\\_s\\_application\\_for\\_membership\\_to\\_the\\_ec\\_london\\_2\\_may\\_1967-en-680afb40-143e-484b-b430-881db671d1ec.html](https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/statement_by_harold_wilson_on_the_united_kingdom_s_application_for_membership_to_the_ec_london_2_may_1967-en-680afb40-143e-484b-b430-881db671d1ec.html)

<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister Edward Heath, “Brussels Speech”, (1972). <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/edward-heath-1972-speech-in-brussels/>

Europe alone. There lies also to the east another part of our continent: countries whose history has been closely linked with our own.” Twenty years later, John Major welcomed the possibility of “embracing the new democracies of the East”, emphasising above all that “the most far-reaching, the most profound reason for working together in Europe...is peace.”<sup>6</sup> These “joining” efforts were taken on by Wilson, Heath and Major in a British national context that only became more anxious that national political decisions in Westminster would “let Britain’s identity be lost in Europe”, as Major reported “a lady [from Cornwall]” putting it to him. Speaking to an increasingly Eurosceptical Conservative Party, Major insisted that “being at the heart of Europe” was not about “turning a deaf ear to the heartbeat of Britain” but seeing “our own national interest”, what is “right for British industry; right for British jobs; right for British prosperity”, as now more than ever inseparably connected to Britain’s membership of “the Community” and its flourishing.

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*“An EU which enabled its members “to cooperate in our mutual interest” would ward off Euroscepticism by practically demonstrating that “in collective cooperation they increase individual strength.” ”*

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There is, then, considerable continuity across these British political speeches on the primarily pacific virtue of European political integration, and of Britain’s best future as lying fully in that development. But there is another British continuity that is equally significant, if significantly more problematic, something belonging to what might be called a distinctive “Europe of the Atlantic” perspective that Britain has been historically central to. Churchill did not think Britain would be part of his 1946 projection of “a kind of United States of Europe”. The “coherent natural grouping” of nations from the “mighty continent” would be a partner with what he called another “natural grouping in the Western Hemisphere”: “we British have our own Commonwealth of Nations.” (Along with the UK, the members of the Commonwealth at this time were the semi-independent polities that had Dominion status, and, in 1946, white governments within the British Empire. In 1946 these were Canada, the Irish Free State, Newfoundland, and the Union of South Africa.) As we shall see, when Europe has been in view for Britain, it is the history and memory of Empire that has loomed largest over its horizon.

<sup>6</sup> Prime Minister John Major, Conservative Party Conference Speech, (1992). <http://britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=138>

As the Council of Europe began to take shape, it seems that Churchill began to look more favourably on the idea of Britain joining the European grouping. Perhaps the “natural grouping” of the Commonwealth started looking considerably less “natural” to him when the organization of countries that were formerly part of the Empire started to include quite so many countries of the (rapidly diminishing) Empire *not* ruled by white people. In any case, he was unquestionably in favour of Britain joining the EEC later in his long life, which is no great advert for it. Nevertheless, it is Empire that brings in a further defining aspect of the line of British Prime Ministerial contributions we are considering here – at least until Blair. Successive British politicians still had Empire in view when Europe was in view. In the passage from Wilson’s speech cited above I omitted a sentence in which he had underlined the British view of the importance of a Europe to come that was not “narrow or inward-looking” by immediately recalling that “Britain has her own vital links through the Commonwealth, and in other ways, with other continents. So have other European countries.” It was there in Heath’s Brussels speech in 1972 when, while claiming not to be thinking of reviving the “Age of Imperialism”, he nevertheless stressed “the lasting and creative effects of the spread of language and of culture, of commerce and of administration by people from Europe across land and sea to the other continents of the world.” It was even more powerfully present in Thatcher’s Bruges speech in 1988 too, where she spoke shamelessly of “how Europeans explored and colonised – and yes, without apology – civilised much of the world”. And, in fact, it was still there in John Major’s conference speech in 1992, when he claimed that “Britain has always grown and prospered when it has looked outwards – from the time of the First Elizabeth.” The post-War British understanding of both itself and of Europe was forged in the history and memory of British and European discovery, colonialism, and Empire.

### *The British Preference for a United Europe of States*

Blair’s speech to the European parliament in 2005 was not free of Imperial references, but the attempt was made there, for the first time, to mark a decisive break from the post-War British understanding of both itself and of Europe in that regard. He did not represent the Europe that “had dominated the world, colonised large parts of it, fought wars against each other for world supremacy” as something one might recall without more ado, still less without apology: if there was a time when British and other European leaders had done so, he said, “those days were gone”. Moreover, he did not speak up for “the idea of Europe, united and working together”, as Churchill had in 1946, from the outside, but firmly from the inside, as “a passionate pro-European”, confidently affirming his commitment to “Europe as a political project”. Not that he advocated ever greater powers for European institutions. Blair gave his speech in the wake of referenda “in two founding member states” in which the EU’s

attempt to establish a European Constitution had been “comprehensively rejected” by ordinary citizens. He was drily provocative in denying against no one that this was because “people studied the constitution and disagreed with its precise articles.” It was perfectly clear that it was a question of perceived EU over-Europe overreach: people were simply opposed to the aim to establish the EU as a supranational state-like body, what Blair called a “federal superstate”. And Blair agreed with them: “people always see politics more clearly than us. Precisely because they are not daily obsessed with it.” In Blair’s view, the real challenge for the EU was about the “renewal” and “modernisation” of its “policies” not the becoming state-like of its “institutions”. Or again, the EU’s future depended on the success of its practical efforts to “improve the lives of people”, not the promotion of a distant “ideal” that very few Europeans found ideal anyway. It was failing in the former, and Europe was weaker as a result. Thinking in this way was not, he insisted, “anti-Europe” but would help the EU “recover...support amongst the people”, without which Europe could find that its own citizens had simply “defaulted to Euroscepticism”.

Moreover, the whole pacific point of the EU for Blair was to enhance and protect not reduce and replace the power of its Member States. As Blair had put it in a speech two years earlier, in Warsaw, “the purpose of the European Union is to give us, the individual nations that form it, greater economic and political strength.”<sup>7</sup> An EU which enabled its members “to cooperate in our mutual interest” would ward off Euroscepticism by practically demonstrating that “in collective cooperation they increase individual strength.”<sup>8</sup> His Warsaw speech was explicit about the future shaping of the EU that this implied:

We want a union of nations, not a federal superstate, and that vision is shared by the majority of countries and people in Europe. A European superstate would neither have the efficacy or legitimacy to meet the global challenge... I reject the notion that the “true” Europe is to be found only in the European Commission and European Parliament. The European Union is a balance between the community and the intergovernmental. What we need to do is to strengthen Europe where necessary at every level; but the fount of authority lies in the free will of nations, collectively expressed... [We] need to root the European vision in the identity of the nations that make up Europe.<sup>9</sup>

Affirming the *prima facie* paradox of international unions – the idea of *enhancing* the strength and independence of individual nations through membership of a political

<sup>7</sup> Prime Minister Tony Blair, speech in Warsaw, (2003). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/may/30/eu.speeches>

<sup>8</sup> Prime Minister Tony Blair, Speech to the European Parliament, (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister Tony Blair, Speech in Warsaw, (2003).

union with other nations that *limits* their sovereignty – is the basic form of *all* British contributions to the formation of the EU, and its best.

For Blair, the future of the EU lay not in the possibility of a new European federal government, not a new state-like “bureaucracy”, but in improved co-ordination on policies that could make the EU the “champion of a global, outward-looking, competitive Europe.” The classic “Europe of the Atlantic” figure of Europe is still clearly in view here, but now in the form of what one might call its post-Imperial Europeanization. It was, I think, a promising development, but in reality it was only nascently and weakly making its generational way in Britain. And Blair’s pro-European speech to the European Parliament was greeted with jeers – by Britain’s own UKIP MEPs. Increasingly hostile to what they saw as centralising forces in the EU overwhelming political freedom in the UK, the right-wing in Britain saw the EU as a regulatory fetter to a self-confident and still globally voyaging Britain. Meanwhile, sections of the left-wing framed the EU as a deregulating neoliberal trap, part of a neoliberal hegemony increasingly becoming global. For that part of the left it was better for Britain to escape the EU altogether. Many other UK citizens were simply feeling something that the lady from Cornwall was feeling: Britain was losing itself not renewing itself in Europe. In a desperately ill-conceived bid by Prime Minister David Cameron to quell the divisions over Europe within his own party in a national way, a referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU was held in 2016.

Prior to the referendum Cameron tried to renegotiate a “new settlement” on the UK’s membership, and very nearly won what might have been a significant change not just for the UK but for the EU. The draft agreement between Cameron and the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, presented on 2 February 2016 included the following text:

### SECTION C SOVEREIGNTY

1. References in the Treaties and their preambles to the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe are primarily intended to signal that the Union’s aim is to promote trust and understanding among peoples living in open and democratic societies sharing a common heritage of universal values. They are not an equivalent to the objective of political integration.<sup>10</sup>

This text did *not* make it to the final agreement of 19 February 2016, the latter

<sup>10</sup> *Consilium Europe*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21980/decision-new-settlementen16.pdf>

replacing it with the bizarre proposal that EU treaties be amended “so as to make it clear that the references to ever closer union do not apply to the United Kingdom.” The draft text of “Section C” may not have anyway given Cameron what he needed to win the referendum, perhaps nothing would have given him that, but its replacement, the strangest of all UK EU opt-outs, was an unconvincing variation. In the end, the final agreement, with its truncated quotation of the beautiful vague words on “ever closer union among the peoples of Europe”, and its accompanying (very) long legal explication that “references to ever closer union” in the EU treaties in fact *have no legal significance whatsoever* whether they “apply” to a Member State or not, only served to confirm that the beautiful vague words were also very jealously guarded words for those who still wanted them, vaguely-if-not-legally, to “signal” a vision of (“ever closer”) political integration, and not on the books, as the draft text of “Section C” would have had it, as something definitively and explicitly “*not equivalent*” to that.

Defending Britain’s membership of a Union that few could have thought especially inspiring in its existing condition or trajectory, the campaign for “Remain” in the UK was strongest in Scotland, where the leaders of all the major parties at least worked conspicuously together, and effectively marginalised “Leave” voices as retrograde and extremist. Many leading national politicians – perhaps especially the former Prime Ministers John Major, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, along with the leaders and former leaders of the smaller Liberal-Democrat and Green parties – put all their energy behind the pro-European cause. But, with the Conservative Party divided from top to bottom, and a woefully inadequate present-but-not-participating leader of the opposition Labour Party, a longstanding follower of Tony Benn with a consistently Eurosceptic past who refused point-blank to participate in a cross-party national campaign, the Remain voice in the UK did not compete well against the glittering promise to “take back control” that belonged to Leave supporters, and most of the national newspapers.

Ultimately, however, it is not clear that the result of the referendum was due to the Remain voice being so fragmented, or what beautiful vague words meant, or indeed how much it was specifically or coherently about assessments of the EU’s actual role in British political life. Beyond the postures and impostures of political persuasion, the referendum gave an opportunity, a rare opening, for feelings like those of the lady from Cornwall to find public expression. “She didn’t tell me her name”, Major confessed in his conference speech in 1992, but he was doubtless right to think that there was, articulated in that anonymous voice, “the anxieties of millions”.

### ***Brexit and Beyond***

The referendum was their opportunity, and “Brexit” the all-but-meaningless name of their aggregated preferences. (“Brexit means Brexit” as Prime Minister Theresa May, who was the first to be tasked with near impossible task of picking up the pieces afterwards, came to put it.) While its meaning remains not one, its consequences far-reaching and unpredictable, there was, however, at least one undeniable result. As a result of the definitive referendum result, the hope that the UK might find a new post-Imperial sense of itself in Europe was, whether temporarily or permanently we do not know, overnight extinguished.

Losing its most effective voice in a world in which it was anyway increasingly marginal, it is also hard to disagree with the unnamed “English friend” of Donald Tusk, who the latter cites as saying “Brexit is the real end of the British Empire” – and that despite the fact that “Brexit” is itself a symptom of Britain having *not* got beyond understanding itself through its Imperial history.

Britain now has to work its way out of the other side of the paradox of international unions: the inverse relationship between sovereignty and independence in a globalised world. The more one attains of the former, the less one can navigate freely in the latter. Nevertheless, Britain is not alone with its paradoxes and problems. I very much doubt that the distinctively “British” idea of a United Europe of States – as opposed to a United States of Europe – that I have sketched in this article will disappear from the now Britain-free EU. Blair was right: “We want a union of nations, not a federal superstate, and that vision is shared by the majority of countries and people in Europe.” The future of the EU does not lie in the hands of visionaries in Europe’s supranational institutions. It lies in the hands of the EU’s constituent countries – and especially the millions of their still-anxious voters.