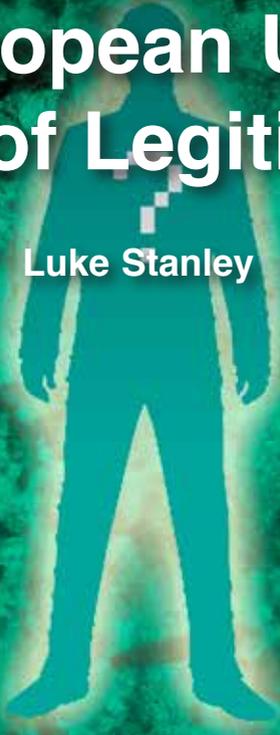


# A European Supra-National Identity: The Solution to the European Union's Crisis of Legitimacy?

Luke Stanley



# **A European Supra-National Identity: The Solution to the European Union's Crisis of Legitimacy?**

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# **A European Supra-National Identity: The Solution to the European Union's Crisis of Legitimacy?**

## **Introduction**

Massimo d'Azeglio, a Sardinian politician during the unification of Italy, famously said, 'Italy has been made; now it remains to make Italians'.<sup>1</sup> In a European Union moving further towards "ever-closer union", it remains to be seen; can the European Commission make Europeans? And if so would this be enough to legitimise the European Union, and reverse growing disillusionment? To come to a conclusive answer, several aspects must be considered. Firstly, the importance of national identities in legitimising states, which can be applied to the European Union. Secondly, the extent to which a European identity is discernable across the European Union member states at the present, in particular within the United Kingdom. Lastly, the methods the European Commission could use to develop a common European culture into a European supra-national identity.

Nationalism was brought into disrepute by the two world wars, and the extremist nationalist movements founded during the interim. Cris Shore argues that 'the nation-state ... - and not simply its distortion under authoritarian regimes – is construed as an agent of conflict and war'.<sup>2</sup> Yet liberal nationalism was also the corner-stone of resistance against both Nazism and Communism. Many historians have been quick to denounce the idea of nations and national identity as a phenomenon, prominent only for a relatively short period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, historians and political scientists alike, firmly espouse the idea that national identities have no place in the present, and will ultimately be replaced by more cosmopolitan identities. This however is, for the most part, wishful thinking. National consciousness is alive and well, as is the nationalist desire for a "homeland" nation-state with full sovereignty. This is demonstrated by the many sub-national movements across Europe, most notably those of the Scottish and the Catalonians, both of which have secured referenda on the subject of independence scheduled for 2014. Even Europeanist John McCormick concedes

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1 Andrina Stiles, *The Unification of Italy 1815-70* (Bristol, 1987), p. 91

2 Cris Shore, *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration* (London, 2000), pp. 58-59

that nationalism 'continues to fester on the margins of politics in several parts of Europe'.<sup>3</sup> Eurobarometer results, as shown later, also clearly show continued national identity. That national identities are still prominent demonstrates how useful they are in legitimising states, and adds credence to the argument that were the European Union to successfully induce a European supra-national identity, it could solve its legitimacy deficit.

## The Demos Deficit

If the European Union is to continue to move towards political unification, a move the Eurozone crisis has accelerated, it desperately needs some form of legitimacy. An example demonstrating the necessity of legitimacy gained from national identities is contemporary Belgium. The linguistic divide between the Flemish-speakers of Flanders and the French-speaking Walloons has led to tensions between the two national communities, tensions exacerbated by an economic divide. Els De Graef, echoed other Flemish nationalists by branding the Walloons as, 'welfare addicts', during a period in which Walloon unemployment was at 20%, compared with 8% in Flanders.<sup>4</sup> The inability of some Flemings and Walloons to work together in government has contributed, along with other factors, to short-lived administrations, as well as periods of government anarchy, such as in 2007. Belgium is a state divided between only two nationalities, how can a future European super-state consisting of twenty-seven nationalities be effective? Historian Anthony Smith rightly asserts that, 'until the great majority of Europeans ... feel inspired ... to common action and community, the edifice of "Europe" at the political level will remain shaky'.<sup>5</sup> This is echoed by Europeanist Soledad García who agrees that, 'Europe will exist as an unquestionable political community only when European identity permeates people's lives and daily existence'.<sup>6</sup> The essentiality of a European supra-national identity for future European integration, leads us to try and ascertain the depth as to which such an identity is presently felt across the European member states. The following quoted results from Standard Eurobarometer 77 can be found in tables in

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3 John McCormick, *Europeanism* (New York, 2010), p. 75

4 Bruno Waterfield, 'A nation divided – Belgium's identity crisis', *The Telegraph* (18 September 2007), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1563466/A-nation-divided-Belgiums-identity-crisis.html> [accessed 22 January 2013].

5 Anthony D. Smith, 'National Identity and the Idea of European Unity', *International Affairs*, 68, no. 1 (Jan 1992) p. 73

6 Soledad García, 'Europe's Fragmented Identities and the Frontier of Citizenship', in Soledad García (ed.), *European Identity and the Search for Legitimacy* (London, 1993), p. 15

the appendix (Figures 1 and 2) along with a graph comparing all European member states' results (Figure 3).

Eurobarometer 77's results show that in May 2012 a mere 46% of respondents across the EU27 felt attached to the European Union whilst 52% felt unattached. Meanwhile, 88% felt attached to their town or city and 91% felt attached to their country. The same Eurobarometer shows that 87% of respondents of the EU27 identify themselves in the near future primarily as their nationality and only 9% primarily as Europeans. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of citizens of the EU27 identify themselves by their national identity rather than by a European identity. Despite this, there is a sizeable minority of attachment to the European Union across the EU27, as demonstrated by the results of Eurobarometer 77, with attachment varying across the individual member states.

The member state most attached to the European Union, according to the Eurobarometer 77 results with 72% of respondents attached, is Luxembourg. This is perhaps not surprising as many EU agencies are based there. Despite such a strong attachment to Europe, the respondents for Luxembourg also demonstrated a continued national identity, with 74% identifying themselves in the near future as being primarily Luxembourgers and, a still sizeable, minority of 24% identifying themselves primarily as being Europeans. This suggests even the most pro-European states lack a European identity, let alone the more Eurosceptic states. The United Kingdom which registered the lowest attachment to Europe in Eurobarometer 77, with 27% of respondents feeling attached, records 93% of respondents identifying themselves as being British above European (60% solely as British), with only 5% identifying themselves as European above British. The reasons for the very low attachment to, and identification with, Europe within the United Kingdom is worth briefly examining.

## National Consciousness

England was one of the first states to develop a national consciousness, a consciousness that was passed on to the United Kingdom. The historian Adrian Hastings has pointed out that Britain, as an island, developed clear state boundaries early on, whilst state boundaries were much more fluid on the continent, creating a blend of cultures around the boundaries.<sup>7</sup> As David Cameron has recently pointed out, Britain has, 'the character of an island nation – independent, forthright,

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<sup>7</sup> Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 42

passionate in defence of [its] sovereignty'.<sup>8</sup> However, not all of the British Isles, nor all of the United Kingdom, are naturally Eurosceptic. As Sean Carey has said, 'the English resist the threat the EU poses to their identity, whereas the Scottish, Welsh and Irish perhaps see the EU as a positive force for the expression of theirs'.<sup>9</sup> This can be seen as a contradictory. After all why should Ireland, a nation that had struggled for so long to affirm its right to statehood, be so supportive of an organisation moving towards closer political union? And why is the Scottish National Party so anxious for a potentially independent Scotland to retain membership of the European Union? The answer is that the European Union allows new states, such as Ireland and potentially Scotland, to prosper as net beneficiaries of the European Union's budget, as well as giving them the sense of being a diplomatically significant state. However, only 44% of Irish people in the Standard Eurobarometer 77 felt attached to the European Union, whilst only 3% said they would describe themselves as European above Irish in the near future. Therefore whilst some parts of the United Kingdom, for example Scotland, are pro-European this should not be misconstrued as attachment or European identity.

So whilst the European Union may be seen in a more positive light in some states such as Luxembourg, than in the United Kingdom, there is still a substantial absence of European identity across all the member states of the European Union. This means that continued political unification will widely be seen as an unfavourable erosion of each country's sovereignty. That is unless a supra-national European identity can be developed. If such a European identity is to supersede national ones in the future, then the European Union must be the instigator of this transformation. It is certainly possible for states to foster successfully a sense of national identity, this practice being predominant during the nineteenth century. However, a successfully fostered national identity must be cultivated from certain pre-existing conditions, even the historian Benedict Anderson conceding that, 'nation-states ... always loom out of an immemorial past'.<sup>10</sup> By examining some aspects of a common European culture, and the pre-conditions for national consciousness suggested by various historians, and applying them to the European Union, we can ascertain whether or not a European supra-national identity is attainable.

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8 David Cameron (speech delivered 23 January 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21160684> [accessed 27 January 2013]

9 Sean Carey, 'Undivided Loyalties: Is National Identity an Obstacle to European Integration?', *European Union Politics*, 3, no. 4 (2002), p. 406.

10 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991), p. 11

## The Limits of Integration

Anderson has pointed out the significance of a common language in uniting communities. He argues that early modern printing standardised vernacular languages and unified different dialects, creating a way for communities of non-Latin speakers, to exchange information, but only with each other, isolating other vernacular-speaking communities. The language fixity created gave an idea of antiquity to nations centuries later. In those two ways printed vernacular languages laid the foundation for national identity.<sup>11</sup> The problem with language in the European member states is the prevalence of so many different languages, not only official languages but also sub-national languages such as Gaelic, Catalan and Basque. Moreover, according to the Special Barometer 386, only 54% of European respondents can hold a conversation in a language other than their own.<sup>12</sup> Of these multilingual respondents, 38% can speak English as their second language, 12% French, 11% German, 7% Spanish and 5% Russian.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, even those Europeans who can communicate with members of different linguistic communities are divided between languages, meaning there are large linguistic divides between national communities. As we have seen in Belgium these divides, 'will favour intra-group communication, and discourage interaction between the groups'.<sup>14</sup>

Despite being divided in their respective histories, member states do share some aspects of culture. Europeanists are always quick to emphasise the role of the Renaissance, Humanism and the Enlightenment in developing the existence of a common European culture, as well as democracy. In the past religion has also been instrumental in the development of national identities, however in an increasingly secular and tolerant society, it is no longer a defining aspect. Despite this, Christianity has aided the development of a European culture based on Christian ethics. As Smith has suggested these developments have not led to a European culture common to all member states of the European Union, but instead to, European 'families of culture', with each national culture sharing some traits but not all.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, whilst there is no universal European culture for an identity to be formed from, there are definitively similar aspects between different European national cultures.

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11 *Ibid.*, p. 44

12 European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 386: Europeans and their languages* (July 2012)

13 *Ibid.*

14 Bruno De Witte, 'Cultural Legitimation: Back to the Language Question', in Garcia (ed.), *European Identity*, p. 157.

15 Smith, 'National Identity', pp. 70-1

Historic national identities have also been shaped by shared experiences, for example, Bismarck's use of the Franco-Prussian War to forge a closer German identity. It is possible that the shared experience of the Eurozone crisis could forge a closer European identity within the Eurozone states. However, the crisis is equally likely to exacerbate tensions between the Eurozone states, with certain countries resenting the others for forcing austerity measures upon them. This is symptomatic of another aspect that affects identities; economic divides. The creation of a Germanic customs union, the Zollverein, was certainly an important precursor to the unification of Germany. Despite the creation of the Single Market, which has incontrovertibly aided the development of a European identity, economic divides remain. Broadly speaking, the more prosperous northern European states are divided economically from the less wealthy southern European states. As we have seen with Belgium, such economic divides, 'act as reinforcements ... in defining nationalities'.<sup>16</sup> This could mean that if a European identity does develop, it could develop separately in the north and the south. Eventually however, this economic divide may subside as the net beneficiaries of the European Union's budget improve their economies. Yet if the problems with the euro persist the imbalances which the Single Currency creates will create more division.

Therefore, as Shore puts it, 'the cultural elements from which existing national identities are constructed ... are precisely those factors which divide most Europeans'.<sup>17</sup> Europeans are divided by language, history, economic conditions and, to some extent, by cultural traits. However, these divides can potentially be overcome by the European Commission, and we must consider the methods that can be used to artificially foster the pre-conditions for a European identity.

## The EU's Predicament

There is a predicament for the European Union; it cannot be seen to be eroding its member states' cultures, and yet it must do so in order to encourage a European identity to legitimise itself. Therefore whilst the Commission espouses "unity in diversity" as its motto, it also tries to foster a European identity. This contradiction is enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty in which the European Union promises to respect, 'national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common

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16 A. W. Orridge, 'Separatist and Autonomist Nationalisms: The Structure of Regional Loyalties in the Nation State', in Colin H. Williams (ed.), *National Separatism* (Cardiff, 1982), p. 48

17 Shore, *Building Europe*, p. 225

cultural heritage to the fore'.<sup>18</sup> One theory promoting "unity in diversity" is the idea of multiple identities. Smith argues that people have more than one identity and this makes it possible for someone to be English or Scottish, British and European at the same time.<sup>19</sup> Carey argues that, whilst people do have multiple identities, they also have terminal communities; the 'highest political unit to which individuals feel they owe allegiance'.<sup>20</sup> However, as Shore points out those who promote the idea of multiple identities, assume these identities, 'fit together harmoniously'.<sup>21</sup> A European identity and national identities are not compatible however, as a European identity will eventually lead to aspirations for a European super-state, whilst strong national identities are based on the desire for a maintained nation-state. Therefore, if a European identity is to be fostered by the European Commission, it may well be at the expense of national identities.

Education is the main medium through which the European Union can foster a European identity in new generations. However, Robert Picht points out that whilst 'educational systems remain different in Europe and resist standardization ... Europeans will differ in basic forms of thinking and behaviour'.<sup>22</sup> Smith also agrees that so long as, 'the state can control and use the instruments of mass education effectively ... national self-maintenance is not to be underestimated'.<sup>23</sup> This is unequivocally for the best however, if these differences prevent the European Union's involvement in member states' history curricula. As Shore argues, the European Union's historiography portrays European history as, 'a kind of moral success story: a gradual "coming together"', promoting an, 'outdated idea of cultures as fixed, unitary and bounded wholes that is both socially naïve and politically dangerous'.<sup>24</sup> Europeanist historians, by focusing solely on trans-European events such as the Renaissance, have constructed a markedly distorted version of history, equal to the nationalist versions of history constructed in the nineteenth century.

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18 Article 128, the Maastricht Treaty ( 7 February 1992), <http://www.eurotreaties.com/maastrichtec.pdf> [accessed 27 January 2013]

19 Smith, 'National Identity', p. 68.

20 Carey, 'Undivided Loyalties', p. 391.

21 Shore, *Building Europe*, p. 225

22 Robert Picht, 'Disturbed Identities: Social and Culture Mutations in Contemporary Europe', in García (ed.), *European Identity*, p. 87.

23 Smith, 'National Identity', p. 65.

24 Shore, *Building Europe*, pp. 57-58

Another area in which the European Union has reason to involve itself in education is in language. After all, if the European Union promotes the studying of languages, a more multilingual Europe will emerge allowing a more united Europe. The Erasmus programme is a prime example of the European Commission promoting the learning of foreign languages as well as encouraging European travel and the mixing of different nationalities. However, the Commission, as mentioned above, cannot be seen to be eroding national cultures, and so they are also committed to preserving linguistic diversity. As De Witte states, there are worries that European integration will, 'cause linguistic assimilation, and that some of the lesser-used national languages ... will be reduced to the status of quasi-dialects' at the expense of a few "national languages of Europe" emerging.<sup>25</sup> Over time, the Commission can increase the number of Europeans fluent in second languages, but because there are multiple options for second languages (English, French and German), it will be decades, if not centuries, before a majority of Europeans are able to communicate with each other fluently in the same language. García asserts however that, 'a common language, will never exist'.<sup>26</sup>

## The Challenge of the EU

National identities can be induced by what Eric Hobsbawm describes as invented traditions, many states using them during the nineteenth century. Hobsbawm argues that, 'inventing traditions ... is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition'.<sup>27</sup> As Shore states, 'the mobilisation of history and memory, particularly among the young', is central to creating new political orders.<sup>28</sup> There are many examples of the European Union using invented traditions and symbols, for example the European flag, the European anthem and Europe Day. McCormick concedes that many aspects of the European Union's attempt to encourage a sense of European identity offer, 'little in the way of real change' and run the, 'danger of overlaying national identity with a homogenized and sanitized version of European identity'.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, as Smith

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25 Bruno De Witte, 'Cultural Legitimation: Back to the Language Question', in García (ed.), *European Identity*, p. 164.

26 García, 'Fragmented Identities', in García (ed.), *European Identity*, p. 3

27 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Tradition' in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 4

28 Shore, *Building Europe*, p. 56

29 McCormick, *Europeanism*, pp. 67-68.

points out, by 'preaching allegiance to national symbols and historical myths, the state's elites may actually stir up resentment ... at the neglect of minority cultures'.<sup>30</sup>

The European Union have also used the figure of Charlemagne as a symbol of European unity. For instance, the city of Aachen, widely associated with Charlemagne, annually awards the Charlemagne Award for promoting European unity. A speech by the President of the European Parliament at the award ceremony for the Charlemagne Youth Prize 2010 exemplifies the European Union's use of a Charlemagne myth as "the founder of Europe":

'Imagine, if you will, the age of Charlemagne, twelve hundred years ago. Already then, he had a vision of a united Europe'.<sup>31</sup>

The European Union's use of Charlemagne to promote European unity is wholly inappropriate. During his reign as King of Francia, he was responsible for religious wars and genocide against the pagan Saxons - hardly a figure associated with the human rights which the European Union is so committed to uphold. And yet the European Union has promoted Charlemagne as the "founder of European culture", another example of how Europeanists can distort history to serve political agendas. These invented traditions and symbols can have a powerful effect of promoting a European identity, but surely such an identity should be reached naturally if possible.

One final method that can be used to induce a national identity, is hostility to other nations. As I have mentioned, Bismarck managed to use the Franco-Prussian War and the anti-French feelings it stirred up to great effect in the unification of Germany. The European Union was able to use the threat of the USSR to instil a sense of community among its member states up until the 1990s. Since then the European Union has played on the economic threat of a resurgent Asia. The latter has certainly worked as a strategy, with some quasi-Eurosceptics, for example the British, accepting the "necessity" of the European Union to be able to compete with China and India in the future. Fear and necessity have been predominant features of the European Union since its inception. Originally the European Community was envisaged as the only alternative to another Franco-German war, then as the only alternative to the Communist bloc and now as the only alternative to Asian dominance.

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30 Smith, 'National Identity', p. 63.

31 Jerzy Buzek, speech at the Charlemagne Youth Prize 2010 Award Ceremony (11 May 2010), <http://www.sitepres.europarl.europa.eu/president/fr-en/press/speeches/sp-2010/sp-2010-May/speeches-2010-May-7.html> [accessed 25.01.2012].

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the European Commission has been largely unsuccessful in fostering any sort of European identity in its member states. The main inducers of national identity - language, history and culture - largely remain divided between the member states, and they seem unlikely to change in the near future. However, perhaps by the end of the twenty-first century a European identity may have begun to develop. The language and economic barriers, as I have mentioned, could eventually be dispelled. Orridge has emphasised the importance of a “homeland”, an area occupied by a majority of a certain nationality in maintaining national identity.<sup>32</sup> The uncontrolled inter-European immigration the European Union presides over may eventually remove this as well.

So to conclude, there is presently no European identity, nor the necessary pre-conditions for a European identity to be fostered in the near future. So where does this leave the future of the European Union? Without a mandate from the peoples of Europe, through a European identity, further European integration should be refrained from. Moreover, the European Union could repatriate some of the powers it has absorbed, back to its member states who have the popular sovereignty and democratic accountability to use them. This is unlikely however, as Shore has pointed out, the European Union has created a new class of politicians, ‘with a vested interest in furthering the integration project and the formation of a de facto European state’.<sup>33</sup> This is demonstrated by the European Union’s history of integration. The European Union extended itself to economically unprepared states, before introducing the Single Currency within these states precipitating the Eurozone crisis.

The European Union cannot simply glue together twenty seven historically unique states overnight, after thousands of years of history have shaped the individual cultures of each state. If political integration is to be continued without popular support, in the form of a European identity, then Eurosceptic member states such as the United Kingdom, will continue to consider the merits of retaining membership. Another, quote of Massimo d’Azeglio may be appropriate for European integrationists; ‘to make an Italy out of Italians, one must not be in a hurry’.<sup>34</sup>

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32 Orridge, ‘Separatist’ in Williams (ed.), *National Separatism*, p. 46

33 Shore, *Building Europe*, p. 34

34 Stiles, *Unification*, p. 91.

# Appendix

Figure 1

| Country        | The European Union | Your own country |
|----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Luxembourg     | 72%                | 89%              |
| EU27           | 46%                | 91%              |
| Ireland        | 44%                | 97%              |
| United Kingdom | 27%                | 88%              |

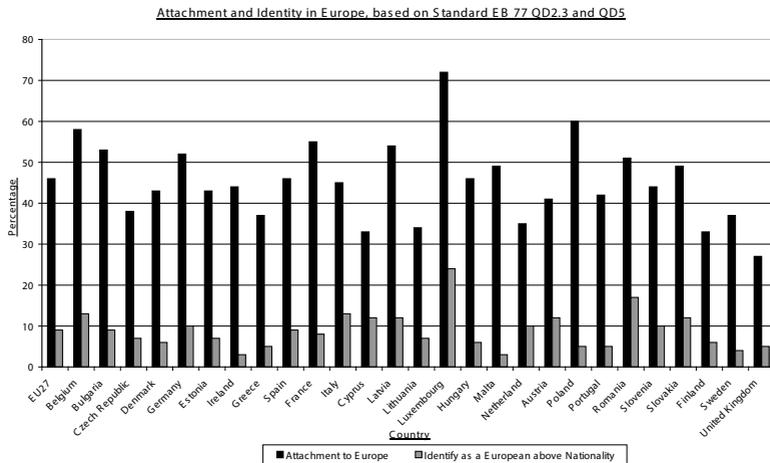
QD2.2 and QD2.3: 'Please tell me how attached you feel to ...' EB77 2012.<sup>35</sup>

Figure 2

| Country        | Solely Nationality | Nationality then European | European then Nationality | Solely European |
|----------------|--------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Luxembourg     | 19                 | 55                        | 13                        | 11              |
| EU27           | 38                 | 49                        | 6                         | 3               |
| Ireland        | 52                 | 41                        | 2                         | 1               |
| United Kingdom | 60                 | 33                        | 3                         | 2               |

QD5: 'In the near future, do you see yourself as ...?' EB77 2012.<sup>36</sup>

Figure 3



37

35 European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 77* (July 2012)

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

## THE BRUGES GROUP

The Bruges Group is an independent all-party think tank. Set up in February 1989, its aim was to promote the idea of a less centralised European structure than that emerging in Brussels. Its inspiration was Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech in September 1988, in which she remarked that "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level...". The Bruges Group has had a major effect on public opinion and forged links with Members of Parliament as well as with similarly minded groups in other countries. The Bruges Group spearheads the intellectual battle against the notion of "ever-closer Union" in Europe. Through its ground-breaking publications and wide-ranging discussions it will continue its fight against further integration and, above all, against British involvement in a single European state.

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