

# Speech by Dr Robin Harris to the Bruges Group **Britain, Europe and the Conservative Party: An Historical Perspective, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2012**

My book about the Conservative Party covers more than two centuries.<sup>1</sup> Europe comes in and out of the story, but it isn't a continuous theme.

There are, though, two relevant strands of continuity. The first lies in the nature of the Party itself. The epithets that best apply to the Conservatives over their long history seem to me to be – successful, necessary and surprising; but also – ruthless, opportunistic and short-sighted. That analysis is relevant to how we consider the Party's attitude to Europe.



The second strand of continuity is the concept of the primacy of national interest. A Conservative leader who argued that a particular policy needed to be followed because it was moral, enlightened, just, or whatever, but who didn't mention if it was in the national interest would traditionally be given short shrift from fellow Conservatives. For Conservatives, however much we may disagree about the details, the national interest comes first. This is a big difference between us and the Left – and by that I include the Liberal Democrats, of course.

So what has been and what is the British national interest in Europe?

Without going back too far, but going back rather further than the origins of the Conservative Party under Peel, we can see that British policy is traditionally hostile to any one power dominating Continental Europe. That hostility from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century was largely directed at France.

But from about the 1830s, the high point of British global greatness, until about the 1930s, Britain's view was modified. Britain still preferred to see a balance of power in Europe. But this was not primarily to preserve its own security. It was primarily with a view to protecting its Empire. Britain had achieved all that it was likely to achieve and it knew it. Indeed, it suffered from overstretch. What Britain now disliked were, therefore, dissatisfied,

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Harris, *The Conservatives: A History* (London: Bantam, 2011)

hungry European powers, and it feared more those whose hunger and dissatisfaction were combined with strength. Under Lord Salisbury, for example, Britain's closest – though never formal – ally was Bismarck's Germany, which was dominant but after the Franco-Prussian War was also a satisfied power. By contrast Britain feared Russia, because of threats to the Near East and ultimately India. Russia was dissatisfied.

The Second World War and the Cold War again changed these calculations in different ways, and ultimately changed the British approach to Continental Europe. On the eve of the Second World War, British policy was still preoccupied with Empire. In the 1930s, the temptation, one particularly powerful for the Conservatives obsessed with Imperial preference and Imperial integration, was to ignore the significance of the rise of the European dictators, above all the rise of Hitler. This was the result of adherence to old ways of thinking and a failure of leadership. Churchill sums this up in his assessment of Baldwin (the comparison is with Neville Chamberlain):

“Stanley Baldwin was the wiser, more comprehending personality, but without executive capacity. He was largely detached from foreign and military affairs. He knew little of Europe, and disliked what he knew... He had a genius for waiting upon events”.

That is a very Conservative attitude – and disastrous one.

It wasn't, though, Chamberlain's. Chamberlain was an activist. He thought he understood Europe, in particular he thought he understood Hitler. Although he began rearmament, he still thought that influence was a substitute for power and that a sound economy was more important than a substantial army.

It's wrong, of course, to focus the spotlight on the Conservatives alone. Socialism and pacifism had during this period been poisoning the national psyche, making a robust defence strategy all but impossible. Moreover, America, having now far overtaken Britain in the great power stakes, pursued a policy of isolation, until Pearl Harbour put a stop to it.

With the end of the War and the drawing of the Iron Curtain a new set of circumstances forced a further reappraisal.



The Cold War required that America and, in tow, Britain should ensure that Western Europe stayed secure and became prosperous. NATO provided part of the answer. But the Marshal Plan and then the various initiatives resulting in the European Common Market were the other part. Churchill's not very coherent enthusiasm for European unity (a unity excluding Britain, of course) fits into this wider pattern. The German question was crucial; and solving it meant concessions to France. The US wanted German rearmament, particularly once the Korean War broke out in 1950. America accordingly pressed for a European army under the form of the European Defence Community, though the French – for whom the whole notion had been devised to offer reassurance – finally turned it down.

It is sometimes said that Britain "missed the boat", failing to get on board the European venture at the right time and in the right conditions. But we must remember that various vessels appeared, and a number sank. Britain's error, for which Foreign Office complacency must take the blame, was in failing to see how strong the drive for European unity among the European elite was – above all at the Messina Conference in 1955 - and how much pressure would come from America to go along with it.

Under both Ernest Bevin and Anthony Eden, as foreign secretaries in the post-War period, British policy had been opposed to any British involvement with supra-national (as opposed to international) institutions.

But for both France and Britain the turning point was the 1956 Suez crisis. In France, even before De Gaulle's victory two years' later, the politicians of the Fourth Republic had become thoroughly disgusted with America and distrustful of Britain because of events in the Middle East. In Britain, the shift was even more significant. Eden's replacement by Macmillan represented the imposition of Eisenhower's favourite British politician, who was also by temperament and preference a progressive. Once entry into the Common Market became associated with progress, Macmillan would press for it. And Washington then pressed him harder than even he wished to go. There is no need to go through all the negotiations that failed or even those that finally succeeded. But three points should be made.

First, the concept of a European Free Trade Area was never seriously developed. When people say that it failed it would be better to say it was never tried. The Free Trade Area idea was first devised as a means of watering down the imminent decision of the Six to set up a Common Market. It had no real chance of doing that. It was too late, and it didn't

offer the French what they wanted, i.e. protection. When the EEC six went ahead, the EFTA seven was set up almost as an act of pique. From the start, British Government Ministers and officials thought poorly of it; the Americans also disliked it, precisely because it didn't have the supra-national institutions they wanted to see as the core of a united Europe, and they thought it a spoiling device, which in some sense it was. Macmillan worried that Britain was excluded from the most rapidly growing markets, but above all that the US would take notice of the Six and not Britain, nor of him. EFTA was, in fact, hardly created before Macmillan was trying, with support from British industrialists, to get back to negotiating entry into the EEC.

The second point relates to what this European Economic Community that Britain finally joined in 1973 actually was and is. Throughout this early period, and much later when it was completely inexcusable, the attempt was made by the political elite, especially the Conservative elite, to portray Europe (as I shall now call it) as something quite different from what it actually was. The conception behind it – the conception of Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman and others – was not of a free trade area. It was of a series of interlocking cartels (beginning with the Coal and Steel Community of 1951), forming a customs union, organised by central institutions, with its own system of law. That is what the Treaty of Rome established and what subsequent treaties and other developments have reinforced. Its purpose was to create a union of European countries, particularly a real union between France and Germany, such that war was impossible because national sovereignty would be suppressed. Its goal was the creation of a kind of United States of Europe, but this goal would be advanced on an apparently ad hoc and pragmatic basis. The assumption, and one can hardly fault it, was that unity was more likely to flow from practical cooperation rather than through declaring too vocally what was planned. Looking at Europe today, one can say that in this sense – if no other – the plan has worked.

Not surprisingly, the Six – even before De Gaulle's arrival – were unconvinced that Britain would fit in to this conception. America, with its political tradition of universalism, its distrust of nation states and its dislike of colonial empires, and now much worried by the costs of the Cold War, thought otherwise. So the US pushed us in – and finally in we went.

When one examines the internal British debates about it all, one is struck by one enormous omission. The Heath Government spent far more time discussing details of access for Commonwealth produce than it did the

financial terms of British membership. And it spent no time at all debating the loss of sovereignty – which it first denied and later more or less accepted but simply redefined – notably by trying to claim that sovereignty was nothing other than power. Which is nonsense. The central error in Britain, though, was to regard as a question of foreign and commercial policy i.e. of external relations - what was in fact an internal question of government as such, in other words a new legal and political order. The Treaty of Rome represented as we can now see the enactment of a constitutional revolution. How did it happen?

There are several aspects to that, but the one which should concern us today is the role of the Conservative Party and its leadership – which is my third and last point.

I am intrigued that David Cameron so venerates Harold Macmillan. This veneration has also been echoed by others who apparently think my book is unfair to Macmillan. But on reflection I don't think I was critical enough. Macmillan hailed not just from the left of the party but ideologically speaking from the left of the political spectrum as a whole. His political career repeatedly shows it. He has some achievements – notably repairing the relationship with America after Suez and winning a landslide in the 1959 election. But from the time he came in, through treachery, and the time he went out, amid deceit, he did a huge amount of harm. The most significant aspect of this harm was in the obsession with Europe.

It was Macmillan who created the impression that Europe was the answer to every problem rather, than the source of more problems. And it was Macmillan's closest disciple Edward Heath, who then so attached the Conservative Party to the European cause that dissidents were silenced or bypassed or effectively expelled, and that even his successors – even Mrs Thatcher, until near the end of her term in office – continued to mouth the required European pieties.

Macmillan and Heath were by instinct and conviction collectivists and internationalists. Collectivism and internationalism are fundamentally at odds with any genuine philosophical conservatism. In this sense, the Conservative Party still pays the price of its own and its leaders past failure to be conservative. There is a poetic justice in that – but it doesn't help us, or the Party, or Britain today.

The chance to break out of this national and Party cul de sac was offered by the Bruges speech in 1988, in which I had a hand (or at least a couple of

fingers). The Bruges model of a Europe of freely cooperating sovereign countries linked by trade but without a single currency was and is a practical, coherent and persuasive one. It is liberal and democratic, which the alternative wasn't and isn't. Arguably, the Bruges model should be nearer fulfilment now than at any time since Maastricht, given the failure of the Euro-zone. But somehow I doubt whether the French and Germans will ever buy ideas made in Britain. If it happens, it will happen by default.

The interesting historical question is why Bruges did not gain traction in the late 1980s, before the Delors plan swept everything before it. There are several reasons. It came too late in the Thatcher premiership, when others were already plotting her downfall and when the economy and later the poll tax were turning everything sour. It was sprung on the Party, with no proper discussion of how and why the European model had failed. (Of course this discussion had been effectively banned since the Referendum Campaign of 1975). Importantly, President Ronald Reagan was leaving office. The US State Department was thus able to resume its old self-destructive drive for further European integration. Moreover, with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of new states from old ones there was just too much on the geopolitical agenda – though, in fact, the Bruges approach was precisely what the post-Cold War world should have adopted but didn't. I also believe that the departure of Mrs Thatcher allowed the Conservative Party to revert to its old ways. People nowadays remember the splits and rows under Major. I think that more harmful was what I must call the end of thought. The Conservative Party's besetting sin is sloth. The Party became once again intellectually lazy. At the top it still is. It is reactive, incoherent, unprepared, and strategically timid even though tactically bold – or even rash.

I am sure Simon Heffer, here beside me this evening, will provide a better analysis of the present position than I can. But, for my part, I am struck by the continuing intellectual failure to come to grips with what is happening in Europe. We are seeing at one and the same time the fulfilment and the implosion of what was planned by the Euro-ideologues. A utopian experiment has been tested to destruction – in the unworkable Euro-zone – and destruction is what we are seeing. Britain is, in historic terms, again faced by a dissatisfied, hungry power that dominates Europe. But, worse, it is an unstable, failing power, one that threatens both its subjects and its neighbours. Britain's goal should obviously be to keep out of the mess, get out of old arrangements which never worked to our interests, and avoid new ones that will most surely work against us in the future. Public opinion has shifted radically against Europe, and only the Conservative Party

leadership ignores the fact. A new Conservative agenda based on less government, low taxes and national independence has more or less written itself in the Tory press. A referendum, or even an early election might, I suppose, destroy the Coalition, but it could also give the Conservative Party a majority and even the chance to be Conservative – if that's not too frightening a prospect.

We need a Conservative re-think. Above all we need to think as Conservatives. I wonder if we still can? I hope so.