All At Sea
The Meaning of 'Europe' in British Political Discourse

To probe the meaning of the word 'Europe' in British usage, is straight away to appreciate one of the defining features of Britain's European debate, namely a profound ambivalence about whether or not 'Europe' includes the United Kingdom. For while the exact connotations and associations that the concept evokes have evolved considerably over the course of the 20th century, it has always remained possible both to include or exclude Britain. This uncertainty will constitute the central theme of an essay which will start with an examination of what 'Europe' has been taken to imply away from the political arena, before turning to investigate the layers of meaning involved in the political debate about Europe.

In every day English, the most striking feature of the way in which 'Europe' is used, is the manner in which it has often become synonymous with 'continental' – i.e. a geographical area which does not include the British Isles.[1] A newspaper competition announcing 'Free Flights to Europe' is thus not to be taken to mean that air tickets between London and Edinburgh might be won. Instead it indicates that winners will be able to travel to a variety of continental, and most probably, Western European tourist destinations. Similarly a decision to take one's holidays 'in Europe' is more likely to mean that the merits of Italian sunshine prevailed over the charms of the English seaside, than it is to suggest that Greece or Scotland is being preferred to Florida. 'Europe' is used as an alternative to Britain, not as a geographical area distinct from Africa, Asia or the Americas.

Used in this fashion, 'Europe', 'European' or the ubiquitous prefix 'Euro-', can of course carry negative overtones. It is not uncommon to hear fans of Anglo-American pop music, speak somewhat derisively of 'Euro-pop'. Uninspiring car designs are on occasion dismissed as 'Euro-boxes', while cinema critics periodically denounce overwrought continental films as 'Euro-puddings'. One of Britain's television channels has for years broadcast a programme devoted to some of the more salacious and off-beat aspects of continental European life known as 'Euro-trash'. In each case the designation is uncomplimentary; in most cases, moreover, an implicit contrast is drawn with the more 'normal' British or Anglo-American fare to which British viewers and listeners have grown accustomed.

As often, however, the reference to Europe is designed to convey sophistication, exoticism or simply difference. Over recent years, large numbers of British companies have

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[1] The *Encyclopedia Britannica* confirms this peculiarity, noting that the position of the British Isles represents the sole uncertainty about Europe's western border. (15th edition, 1974), p.590

adopted the prefix 'Euro-' partly no doubt in an effort to sound distinctive and exciting. The Oxford telephone directory, for instance, lists no fewer than 32 companies so designated, ranging from the 'Euro Foto centre' to the intriguingly named 'Euroquip Automotive Ltd.', by way of 'Euro Shred Ltd' and 'Euroclip Sheep Shearing Equipment'. Some such as 'Euro-Industrial Plastics' or 'Europipes' presumably also intend to signal their ambition to a market that stretches beyond the UK. But others like 'Euro Fine Foods' clearly plan to trade on the implicit sophistication of the word 'Euro' – a tactic which is particularly likely to be successful in the field of gastronomy. Similarly bedding companies, trying to persuade the British of the merits of the duvet over the traditional sheet and blanket, consistently market their product as 'continental quilts'. In all of these cases 'European' or 'continental' is certainly meant to underline difference from plain 'English' or 'Britishness', but it is done in a positive rather than negative manner.

In many further cases, the label 'European' is largely value-free, being simply intended to describe something which neither pertains to Great Britain nor to Asia, Africa, or the Americas. For many years, the Oxford University history syllabus thus required students to prepare three papers on 'English' history and two more on 'European' history – a terminology which eventually fell into disuse, not because of a recognition that Britain might be part in Europe, but instead out of the belief that some American, Asian and African history ought to be included as well and that the non-British papers should henceforth be called 'general' papers.[2] In similar fashion the most widespread handbook for those interested in ornithology is entitled 'The Birds of Britain and Europe'.[3] And to use a still more up to date example, the handbook which accompanies our current mobile phone, notes that its GSM capacity means that the phone can be used 'in Britain, Europe and beyond.' In none of these cases is 'Europe' intended to be interpreted favourably or unfavourably. As with the cases described above it is undeniably meant as somewhere foreign and distinct from the UK.

In other contexts, however, the term 'European' has been used by the English in a fashion which includes themselves as well as the French, Portuguese or Polish. Perhaps the most striking 18th and 19th century example comes from the Empire and particularly India, where soldiers dispatched from the UK rather than recruited locally were routinely referred to as 'European' not 'British' or 'English' despite the fact that many, if not most, of them, almost certainly were of British origin. Similarly the 1844 survey, *British India* written by H.H. Wilson, spoke of 'Europeans in India rarely possessing… the inclination to invest capital in

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[2] That this was not just Oxford being idiosyncratic is confirmed by Keith Robbins, *History, Religion and Identity in Modern Britain* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1993), pp.50-6
[3] John Gooders, *Birds of Britain and Europe* (HarperCollins, 1998)

landed property' while E. Dicey in 1882 wrote of 'the gradual Europeanization of Egypt.'[4] In none of these cases were the British intending to play down their own role; they were simply including themselves in the wider phenomenon of European colonial expansion.

Likewise a portion of the British educated elite throughout the modern era would have acknowledged some debt to a European culture which stretched back to Ancient Greece and Rome, but which also included the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and Romanticism. As a result, some at least of the artists, authors and intellectuals of Britain during the last two centuries would have acknowledged that their own output belonged within a wider European tradition.[5] Both the leisure travel patterns and the language learning habits of the British elite for most of the last 200 years have also reflected a sense of proximity to the continent, with France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany emerging as the favourite destinations, and French, followed by German and then Italian as the most frequently studied modern language. The centrality of Latin and Ancient Greek to a 'proper' education up until the mid-point of the 20th century suggests that the British felt themselves to be the heirs of a European tradition stretching back to Classical antiquity. This European bias has persisted even into the era of mass tourism, with the package holiday makers heading for Greece, Spain or Southern Italy confirming the European centred pattern of travel set by the more moneyed travellers heading for Tuscany, the Algarve or the Dordogne. The *Cimitero degli Inglesi* in the middle of Florence is an eloquent reminder that even at the height of 'splendid isolation' the British never cut themselves off entirely from continental culture; the Volvo-loads of contemporary English families who descend on 'Chiantishire' each summer are testimony that the links still remain strong.

In postwar years, moreover, the British general public has grown accustomed to the spectacle of British clubs and sports stars competing in European tournaments. Well before the 1990s when the sudden flood of continental players and managers into English football led to a remarkable Europeanization of the British domestic game, British sports fans had become used to the notion that Liverpool or Manchester United should periodically take on Real Madrid, Inter Milan or Bayern Munich in competitions to designate the best football team in Europe, or that British runners like Sebastian Coe or Linford Christie should compete for European titles, to place alongside their Olympic, World and Commonwealth awards. In golf indeed, viewers are even treated once yearly to the spectacle of a combined European

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[4] Both are cited in *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd Edition, 1989)
[5] Philip Bell & Peter Morris note however the irony that in the same period that Britain has become involved in political moves towards greater European unity, public consciousness of belonging to a shared European culture, centred on the classics and Christianity, has grown much weaker. Bell & Morris, 'Les "Europe" des Européens ou la notion d'Europe' in René Girault & Gérard Bossuat (eds.), *Les Europe des Européens* (Publications de la Sorbonne, 1993), p.71

team taking on the United States, although it has to be acknowledged that the sight of British fans so passionately backing Spanish or German golfers against US opposition, was considered sufficiently unusual in the early 1990s to be the subject of at least one newspaper editorial. (Revealingly, however, a more recent golf tournament which pitted a team from continental Europe against one from Britain and Ireland, was widely described in the British media as being 'Britain vs. Europe'.)

In British domestic politics, moreover, the last decades of the 20th century witnessed the steady rise in the number of references made to European standards, European growth rates, and European norms. Although the use of such comparative data has not entirely displaced allusions to American, Australian or New Zealand examples, it nevertheless bears testimony to the way in which it has become common place to assume that Britain belongs in European league tables of wealth, pollution, defence spending, heart disease, crime or teenage pregnancy and that such comparisons possess both intellectual validity and political weight. Prime Minister Blair's recent pledge to raise British health spending to the European average within five years attracted much political comment about whether such an increase would be possible and whether or not the figures cited by the government could be relied upon. Nobody challenged the notion, however, that the comparison used by the government was a relevant one. To the extent that a country's identity is defined by the company that it sees itself as keeping, British domestic political discourse does thus suggest a surprising degree of consensus that the UK is indeed a European country.

Despite such recent developments, however, the fundamental ambivalence persists. Europe as both a place and as a concept may include Britain; alternatively, it may not. This linguistic and attitudinal uncertainty has been compounded by the presence, throughout the 20th century, of a number of competing identities towards which the British felt themselves drawn. Prominent amongst these has been the idea of Empire or Commonwealth, the most frequently cited 'alternative' to European alignment in British political debate, both between the wars and since 1945. But they also include the notion of an Atlantic Community, incorporating some of Europe certainly, but also extending to the United States and Canada, and the hazy, yet oddly persistent appeal of 'the English speaking peoples'. The presence of such rival communities and groupings meant that the British have rarely seen themselves as having to choose between European involvement or isolation. Instead, participation in the affairs of the continent, whether economically, diplomatically or by means of institutionalised co-operation, has been seen by the UK as just one of several possible policy options.

Other European countries have of course also flirted with alternative alignments. All bar one of the original six member states of the European Communities had at one point of

the 20th century been important and ambitious colonial powers. In 1958 when the Treaty of Rome was signed, two of them, France and Belgium, still ruled sizeable empires.   Italy's interwar view of the Mediterranean as *Mare Nostrum* and the Scandinavian states' recurrent interest in schemes for Nordic unity should act as reminder meanwhile that Britain has not been unique in having other, non-Imperial, options to pursue.   But with a few exceptions – notably perhaps Nordic co-operation – these rival visions, while able to distract the energies and attentions of policy-makers during periods where ideas of European unity have been absent from the policy-agenda, have not permitted their advocates to feel uninvolved whenever wider European vistas have opened up. Instead, imperial or sub-regional options have tended to have been ditched in favour of European co-operation, or at best, as with the case of the colonial arrangements France succeeded in incorporating in the Treaty of Rome, reconciled with a European strategy. Britain, by contrast, has periodically felt able both to support European integration for others and an alternative grouping for itself. Churchill in the interwar years as much as in the postwar era was particularly representative of this view – both his famous 1930 article on 'The United States of Europe' and his 1946 Zurich speech advocated a united Europe living in harmony with a powerful British Empire. But this stance was far from exclusively Churchillian. The same assumption underpinned the attitude of 'benevolent neutrality' which is normally held to have been Britain's approach to integration amongst the Six in the 1950-55 period, and recurs in the arguments of those opposed to Britain joining the Euro in the contemporary debate. In public at least, most of those hostile to British membership assert that they wish no ill towards the single currency itself; they simply do not feel that it is the right choice for the UK.⁶

The very multiplicity of policy options available to Britain, has fuelled a further distinctive feature of the British debate, namely a recurrent tendency to attack regionalism in the name of global co-operation. The UK one might argue slightly cynically has responded to its own unwillingness (or inability) to choose where and with which partners its own future belongs, by accusing those more willing to press ahead with regional co-operation of threatening global harmony. Expressed more charitably, the world-wide nature of Britain's own economic and strategic interests, has encouraged the UK to champion global economic liberalism and the widest possible international co-operation. As a result, interwar schemes for European co-operation, notably the 1930 Briand Plan, were rejected by the British on the grounds that they would be contrary to the principles of free trade and that they would

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[6] The ill-disguised glee apparent in British press coverage of the Euro's recent fall in value, however, might suggest that much of Britain's 'benevolent neutrality' is only skin-deep.

undermine the authority and effectiveness of the League of Nations.[7] Similarly, the initial British response to the Messina conference and the idea of a Common Market among the Six, was to condemn a step which, British representatives claimed, would divide Western Europe economically, undermine the wider liberalisation programme being carried out by the OEEC, and be contrary to the spirit, if not the letter, of GATT. Enthusiasts for Commonwealth co-operation meanwhile, often contrasted what Hugh Gaitskell could describe as 'this remarkable multiracial association, of independent nations, stretching across five continents, covering every race', with the narrow regionalism of 'Little Europe'.[8] In similar fashion, one of the 'no' slogans in the 1975 referendum was 'Out of Europe and into the World'.[9] To many opponents of integration, it has been the self-styled 'Europeans' who have been guilty of a narrow and restrictive vision, not themselves.

Taken together, this fundamental ambivalence about whether or not Britain is a European nation at all, the presence of alluring alternatives to European co-operation, and a persistent belief that the widest possible global co-operation is preferable to action at a regional level, go a long way towards explaining why the UK has often reacted with uncertainty, perplexity and even hostility to the ideas of European co-operation which have been advanced by its neighbours, and hesitated profoundly about the extent to which it has wanted any involvement at all with the affairs of the continent. So strong indeed have been the forces pushing Britain away from Europe that it is at first sight surprising that the question of involvement, let alone integration, has even arisen.   And yet for all the temptations of detachment, the British have found themselves deeply entwined with 20th century historical developments, acting as major combatants in both World Wars, intervening frequently through diplomatic and economic means in the affairs of the continent, and, for the last thirty years, playing a role as a central member state of the principal forum for European co-operation, namely the EC/EU. The actual reality of Britain's position has thus been much closer to 'the heart of Europe' than the frequent talk of detachment or 'splendid isolation' implies.

In attempting to explain this apparent paradox, most British historiography has focused on a series of pragmatic calculations made by British governments. Involvement in European affairs, it has been argued, has not arisen out of sentiment, idealism or any powerful urge, at public or at elite level, to be part of the continent. Instead it has reflected an assessment of the geo-political and economic advantages of throwing Britain's weight into

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[7] Sir Arthur Salter, *The United States of Europe and other papers* (George Allen & Unwin, 1933), pp. 106-122
[8] Gaitskell's speech to the Labour Party conference, October 1962. Cited in Martin Holmes (ed.), *The Eurosceptical Reader* (Macmillan, 1996), p.28
[9] Holmes, *The Eurosceptical Reader*, p.1

European affairs. Hard-headed calculations of national interest have driven policy, not diffuse ideas about the meaning of Europe.

Britain's decision to go to war with the Central Powers in 1914 tends thus to be explained in terms of London's assessment of how the balance of power in Europe would tilt against Britain in the case of UK neutrality, while the hesitations and ambivalence about any 'continental commitment' during the interwar years are attributed to a combination of economic and military weakness, a desire to avoid a new bloody conflict, and a sense of commitment towards global and imperial interests not European ones. The initial aloofness towards the Six is put down to the perceived difference in stature between Britain and the main continental powers in the immediate postwar years, a lack of economic interest in continental regional integration as opposed to Commonwealth free trade and global monetary liberalisation, and the contrary pull of Empire, whereas the belated turn towards the EEC is explained in terms of Britain's diminished strength relative to the Superpowers, the ongoing disappearance of the Empire/Commonwealth option, and American pressure. Similarly, Britain's discomforts since it has joined 'Europe' in 1973 tend to be linked to the divergent economic and political interests of the UK and its partners, as well as with Britain's dislike of some of the institutional and policy characteristics of the Community which had developed in the years before the British had been able to enter the EEC.

Policy-making of this sort would, *prima facie*, appear to be a rather poor hunting ground for 'meanings of Europe'. Totally pragmatic calculation should be grounded in objective geo-political or economic realities, not value judgements about Europe's worth, appeal or meaning. But on closer inspection British decision-making can be seen to be influenced by, if not shaped, by a variety of assumptions and attitudes towards Europe which have been much less than objective. And it is on these more subjective judgements which the remainder of this essay will focus.

The first group of assumptions have centred on Europe's stability and on the likelihood of conflict or collapse either between or within the major states. Britain's readiness or otherwise to assume a major role in European diplomacy has, to a large extent, been influenced by judgements about whether or not European politics have been stable and likely to remain so. Such assessments, however, have often revealed more about Britain's underlying prejudices than they have about the real state of politics in continental Europe.[10]

In the interwar period, and in the immediate aftermath of World War II, a great deal of British concern centred on the likelihood of further European conflict. The Great War

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[10] For a discussion of how far back such prejudices go historically, see Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 24-5 & 364-8.

produced an understandable desire, both amongst the public at large, and within the political elite, to ensure that no comparable carnage could occur again. It also produced a wave of sentiment which associated 'Europe' and 'European history' in particular with bloodshed and conflict. Even an observer like Churchill, someone who would subsequently rekindle his political reputation through his determination to ensure that Britain did not turn its back on the continent, could write of continental European developments in deeply blood-tinged language. In a 1930 article which compared the idea of European unity to a fire which had smouldered for years but which was only now at a stage where it was likely to set alight the 'rubbish heap' of Europe, he went on:

> 'We must regard this heap a little more closely in the glowing light. It has been the growth of centuries, and even millenniums have passed since some of its still-existing materials were deposited. In the main, it is made up of the bones and broken weapons of uncounted millions who brought one another to violent death long ago. Upon these, three or four centuries have cast masses of rotting vegetation, and latterly an increasing discharge of waste paper. But in it, mixed up with all this litter, scattered about and intermingled, are some of the most precious and dearly loved of treasures of the strongest races in the world. All the history books of Europe are there; its household gods; all the monuments and records of wonderful achievement and sacrifice; the battle flags for which heroes of every generation have shed their blood; the vestments of religions still living and growing in the minds of men; the foundations of the jurisprudence still regulating their relations one with another – all flung and blended together.'[11]

For Churchill the conclusion to be drawn from this mix of barbarity and civilisation was that Britain should do all in its power to encourage Europe to unite – without itself taking part – thereby, perhaps, putting an end to the continent's endemic bloodshed. But it was hardly surprising if other statesmen, while sharing with Churchill the association between Europe and bloodshed, drew rather different conclusions.

Fear of further European war also threw into sharp relief, the fundamental uncertainty about whether or not Britain was European. For Imperial statesmen such McKenzie King, the Canadian Prime Minister, the best response to the underlying dangers of European involvement was clearly disengagement: Canada he asserted should take advantage of the fact that 'We live in flame-proof house, far from inflammable materials.'[12] Many other statesmen from the Dominions – influential figures in interwar Britain – shared his view. Yet for Britain itself the decision to disengage itself from European affairs was much harder to take, particularly at a time when the great military development of the age, the emergence of air power, was actually increasing Britain's vulnerability to attack from the continent not

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[11] Winston Churchill, 'The United States of Europe', *Saturday Evening Post*, 15.2.1930
[12] Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment. The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of Two World Wars* (Penguin, 1974), pp. 75-6

decreasing it. The flammable material in other words was much too close, the house itself far from flame-proof. The story of Britain's military and strategic planning between the wars, is thus one which centres on an agonising debate about how 'European' or how Imperial Britain could afford to be. Through most of the 1920s and the first part of the 1930s, guided by figures such as Austen Chamberlain and Stanley Baldwin, Britain opted primarily for the politics of European involvement. As Baldwin put it graphically to the House of Commons in 1934, 'When you think of the defence of England you no longer think of the chalk cliffs of Dover; you think of the Rhine. That is where our frontier lies.'[13] But neither public opinion, nor all of Baldwin's Conservative colleagues were wholly convinced. Two years later, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, could thus respond to a plea by the army for the necessary resources to be able to intervene on the continent, by noting that public opinion 'strongly opposed to continental adventures… will be strongly suspicious of any preparation made in peace time with a view to large scale military operations on the Continent and they will regard such preparations as likely to result in our being entangled in disputes which do not concern us.'[14] From such views to the belief that the Sudeten crisis was 'a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing' was but a short step. Appeasement was thus in part a function both of attitudes about how European Britain should be, and of assessments of how dangerous and unstable continental politics were likely to prove.

Britain's disinclination to involve itself too deeply in 1930s Europe was bolstered by an equally strong suspicion of domestic continental politics.[15] Distaste at the Italian Fascist and Nazi German regimes was, of course, deeply comprehensible, as were the equally strong misgivings about Soviet Russia. But British dislike of 'European' politics extended also to countries which had remained democratic such as France. The perpetual comings and goings of III Republic governments were looked at with a mixture of dismay and contempt, and even as Anglophile a French leader as Leon Blum, had to struggle in order to establish a close *rapport* with London. The interwar failure to build a strong Anglo-French alliance against Hitler, was hence intertwined with a sweeping British judgement about the nature of European politics.

British dismissiveness towards the stability of continent was much in evidence after 1945 as well. Although the late 1940s were an era when Britain did take the lead in building

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[13] Howard, *The Continental Commitment*, p.112
[14] Howard, *The Continental Commitment*, p. 116
[15] For an interesting discussion of the links between such suspicion and the way in which Britain interpreted its own historical development, see Philip Bell, 'A Historical Cast of Mind. Some Eminent English Historians and Attitudes to Continental Europe in the Middle of the Twentieth Century', *Journal of European Integration History*, vol.2, no.2, 1996

a variety of trans-European bodies, designed both to distribute American Marshall aid and put in place defensive structures which might help repel a Soviet attack, it did so with misgivings, unwilling either to see itself reduced to the level of 'just another European country' or to allow its own survival to become unduly dependent on unreliable continental armies which were as likely to collapse in the face of a Soviet challenge as they had been in the face of the Germans in 1940. The British military in particular continued to feel that continental Europe was indefensible without American assistance, and made no effort whatsoever to plan for ways in which the UK might honour the defensive obligations its politicians had decided to assume by means of the Dunkirk and Brussels treaties.[16] British European policy-making in the first years of the Cold War, was thus deeply influenced by the 'lesson' of 1940, namely that no continental country could be considered militarily reliable. Both its military strategy, which went on being centred on the Middle East and Commonwealth defence long after NATO's creation in 1949, and its attitude towards European projects such as the Schuman Plan, reflected this dismissive judgement of Europe's prospects in the event of war with the Soviet Union.[17]

As during the interwar period, question marks about Europe's strategic reliability went hand in hand with uncertainty about the domestic politics of the major continental countries. Britain admittedly was not alone in taking time to regain its trust of Germany, but by the 1960s the tone of caution, mistrust and ill-concealed hostility which still characterised Britain's approach to Bonn looked increasingly anachronistic. In 1963 relatively junior British diplomats based in Bonn, seeking to explain why Adenauer had seemingly sided with de Gaulle against British membership of the EEC, pleaded with their government 'to demonstrate that we regard the Federal Republic as a trusted ally, instead of a rather shady business partner to be tolerated but not liked.'[18] Revealingly, however, their ambassador continued to harbour many of the sceptical feelings shown by his political masters, and repeatedly demonstrated an extraordinary willingness to write off the ageing Chancellor as all but senile. Relations with France were also less than ideal. Britain has never been good at understanding the intricacies of coalition politics, and its attitude towards the rapid rotation of governments under the IV Republic, only confirmed this rule. French governments were seen as transient, weak and totally unreliable, the policy consistency which sprang from the powerful French Civil Service being usually totally overlooked. But matters did not improve with the advent of the V Republic, since dismissiveness about weak governments was

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[16] John Baylis, *The Diplomacy of Pragmatism. Britain and the Formation of NATO, 1942-9* (Macmillan, 1993), pp.76-91

[17] The longevity of such dismisiveness is illustrated by the way in which the Conservative Defence Minister, Michael Portillo could still win applause at the 1995 party conference with his allusion to…

replaced with near paranoia about de Gaulle's maverick foreign policy. Italy, meanwhile, was treated with scant respect, its politics and economy both dismissed as backwards, long after the latter at least had begun its remarkable postwar boom. [19] As one senior British diplomat recalled of the postwar decade: 'we were highly sceptical about Europe. Europe was a collection of aliens and foreigners… who were erratic. They were unreliable. Some of them had let us down. Some of them had fought against us. All of them were seen, in 1948, to be liable to communist subversion and they were, quite frankly, not the sort of area that we – in contrast to the Commonwealth and the all its glittering prospects as we saw it – wanted to tie ourselves down to.'[20]

This dismissiveness fed through into Britain's early policy making towards European integration. For a start it tended to cast doubts about the viability of the whole enterprise. Despite the success of the ECSC, the British would remain unpersuaded of integration's effectiveness until very late in the 1950s, and were still expressing doubts about whether it would survive after de Gaulle and Adenauer as they prepared for Community membership in the early 1960s. But it also led both to a strong sense that full participation, as opposed to association, would somehow be demeaning for a country such as Britain, and to the unfounded expectation that Britain had only to say the word to be able to assume control over the process. Expectations that Britain could push 'Europe' where it willed were to reach their apogee in the mid 1950s with the Free Trade Area scheme and would subsequently fade somewhat. The belief, however, that Britain's negotiating position was much stronger than it really was, continued to shape British policy making under both Macmillan and Wilson. Its most famous expression after all, in the form of George Brown's reported outburst to Willy Brandt, 'come on Willy, you must get us in so that we can take the lead' dates from the end of the 1960s rather than from the previous decade.

A vein of dismissiveness towards much continental politics has continued up until the present day. Fully fledged attacks on the viability of continental democracy, along the lines of Lord Attlee's full-page advertisement in 1962 in which he spoke of Europe being 'politically unstable' and asked whether France, Germany and Italy would still be democracies in twenty years time, have faded somewhat.[21] But the sentiments arguably live on, both in the recurrent attacks on the undemocratic structures of the Community itself and in the repeated questioning of the honesty and freedom from corruption of most continental politicians and indeed of continental life. Michael Portillo' off-the-record comments about how easy it was

[18] PREM 11/4524, Rose to FO, No. 32 Saving, 2.2.1963

[19] See N.Piers Ludlow, 'A Slow Reassessment: British Views of Italy=s European Policy 1950-1963', *Storia delle relazioni internazionali*, special issue, forthcoming 2000

[20] Joseph Garner cited in Michael Charlton, *The Price of Victory* (BBC, 1983), p.62

to buy a degree in most European countries were indicative of a widespread mistrust of continental fairness.

Suspicion of Germany in particular has frequently bubbled to the surface, often combined with ill-disguised irritation at Britain's inability to displace Paris and Bonn from the leadership of the European integration process. As early as 1956 Harold Macmillan was warning that the project that had been launched at Messina could constitute 'an instrument for the revival of German power through economic means. It is really giving them on a plate what we fought two world wars to prevent.' Similar sentiments have been expressed more recently by Nicholas Ridley, the Conservative Secretary of State for the Environment under Thatcher who described the EC to *The Spectator* as 'a German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe', as well as by Thatcher herself in the notorious 1990 Chequers study day, and have been given spurious academic credibility by Niall Ferguson.[22] In all cases, the aggressiveness of the Germans and the political unreliability of the remaining 'Europeans' has been contrasted, normally implicitly, sometimes explicitly, with the reliability, fairness, honesty and respect for democracy of the British (and sometimes the rest of the English-speaking world.)[23] Although extreme, a recent outburst by Lady Thatcher illustrates the basic attitudes well, the former Prime Minister telling a gathering of Scottish Tories that

> We are quite the best country in Europe… I dare say it – I'm told I have to be careful about what I say and I don't like it – in my lifetime all our problems have come from mainland Europe and all the solutions have come from the English-speaking nations of the world that have kept law-abiding liberty alive for the future.[24]

This long tradition of British criticism of the military and political reliability of its continental neighbours is most usually associated with those opposed to closer links between the UK and the Continent and those dismissive of any idea of European unity or co-operation. The prominence in the preceding paragraphs of Eurosceptics such as Attlee, Thatcher or Portillo only reinforce this linkage. But the fact that men such as Churchill and Macmillan have also been periodically outspoken in their denunciations of the state of continental politics, underlines the fact that unhappiness at the state of Europe has not necessarily been an argument for indifference or detachment. On the contrary, some of the most powerful advocates of British involvement have drawn much of their zeal from the twin beliefs that, firstly the UK could not but be affected by either instability or conflict amongst its nearest

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[21] Attlee's advertisement appeared in all the major British dailies on 15.8.1962

[22] For Thatcher and Ridley, see Hugo Young, *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (Macmillan, 1998), pp. 359-62; for Ferguson…

[23] See also Wolfram Kaiser, *Using Europe, Abusing the Europeans. Britain and European Integration, 1945-63* (Macmillan, 1996), pp.221-5

[24] *The Times* 6.10.1999

geographical neighbours, and secondly, that British involvement would be the best means of stabilising the situation and ensuring that matters were not allowed to slip out of control.

Thinking of this sort has been observable in the British political and policy-making debate throughout the 20th century. In what might be perhaps termed its weaker variant, it has not necessarily overcome British doubts about whether European co-operation is suitable for itself, but has led British politicians and diplomats to feel that the UK should play an encouraging and positive role from the sidelines. Churchill's advocacy of such an approach has been noted above. In similar vein, the initial Foreign Office response to the Briand plan, while observing that UK participation would lead to serious problems with the Commonwealth, counselled against too negative a reply on the grounds that British dismissiveness might harm the French Foreign Minister. Briand was, in the view of the Foreign Office, 'an old and valued friend of this country… almost alone among French politicians he has in recent years consistently shown himself a good European, the friend of peace, and of the improvement of international relations.'[25] The poor state of French and European politics generally was in other words being advanced as a strong reason for mitigating British criticism of the plan. In the postwar era comparable anxieties about the adverse effect of British hostility, tempered both Labour and Conservatives attacks on the Schuman and Pleven Plans. Anthony Eden, in particular, became so convinced that the EDC was vital for European stability, that he was prepared to go to great lengths in his efforts to salvage the project.[26]

In its stronger form, the perceived need for British encouragement has been superseded by the belief that the stability of Europe can only be achieved through actual British participation. The best known interwar manifestation of this line of thought, were of course the arguments of those who opposed appeasement and denounced the Munich agreement. In their eyes, Britain, France and Russia would have to act together in order to curb German aggression and preserve peace in Europe. Full-hearted British involvement in the politics of Europe was thus essential, if war was to be avoided and the dictators held in check. Since 1945, comparable reasoning has been applied with regard to European integration. The 1960 Lee Committee report, for instance, a document widely regarded as being a major milestone on Britain's road to EEC membership, noted the strong foreign policy pressures which would be brought to bear on the UK should the Six succeed in their collective endeavour and then went on:

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[25] Cited in Robert Boyce, *British Capitalism at the Crossroads 1919-1932. A study in politics, economics and international relations* (CUP, 1987), pp. 247-8
[26] Spencer Mawby, *Containing Germany. Britain and the arming of the Federal Republic* (Macmillan, 1999), pp.73-103

If on the other hand, the Six 'fail', there would be great damage to Western interests, and the weakening of Europe which would follow would be a serious matter for the United Kingdom; it would be too later for us to go in to prevent failure when a breakdown was seen to be coming, but if we were already in, we could probably strengthen the European bloc and prevent its disintegration.[27]

The potential for European instability was once more being turned into an argument for British involvement rather than against.

Throughout the last one hundred years, the British have thus been recurrently drawn into making sweeping generalisations about the stability, the reliability and the honesty of 'European' politics. Such judgements when made have rarely, if ever, been the product of a genuine pan-European survey, ready and able to differentiate between different tendencies across the differing parts of the continent. On the contrary, they have most often been snap judgements, based primarily on a patchy knowledge of Western Europe in general and France and Germany in particular.[28] But despite their questionable reliability, such assessments have played a central role in the determination of British policy towards its neighbours, at times forming the basis of arguments for isolation and detachment, at others underpinning the belief that Britain needed to become more deeply involved.

The second cluster of attitudes which need to be considered in understanding the assumptions that have underpinned Britain's European policy, are questions surrounding the idea of 'Europe' and modernity. For, in the postwar period especially, assessments about the extent to which participation in European co-operation would drive Britain forward or hold the country back, have been present, and telling, in virtually all of Britain's intermittent debates about 'Europe'.

For many on the left of British politics, one of the most persuasive reasons to look askance at the whole integrative project, despite the Labour Party's ostensible commitment to internationalism and transnational solidarity, was the belief that Western Europe was primarily reactionary and conservative, and that as such, British involvement could only impede the UK's own path towards the construction of a socialist state. 'Europe' in this sense became not an alternative to 'Commonwealth' or 'Atlanticism' but instead a barrier to 'Socialism' and that New Jerusalem which the postwar Labour Party wished to build. This attitude can be traced back to the very start of post-1945 discussions about European integration. In April 1948, for instance, the Labour-leaning *Daily Herald*, urged Labour

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[27] PRO. CAB 134/1853, ES(E) Cttee, June 1960
[28] The centrality of France and Germany – and the general dismissiveness of UK views – is confirmed by Anne Deighton & Geoffrey Warner, 'British Perceptions of Europe in the Postwar Period' in Girault & Bossuat, *Les Europe des Européens*, pp.60-2

delegates to boycott the Hague Conference since the gathering would merely provide a platform for Churchill and others who desired 'the old order of things'.[29]

During the 1960s and the great debate about British membership of the EEC, there was a similar sub-text about the compatibility of European integration and Socialism. Gaitskell's 1962 party conference speech, in which he attacked the Macmillan government's headlong rush into Europe, displayed strong doubts about whether or not joining the Community would be progressive.

> For although, of course, Europe has had a great and glorious civilisation, although Europe can claim Goethe and Leonardo, Voltaire and Picasso, there have been evil features in European history too – Hitler and Mussolini, and today the attitude of some Europeans to the Congo problem, the attitude of at least one European government to the United Nations. You cannot say what this Europe will be: it has two faces and we do not know yet which is the one which will dominate.[30]

This sense of general unease was compounded by more specific doubts about whether EEC membership would allow Britain the economic freedom to tackle local unemployment and the extent to which economic planning would be permitted. For those on the Labour left, such as Barbara Castle or Richard Crossman, the choice between Europe and socialism was much more clear cut, as the latter's diary account of 1967 Cabinet discussions of the issue reveal.

> Those who are in charge – Michael Stewart, George Brown, Harold Wilson, Jim Callaghan – all now feel that the attempt to have a socialist national plan for the British Isles keeps us balanced on such a terribly tight rope that it really has got to be abandoned and that of course is the main reason why they favour entry into the Market. Today Barbara [Castle] made a tremendous speech saying that entry would transform our socialism and make us abandon all our plans. In a sense she's completely right. It anybody wanted, apart from myself, Britain to be a socialist off-shore island, entry to the Market would mean the abandonment of that ideal.[31]

The way to the left's vision of modernity and the path to 'Europe' were thus seen as utterly divergent. To the Labour left, the Wilson government's espousal of Common Market entry, signalled its abandonment of fully-blown socialism. In the light of such views, it is unsurprising that the apogee of left wing power within the Labour Party, saw the party fight the 1983 General Election on a platform of withdrawal from the European Community.

By the mid to late 1980s, however, it had become the Thatcherite right not the socialist left, who felt that their opportunity radically to transform Britain was being obstructed by the European Community. The tension between the ideals espoused by the

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[29] Cited in Jeremy Moon, *European Integration in British Politics 1950-1963: A study of issue-change* (Gower, 1985), p.107
[30] Cited in Holmes, *The Eurosceptical Reader*, p.21
[31] Entry for Sunday, April 30th, 1967. Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, vol. II, p.335

European Community and the free market vision of the British Prime Minister was nowhere better expressed than in Thatcher's 1988 Bruges speech.

> I want to see us work more closely on the things we can do better together than alone. Europe is stronger when we do so, whether it be in trade, in defence, or in our relationship with the rest of the world. But working more closely together does *not* require power to be centralised in Brussels or decisions to be taken by an appointed bureaucracy. Indeed, it is ironic that just when those countries such as the Soviet Union, which have tried to run everything from the centre, are learning that success depends on dispersing power and decisions away from the centre, some in the Community seem to want to move in the opposite direction. We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them reimposed at a European level, with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels.[32]

As had been the case with the Labour left during the years between 1945 and 1983, the most radical members of Britain's political class thus regarded the notion of collective European action as something which would at best dilute and at worst altogether remove their capacity for a far-reaching transformation of the British economy and society. To those with the most extreme visions of modernity, 'Europe' was a regressive rather than a modernising concept.

The alarming radicalism of both the left and the Thatcherite right may equally have led some with more centrist convictions into a more favourable position towards European integration. That same capacity to obstruct or dilute far-reaching change which so appalled the radicals, would appear rather attractive to those hostile to socialist or Thatcherite ideals. There is some evidence of this happening in the 1950s and 1960s. The *Daily Telegraph* editorial, for instance, entitled 'Socialism vs. Europe' which advocated observer status at least for the British at the Schuman Plan negotiations, may well have been born in part out of the belief that the worse excesses of the postwar Labour government might be contained by European involvement.[33] And it is sometimes claimed that one of the unspoken arguments behind the Tory *volte-face* on Europe of the early 1960s was the need to make Britain safe from the socialism of any future Labour government.[34] But it is in the 1980s that this phenomenon is most easily observed. The swing towards pro-Europeanism of the TUC and the majority of the British Labour movement, for instance, was strongly related to the growing conviction amongst British trade unionists that Europe, far from posing a danger to their aspirations, instead represented the most effective means of protecting the conquests of the past from a right-wing British government which appeared instinctively hostile to unionism. To beleaguered British trade union officials, who had come to dread virtually all economic, social and fiscal policy-making under the Thatcher, Jacques Delors' sweeping (and

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[32] Cited in Holmes, *The Eurosceptical Reader*, pp.91-2
[33] See Moon, *European Integration in British Politics*

ill-founded) prediction that 'in ten years time, 80% of economic, and perhaps social and tax legislation, will be of Community origin' sounded like a promise of liberation.[35] Similarly, there is much to suggest that the transformation of Scottish opinion towards European integration in the course of the 1980s, which saw what had in the 1975 referendum been the most hostile part of the British electorate to the idea of remaining inside the EEC become, by the late 1980s, consistently more pro-European than the national average, had much to do with Scotland's antipathy to Thatcherism. For many in Edinburgh, Brussels represented the best protection available from the excesses of London.

It would, however, be unfair to those who have occupied the centre ground of British politics, to suggest that their pro-Europeanism sprang merely from the belief that Europe would act as a restraining force on either or both of the political extremes. Instead, there has always been a strong strand of argument within the moderate centre of British politics which has equated European involvement with the modernisation of the country. Roy Jenkins, one of the most articulate exponents of this view-point, could for instance write in 1961:

> Looked at in more practical and more specifically European terms, would joining the Six be likely to inhibit the rate of social progress in this country? Only those who are still living in the world of 1949 could answer with a firm yes, for no one who has observed the world of the fifties can believe that Britain is a less Tory nation than the dominant powers of the EEC. For rapidity of economic growth (France, Germany and Italy), for the fullest of full employment (Germany and France), for highly successful nationalised industries (France), for a model system of economic planning (France), and for a most imaginative and generous system of retirement benefits (Germany), the Six have far more to show the Left than anything which this country has achieved for years past.[36]

In the course of the 1960s debate a large number of other 'progressive' benefits were linked to the European cause. These ranged from metrification to decimalization, from Parliamentary reform to the building of a Channel Tunnel. At its most extreme, Lord Gladwyn could conclude a 1961 newspaper *plaidoyer* in favour of EEC membership with the invocation: 'Somehow we must get out of our present nineteenth century rut and join the main stream of mid-twentieth century history.'[37]

Much the same process has occurred during the 1980s and 1990s when 'Europe' was seen as a powerful means to an end by those pursuing any number of 'progressive' goals. Probably the two reforms of the British political system most frequently linked to European integration have been electoral reform – it was often argued that pressure to devise a single,

[34] Martin Holmes, 'The Conservative Party and Europe' in Holmes (ed.), *The Eurosceptical Reader*, pp.116-8
[35] Jacques Delors, 'Europe 1992: The Social Dimension', Address to the TUC Conference, Bournemouth, September 1988 (European Commission, 1988)
[36] Roy Jenkins, 'From London to Rome', *Encounter*, August 1961
[37] *The Guardian*, 31.7.1961

uniform electoral system for European elections, would by inexorable logic, strengthen the case for the whole British system to move in the direction of proportional representation – and the decentralisation of power. A more flexible approach to the sovereignty of Westminster which recognised the need to pool some sovereignty at a European level would, it was maintained, go hand in hand with a greater readiness to devolve power within the United Kingdom itself. But both the mechanism of European integration and the example of numerous continental countries, have also been invoked by those pressing for better public transport, higher public spending, a more liberal criminal justice system (the role of the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights have reinforced this tendency), more equal treatment of men and women, and a more 'enlightened' attitude towards the use of soft drugs or sex education. Debates about 'Europe' amongst politicians from the centre ground of British politics, whether Liberal Democrats or moderate Labour and Conservative figures, have thus tended to convey more than just an attitude towards Britain's place within the EC/EU; they have instead been about a whole-scale modification of Britain's approach to a wide range of political, social and economic issues. From the standpoint of the political centre, embracing Europe has also implied an embrace of 'modernity' defined in centrist terms.

The extent to which Europe has been seen as a modernising force has thus depended greatly on the standpoint of the observer. For those on the political extremes it has rarely been seen as such, appearing instead as a regressive force, more likely to thwart than to promote change. But those more centrist in their ideal, have repeatedly looked across the Channel and invoked the ideal of 'Europe' both in the hope of blunting the more dangerous zeal of some of their compatriots and in the belief that European involvement would encourage a welcome Europeanization and therefore modernisation of British life. At the risk of caricature, it is more often the case in Britain that the socially permissive, bike-riding Liberal Democrat who calculates his or her height in centimetres will be pro-European than a Toyota-driving, six foot three Tory, who is strongly in favour of capital punishment.

Despite the tendency of much of the current historiography to present Britain's attitude towards Europe as one of calculating pragmatism and hard-headed realism, the concept of Europe in British political discourse has been far from value-free. Britain's fundamental uncertainty about whether or not it is part of Europe, geographically, culturally or politically has certainly given the British debate about Europe a distinctive twist, as has the rival pull of both Empire and the English-speaking world. But far from permitting a detached and dispassionate objectivity, the question mark over Britain's Europeanness, has in fact allowed Britain's policy-makers to let their choice for or against European involvement be guided by

assumptions about the stability, reliability and modernity of continental political life. In circumstances where a choice to participate or not to participate in any form of European activity has never been automatic, both the ferocity of the debate and the diversity of possible views has always been increased. The concept of Europe has acquired multiple layers of meaning as a result. Thus while a large portion of the British population still gives the impression that it has not made up its mind whether Britain belongs in the heart of Europe, it has become abundantly clear on the basis of 20th century history that the concept of Europe has come to occupy a position at the heart of British political discourse.

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Piers Ludlow
LSE, 18.4.2000

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