

Thatcher, Cameron and Europe: Two Speeches, One Concept?

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Helene von Bismarck

There can be little doubt that the late Lady Thatcher was not only one of the most formidable British Prime Ministers of the Twentieth Century (Winston Churchill alone might fall into the same category with her in this respect), but also one of the most controversial. While it will probably take a generation of historians to fully assess the consequences of her eleven years in power, both for Britain's domestic and its international affairs, her legacy could be acutely felt less than three months ago, on 23 January 2013, when Prime Minister David Cameron gave his long-awaited speech on the future of the European Union and the role Britain ought to play in it.^[1] Both the arguments outlined in this speech and the original plan to deliver it in the city of Amsterdam, are strongly reminiscent of Thatcher's famous Philippica about the *European Family of Nations*, given at the Collège d'Europe in Bruges in September 1988.^[2] The example of another conservative Prime Minister crossing the channel, thereby showing her interest in the European continent whilst distancing herself, very explicitly, from the principle of ever closer union, must have appealed to Cameron. Aware that whatever anyone might have thought of her, Margaret Thatcher was one to make people listen, and indeed, react, to her ideas, emulating her example probably looked like an excellent idea. Alas, things did not work out as they should have. Due to the Algerian hostage crisis, Cameron was forced to cancel his trip to Amsterdam and deliver his speech in London.^[3] This was just as well, because, while it may have been a speech about Europe, it was clearly a speech for Britain.

Cameron's discussion of Britain's place in the European Union can be divided into two parts, the first of which reads like an updated version of Thatcher's lecture in Bruges, some direct and several only slightly paraphrased quotations included. Both leaders were at pains not to appear as isolationists, and therefore started their speeches by underlining the European components of Britain's national identity. They stressed the history and culture that Britain shares with the continent, and pointed out – quite rightly, one might add – the enormous sacrifices Britain made during the Second World War by defending Europe's freedom against the barbaric and aggressive Nazi regime in Germany. At the same time, both Thatcher and Cameron reminded their audiences of Britain's traditional globalist worldview: for her, the

European Community could ‘never prosper as a narrow-minded, inward-looking club’; for him, the ‘global race’ for prosperity, i.e. globalization, is one of the main incentives for European cooperation. Like Thatcher, Cameron set out five guiding principles to explain his ‘heretical’ vision for the future of the European Union. Their principles are not identical, since they reflect the different times and circumstances they were established in: in her case, the Cold War context, in his, the Eurozone crisis. Nevertheless, there are still striking similarities between Thatcher’s and Cameron’s respective five points, and their message is essentially the same. To both Prime Ministers, European integration has always been, and should remain, the means to an end, never an end in itself. In their opinion, its point has been to secure peace and prosperity by the establishment of a common market, not the creation of any kind of centralized political union. They also share their dislike of economic regulation and a too powerful European bureaucracy, as well as their desire to stimulate enterprise and competitiveness. The main difference between Thatcher’s and Cameron’s vision for Europe is that she envisaged a group of cooperating ‘independent sovereign states’, while he stressed his readiness to embrace a ‘flexible’ approach that would allow those EU members interested in further integration to go ahead with it, and those who are not, to stay out of this process. This principle of ‘flexibility’ sounds like a concession to the present reality of the European Union and the policies of the majority of its members, but it does not alter Cameron’s crucial point, to which Thatcher would have wholeheartedly agreed, that Britain will not participate in a closer political union and will try to reverse the process of integration where it has gone too far for the British ‘comfort zone’.

In the second part of his speech on 23 January, Cameron set out his plans for Britain’s future role in Europe, announcing his intention to organize an in-out referendum about continued British membership in the EU in five years time. Before that, he intends to try and convince the other members of his reform plans for the EU, or, should he fall short of achieving this ambition, re-negotiate Britain’s terms of membership. It is a mistake to interpret this plan, which was in all likelihood aimed at appeasing anti-integrationist voices in the Tory Party and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), while pressurizing the continental EU states to hear Cameron’s voice, as a direct move towards British exit. Cameron emphatically rejected the idea of Britain trying to copy Norway’s or Switzerland’s situation and stressed the many advantages of staying in the European Union he wants, i.e. a Single Market without centralized bureaucratic or political constraints. In the final analysis, not much has changed since Thatcher travelled to Bruges in 1988: the British Prime Minister wants his country to be part of the European Union, provided, of course, that the European Union is something different.

[1] The full transcript of Cameron’s speech is available at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2013/jan/23/david-cameron-eu-speech-referendum>

[2] Margaret Thatcher, ‘The European Family of Nations’, in: Martin Holmes (ed.), *The Eurosceptical Reader* (Basingstoke/ New York: Palgrave Macmillan 1996), p. 88-96. A videotape of the lecture is available on youtube at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkRwMFy0CVM>

[3] A videotape of the speech is available at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ls60Wbq_dk

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