

“With Europe but not of It” – An Exclusively British Attitude?

By [Helene von Bismarck](#) | Published: June 15, 2012

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Citation advice: Helene von Bismarck, ‘ “With Europe but not of It” – An Exclusively British Attitude?’ Essay for The British Scholar Society, June 2012, <http://britishscholar.org/publications/2012/06/15/with-europe-but-not-of-it-an-exclusively-british-attitude/>



Helene von Bismarck,

Sometimes, current affairs present us historians with the very curious feeling of a déjà-vu. An example is the quarrel between Great Britain and the majority of the other member states of the European Union, especially Germany and France, about the best way to solve the Euro crisis. Prime Minister Cameron has made it emphatically clear that he will not consent to a higher level of European integration without special safeguards for the City of London. Faced with the choice between isolating Great Britain in Europe and endangering what he regards as Great Britain’s national interest, he has chosen the former by vetoing an EU-wide treaty change proposed at last December’s summit and expressed his readiness to do so again.

In many ways, the Prime Minister’s position is consistent with an attitude that has had considerable influence on Great Britain’s policies towards European integration for over sixty years and was formulated by Cameron’s most prominent predecessor in the twentieth century: Winston Churchill. On 19 September 1946, Churchill, then leader of the Tory opposition, gave a speech at the University of Zurich, in which he called for the creation of “a kind of United States of Europe”.^[i] He argued that the only way to overcome the devastating consequences of the Second World War and face up to the danger of further Soviet expansionism was to “re-create the European family, or as much of it as we can, and provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, in safety and in freedom.”^[ii] This process would have to be based on reconciliation between France and Germany, who should assume leadership of the United States of Europe together. Churchill’s speech was published on the following day in every major European and US newspaper and commanded worldwide attention. It raised hopes on the European continent that a conservative British Government under Churchill’s leadership would be more inclined to make Great Britain part of the nascent European integration process than Clement Attlee’s Labour Government. The problem was that these hopes, which were to be frustrated when Churchill became Prime Minister again in 1951, were based on a profound misunderstanding of Churchill’s position. While he had

advocated the idea of integration between the continental European states since the early 1930s, he was firmly convinced that Great Britain's fate rested with another "natural grouping": the Commonwealth of Nations.^[iii] Churchill had made his opinion on the question of Great Britain's role in Europe very clear as early as 1930, when he published a newspaper article in support of Aristide Briand's plan for the creation of a European federal union. Churchill wholeheartedly supported Briand's idea, but he stressed that Great Britain could never be part of such a union because: "[...] we have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked, but not comprised. We are interested and associated, but not absorbed."^[iv]

The idea that Great Britain is a close friend of the European continent, but somehow very different from it, has been a guiding principle of British Government policy since the 1950s. The fact that Great Britain eventually joined the Common Market in 1971 has not really changed that. One prospect in particular has continued to cause a lot of uneasiness in Great Britain: that participation in the European integration process could endanger British sovereignty. Being part of the European Union to benefit from economic cooperation with the other members is one thing, having the terms dictated by them quite another.

It would of course be hypocritical to suggest that only Great Britain has selfishly pursued its own national interest while the other member states, namely France or Germany, have served the European cause simply for the sake of it. The long step-by-step process that led to the creation of the European Union we know today was driven by tough negotiations between the governments of the different nation states. Each of these governments has been very aware of their respective country's interests and of their obligation to defend their European policies domestically. This is obviously much more difficult in a crisis like the one we are experiencing at the moment. Propagating the ideal of a United States of Europe when the European Union seems to be caught in a downward spiral towards economic disaster is not an easy task. For many politicians all over Europe, whether they live in Athens, Berlin, Rome or London, blaming the bureaucrats in Brussels or the governments of the other member states for every problem is a much more promising electoral strategy to divert from their own mistakes. As a result, the "with but not of" attitude is gaining momentum on the continent. At the end of the day, every European country would like to benefit from the advantages presented by membership in the European Union and be involved in steering its course, but would prefer to avoid facing the consequences when things go badly. The problem with this attitude is that it is no longer a viable option for Great Britain or any other European state. If the present Euro crisis has shown us anything it is that some of us may not like being part of the European Union, but that European integration has reached a level which leaves none of us untouched. Great Britain may congratulate itself on having stayed out of the Eurozone, but would still have to face very grave economic consequences in the case of its collapse. It should therefore be remembered both in Great Britain and on the continent that the future of Europe remains a joint responsibility.

[i] Winston S. Churchill, Zurich Speech, in: *Documents on the History of European Integration, Vol. 3: The Struggle for European Union by Political Parties and Pressure Groups in Western European Countries 1945-1950*, ed. by Walter Lipgens and Wilfried Loth, Berlin/ New York 1988, pp. 662-666.

[\[ii\]](#) Ibid.

[\[iii\]](#) Ibid.

[\[iv\]](#) Article by Winston S. Churchill in the Saturday Evening Post, 15 February 1930, quoted in Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, *An Idea Conquers the World*, London 1953, pp. 162-163.

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