

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

THE AUTUMN LECTURE

Conservative Britain in the 21st Century

MALCOLM RIFKIND QC MP





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52 Rochester Row, London SW1P 1JU
1996

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This is the text of the annual CPS Lecture which was delivered by Malcolm Rifkind MP on 10 October 1996 at the Conservative Party Conference in Bournemouth.

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ISBN No. 1 897969 53 8

© Centre for Policy Studies, October 1996

Printed by The Chameleon Press, 5 - 25 Burr Road, London SW18

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CHAPTER 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FORTHCOMING GENERAL ELECTION

THERE IS A TEMPTATION to believe that with the passing of a Labour Party publicly and unequivocally committed to socialism, to anti-nuclear policies and to proposals for the wholesale nationalisation of the main elements of the British economy, that this election is somehow less important to the future of Britain than the four that have preceded it. There is a tendency to believe that the future is not what it used to be. I believe that to be an absolute fallacy. This election is going to have profound implications for the future of the United Kingdom as a nation, as a State and as a society.

Our people will have to take decisions that will influence whether or not this nation might disintegrate into its constituent parts; whether we are going to see a wholesale change in the nature of the governance of this kingdom, the inheritance of hundreds of years of parliamentary evolution perhaps turned over in a single parliament and the role of the monarchy itself put into question.

Our people are going to decide the sort of European Union that this country will participate in. In the new world following the end of the Cold War we are going to have to decide how distinctive a British foreign policy to pursue and whether that foreign policy should be global, backed up by armed forces with global reach and first rank capability.

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As a society we are going to have to decide whether we wish to continue to devolve responsibility onto individuals and families; whether we want a flexible labour market, with more dynamic employment patterns being accompanied by more jobs, more productivity, more competitiveness and more prosperity; or whether we wish to see government taking increased responsibility for all in society, at work and at home by regulation and inspection; of deals between government, unions and big business that at best afford a degree of temporary stability, but at a price of renewed long-term relative national decline.

Before our country there will be two fundamental constitutional questions to be faced. Are we prepared to accept political disintegration at home and are we prepared to accept political integration abroad?

The nature of the political debate may have changed but no Conservative should be under any illusion that the issues at stake in this election are as important as ever if the Tory inheritance of the last 300 years is to survive, let alone be protected and enhanced.

CHAPTER 2

THE INTERNATIONAL BACKGROUND TO THE NATION'S CHOICE

THE CHOICE FACING THE people of the United Kingdom cannot be taken in isolation from what is happening in the rest of the world. We need to identify the arguments and trends that are unique to Britain, but we also need to understand what trends are pan-European and indeed global.

There are now a number of trends in world affairs of profound importance and no country can escape their consequences. These include: globalisation, the increasingly international nature of the ownership of assets throughout the world; interdependence, nations increasingly unable to act in isolation; growing openness of the world economy following from the victory of the ideas of liberal capitalism and the consequent march towards global free trade; the radical improvement in world security with the United Nations working as its founders intended, not paralysed by decades of East/West conflict.

Alongside these benevolent trends there are of course threats. It is not the end of history. Rather as one door has closed another is slammed in our face. We are increasingly aware of the potentially damaging consequences of human action on our environment, with Chernobyl as an example of potential catastrophe tomorrow and global warming as a long-term threat to the lives and livelihood of millions of our human beings. All governments wrestle with terrorism, drugs and the threat of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons

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proliferation. This is the new global environment in which all nations of the world are trying to find a route to a secure and prosperous future.

On our own continent we are seeing a curious paradox in the 1990s. On the one hand a great debate and movement towards integration in Western Europe, being pursued with a sense of high moral purpose by much of the West European political class, alongside the actual experience of disintegration in Central and Eastern Europe, with the Soviet Union reduced to 16 countries, Yugoslavia to five and Czechoslovakia to two. We have also seen the re-emergence of militant nationalism that has resulted in the most horrendous acts of large-scale barbarism in Europe since the death of Stalin.

Whilst Western Europe seems preoccupied with the politics of integration, we should remember that we too are not immune from potential nationalist turmoil: the Basques, the Corsicans, the Flemish, the Northern League in Italy; and at home, Scottish and Welsh nationalism must be confronted to ensure that the Union remains a powerful force for good for all the constituent parts of the Kingdom.

CHAPTER 3

THE CONSERVATIVE VISION OF BRITAIN IN THE WORLD

SINCE 1979 WE HAVE seen a profound change in British self-confidence and in Britain's role and reputation in the world. This reversal of a trend of relative British decline has coincided with the most profound change in global politics. In the seven years since the fall of the Berlin Wall our understanding of international relations and world affairs has had to be fundamentally changed. Now, in the wake of the changes that have flowed from the end of the Cold War, with the end of a bipolar world and two competing ideologies, the new pattern of international relations is becoming clear. The Cold War, however permanent and rigid a state of affairs it seemed to those of us who lived through it, has proved to be an anomalous and short-lived period in international relations.

I believe, that what might be described as a return to normal in international relations, presents the United Kingdom with opportunities to advance our prosperity unseen since the first Elizabethan age. It was then that our traders, adventurers and explorers began to set forth in numbers around the world. Our pattern of international relations was led by the patterns of trade established by those Elizabethan and other pioneers. Indeed Britain's imperial responsibilities followed in the wake of the activities of our traders. Our empire owed more to the pattern of our trade than to any idea of political aggrandisement nurtured in London.

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The great Elizabethan figures of Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh, followed by the Pilgrim Fathers, set the pattern and laid the foundations of England's, and then Britain's, prosperity. By the 19th century this process had made us as the world's wealthiest nation and the possessors of the largest Empire the world has ever seen. Whilst that era, like the Cold War, has passed into history, the national characteristics of the British people have not disappeared with the Empire. British innovation, enterprise, and administration laid the foundation of our advance in relative prosperity through the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. We now also enjoy the beneficial legacies of Empire: English has become the global business language; Britain enjoys a global perspective, a broad culture that is tolerant of, indeed rejoices in, diversity.

Conservative Britain stands on the threshold of a new era of national prosperity. A prosperity based on the skills and characteristics of our people, buttressed by the right economic policies at home, and with Britain's interests abroad being pursued in an environment uniquely suited to Britain's strengths.

Next month Ian Lang and I will publish a joint White Paper about how Britain pursues her vital interests overseas. It reflects the fact that the tide of economic globalisation, of interdependence, means that one cannot simply compartmentalise our economic and financial objectives on the one hand and pursue them in isolation from our diplomatic, security and political objectives on the other.

A stable world, where liberal democracy is nurtured and security threats contained, is one which will enable us to pursue our objectives of open markets and free trade, giving liberal capitalism the opportunity to maximise our prosperity and that of the whole international community.

Increasing prosperity reinforces the success of liberal democracy, helps reduce the causes of instability and war, thus reducing the threats to our security.

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A policy of proactive international engagement best promotes and distributes prosperity and stability amongst all the nations of the world. It is why this Party and this country, if it returns a Conservative Government at the next election, will be a passionate advocate of global free trade. As we were the standard bearer of privatisation in the 1980s, deregulation and reform of the public sector in the 1990s, so for now and into the 21st century this Party and our country will be the standard bearers of global free trade.

We have spent 17 years reversing the course of relative economic decline of our nation. In terms of global trade we have halted the decline from 10% of world trade in 1950 down to about 4.5% where it stabilised in 1985. Now the challenge to all sectors of our commercial and industrial life is twofold: to increase that share of world markets and greatly increase the scale of world trade as a whole.

This is the great task that we have set ourselves for the beginning of the next century. It has the virtue of not only being a vital British national interest, but it is also in the interest of the whole of the international community. Britain has the right financial base for this policy. We are already the second largest holders of overseas investments in the world after the United States. We welcome inward investment into the United Kingdom. The opportunities for the increased success of the City of London are immense.

The overall prize that awaits us can, however, only be achieved if we preserve international stability and the global acceptance of liberal capitalism and open markets, if we avoid the catastrophe of war. Therefore international stability and Britain's contribution to it through the efforts of our diplomats, through the skills and qualities of our armed forces, through NATO, and through the United Nations, is the foundation upon which our future prosperity must be built.

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We are in a new era of international relations and Britain has a new role within it. The old notion of Britain following a balance of power strategy towards the nations of continental Europe is now out of date. Not only is this likely to be unnecessary given post-war Franco-German rapprochement, we are now in a world with only one superpower. Thus our relationships with the nations of Europe and with the United States are pivotal. We cannot have an Atlantic strategy as a substitute for a policy of engagement with Europe. It is crucial that we make both sets of relationships work.

Britain's history and geographical location mean that we are well placed to act as a bridge between North America and Europe. We do not have to choose between an exclusive partnership with North America, nor with the European Union. We are an Atlantic and a European nation which makes us uniquely equipped to play a constructive role in and enjoy the benefits of the close political, military and economic relationships across the Atlantic. I have deliberately raised the profile of Atlantic relations during my tenure as Foreign Secretary precisely because we cannot neglect this vital relationship whilst much of our intellectual and political energy is devoted to discussing, debating and deciding the future shape of Europe.

I found it remarkable and reassuring that during my time as Defence Secretary the relationship between the Pentagon and the Ministry of Defence was as close if not closer than it had been during the Cold War. The understanding and appreciation of military and strategic concerns was shared by our two defence establishments. The wider relationship has also progressively improved. This Administration, like its predecessors, has come to expect and rely on British support, but also on British advice. The United States is well aware that it cannot act alone as the world's policeman and we have a vital role in ensuring that the Western alliance remains coherent

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and solid in the defence of our and the world's economic and security interests.

Britain's unique position in many of the world's most important bodies including the United Nation's Security Council, the G7, NATO, the Commonwealth, the EU, the OECD and CSCE give us particular influence within these multilateral organisations in order to pursue our objectives of an open, liberal and stable world. It is, however, our relationship with our neighbours that commands most of our political attention and energy.

CHAPTER 4

THE CONSERVATIVE VISION OF BRITAIN IN EUROPE

CONSERVATIVE BRITAIN'S APPROACH TO Europe is easily understood when placed in the context of our wider international policy and our domestic economic policy.

We are part of Europe geographically, economically, and politically. The European ideal has helped preserve the peace, promote prosperity and has enhanced the quality of life of all of its citizens. The Conservatives are not an anti-European party. We are promoting a vision for Europe, a partnership of nations, that is the only way to sustain the European ideal for the long term.

The debate about what kind of Europe we are trying to build in the 21st Century is not the debate begun by Schuman and Monnet. For the founding fathers of the European Community, the goal was a political federation of a small number of West European nations. It was a dream born out of the horrors of the First and Second World Wars and a determination to bind former adversaries into a tight institutional structure which would ensure conflict between the nations of Western Europe was never repeated.

The world has been radically transformed since that post-war urgency to unite Europe. The vision the founding fathers espoused was a noble one, but we must remember the fundamental aim was to assure peaceful co-existence, a goal that had eluded all previous European generations. However, with the prospective growth of the Community to include the states of

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eastern and central Europe, it is inconceivable that we can now create a federation based on tight institutional structures and rigid political integration of the kind envisaged as a solution to the problems of Western Europe in the late 1940s.

It is time for a realistic debate throughout Europe about what we want to achieve on our Continent. It is time for some hard-talking about what Europe should be and should never aspire to be. Chancellor Kohl and others have said their goal is not a United States of Europe. I welcome that recognition of reality. But still there is in several capitals too much woolly talk of deepening integration for its own sake, rather than a hard-headed approach to developing Europe's competitiveness and its voice on the world stage. For some politicians in Europe, it remains heresy to question the onward march of integration. They believe that the EU will lose momentum, drive and purpose without the rhetoric of integration underpinning its development.

The objective must be a Europe with which all its member states and those who aspire to membership must feel comfortable. It is dangerous for the political élites of Europe to believe they have a responsibility to lead and hope the people will follow. If the political class get detached from the aspirations of their people, they will at best be in for a rude awakening, at worst they will have sown the seeds of their ultimate rejection by their electorate.

I believe it is not just a question of Britain 'slowing the pace' or 'holding back progress' out of a narrow-minded nationalism. Increasingly, there is a debate throughout Europe on integration which was once the preserve of the governing classes.

I believe Europe is destined to develop in a more flexible fashion. The fact that flexibility is now firmly on the agenda reflects an acceptance that there is no final destination in the European project. France, Germany and others do have a concept of flexibility different to ours. But that should not deter us from engaging in the debate; on the contrary, I

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believe our vision of a flexible Europe based on accommodating the interests of all its member states can help secure a Europe genuinely 'at ease with itself'.

Flexibility must not lead to a two-tier Europe; of first and second-class nations. That would be a betrayal of the wider European ideal and a sure recipe for tension. It may be that some states will wish, in their own national interests to proceed with closer integration. So be it. But because that would have implications for all of us, it could only proceed using European Union institutions if all agreed.

For Britain, as we seek to deregulate and reinvigorate our economy, it is patently obvious that we do not want to reverse our achievements by buying into unnecessary rigidities in Europe. We will not see the beneficial effects of our domestic policy destroyed through such vehicles as the Social Chapter, employment pacts and perhaps in the future, if the Socialists have their way, a European-wide minimum wage. We need a Europe that is competitive on a global scale. Europe cannot afford to become an inward-looking continent unable to compete with Japan and the tiger economies of south-east Asia.

But whilst we reject an integrationist and interventionist pattern of European development, there remain two vital British interests to be sustained in policy towards the European Union. At the political level we must maintain the tremendous success of changing the politics of a continent. Conflict between the nation states and Europe had become a depressingly regular occurrence bringing tragedy to the lives of millions and devastating consequences to the advance of the prosperity of its peoples. We now live on a continent where, instead of conflict, co-operation is ingrained and endemic.

Secondly, we have a vital economic interest. The European Single Market is the most developed international free trading area in the world. It is a vital stepping stone on the route to global free trade. The nations of Europe have pioneered the rules of an international trading system to enable an

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international single market to properly function. Of course there have been mixed blessings, of which the Common Agricultural Policy is a glaring example. But the fact that the effort has been made and the objective of an effective single market is being progressively achieved, is a vital interest for the United Kingdom. It is why Britain played the leading role in securing the single market.

The single market is, of course, more than a free trade area. There are rules to be followed and even enforcement of these rules must be applied across the European Union if there is to be a level playing-field for business. The European Court of Justice and the Commission have a vital role to perform in policing the single market in order that member states and businesses abide by the rules. This is as much in Britain's interests as any other member state.

Britain, as a champion of free trade within the European Union, must be at the forefront of steering Europe in the direction of global free trade.

Some contend that it might be sufficient for Britain merely to have a free trade relationship with the EU. This is neither realistic nor desirable. Why is it that prosperous countries like Austria, Finland and Sweden have joined the EU? They have done so because membership of the European Economic Area (EEA), whilst giving them free trade access to EU markets, denied them the opportunity to influence the decision-making process which profoundly affected their economies and interests. Simply being members of the EEA meant they were excluded from the policy process. Those who aspire to Britain merely being part of the EEA should reflect that that would mean we were part of an exclusive bloc of Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein! That is not where a Conservative Britain should be.

Inevitably there are tensions when others in the European Union are pursuing different agendas. But it is our task to ensure that the European Union does not isolate itself from

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the challenges and developments in the rest of the world: to ensure that it is outward-looking and does not retreat behind a protectionist wall. It is in our interests and those of our future partners that we allow access to European markets for the Central and East Europeans and beyond them the nations of the developing world. It is in our own self-interest to allow these nations to develop wealth through trade with us, so that they can become our markets of tomorrow. These questions all go to the heart of the debate about the sort of Europe we are trying to create.

There will be heat and light whilst this debate continues. The great question of British politics for the 40 years following the end of the Second World War was Europe: In or Out? That question is answered. Now the debate is a pan-European one – what sort of Europe? This Party is not going to disengage from this debate. This Party is not going to flee the battlefield because it is all too difficult to accommodate the strains of sustaining our vision for the future of Europe, too difficult to maintain a constructive engagement in Europe, whilst we seek to convince our partners of the merits of our approach.

We have a positive vision for the future of Europe. It is one built upon the hard lessons we have learnt in rebuilding our own economy over the last 17 years. Conservative Britain is not going to betray those interests by signing up to an integrated federal Europe. That would not just be a betrayal of Britain. It would be a betrayal of Europe. For us to disengage from the argument now would be like Wellington clearing off the battlefield of Waterloo, because he wasn't sure whether Marshal Blücher and his Prussians would arrive in time.

CHAPTER 5

THE CONSERVATIVE VISION OF BRITAIN AT HOME

AFTER 18 YEARS OF HARD WORK we will hold out to the British people, not just the prospect, but the reality of steadily increasing prosperity that is soundly-based. Continued Conservative Government will double the prosperity of our nation over the next 25 years.

We have restored our national self-confidence. In the early years of this Conservative Government we achieved that by showing iron resolve over the Falkland Islands abroad and in banishing the British disease at home, culminating in the Government being prepared to face up to and in the end face down the year long miners' strike. In the latter part of this Conservative administration we have delivered economic self-confidence. We can negotiate with our partners in Europe for the first time in 40 years from a position of economic strength. We know that what we have achieved, in making Britain an enterprise-friendly, deregulated and globally competitive economy, has produced for us a country where the long-term structural problems are being addressed. Our main European partners are only just beginning to grapple with the issues of competitiveness and the relentless growth in the cost of social provision that are currently set to engulf their economies in the next quarter of a century.

So whilst we can look forward to a quarter of a century where we can double the prosperity of our citizens based on the sound macro-management of our economy and allowing

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enterprise to flourish at the micro-economic level, our partners face 25 years of uncertainty. This self-confidence in Britain at home carries over into the negotiations that the Prime Minister and I and others conduct in Europe. We are determined to win the argument about the sort of Europe we are trying to create. There is no choice if the European project is not going to create major problems for itself. In any event, competitive pressures will make our arguments unanswerable.

For our citizens we are gradually re-inculcating a sense of personal responsibility and returning to individuals control over their own destiny and that of their families. Increasing prosperity is giving us the basis on which more and more of our fellow citizens can take their own decisions about the education, health and welfare of themselves and their families. We will be able to provide a society that gives all of our citizens the opportunity to enjoy this prosperity by underwriting their access to education and health combined with an economy that will reward their enterprise and entrepreneurship.

We are an open, tolerant country, whose people have travelled the world for centuries in search of fortune and adventure. We Conservatives will protect that tradition. We will continue to be a nation that trades more of her wealth than the other major industrialised economies and invests more of her wealth than our major trading partners. But the irrefutable evidence of Conservative Britain's success is that we receive much more overseas investment than similar sized economies. In 1995 when Japanese and American investors decided where to place their money in Europe, 60% of it came to Britain. All we have to do is convince the British electorate to place their free vote where foreigners put their money.

Whilst we are achieving a modern and competitive economy, Conservatives remain proud of our heritage and our institutions. We have the benefit of a system of government that has evolved over a thousand years. We have changed that system incrementally over time. That has given us a foundation

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of law and government based on the experience and traditions of our country, while being gradually adjusted to the changing conditions of each successive age. As a result our nation has enjoyed unrivalled political stability. For almost 300 years we have avoided the catastrophe of civil war and revolution. That should remain the case today. We should work to sustain this unique and enviable record.

With the Conservative Party in government that pattern of incremental change, drawing on the respect we have for the traditions and custom and practice of our forbears, will continue. Combined with enlightened economic management at home and an international policy that pursues openness, free trade and stability the prospects for the United Kingdom should be unrivalled.

But it is only the Conservatives who can be guaranteed to defend and deliver this prospect. Our opponents hanker after a different sort of society. They believe in the ability of their generation to fundamentally reorder our affairs, to overturn the way that we are governed at home and conduct our relations abroad. This belief poses a fundamental danger to our country which is why this next General Election is as important as any that have gone before.

CHAPTER 6

THE CONSTITUTIONAL DANGER AT HOME

THE CONSTITUTIONAL DANGER AT HOME does not primarily come from the nationalist parties. Nor is it limited to the issue of devolution. The Labour Party is the danger. Their proposals on devolution, the House of Lords and the monarchy would, if put into practice, change Britain for the worse.

I would have more respect for the Labour Party if they were presenting to the British people a well thought out, comprehensive, constitutional agenda. Wholesale change, however unwelcome to a Tory, should at least be intellectually coherent.

This is particularly true when our present constitution has served Britain well. The unitary state and the Westminster system have given England, Scotland and Wales more peace, stability and prosperity over almost 300 years than any other part of Europe, or indeed the world, has known. That experience ought to mean that any fundamental disruption to that system should only be contemplated if the alternative has been fully thought out and is demonstrably a clear improvement. The British people deserve nothing less.

But what the Labour Party are presenting us with are a rag-bag, mishmash of ill-considered, unrelated changes which would raise more questions and problems in their wake than those they seek to solve.

On devolution we have enjoyed the hilarious spectacle of Labour making up its mind on how it is going to put its proposals to the Scottish people. But it is the proposals themselves that should be causing hilarity if it wasn't for the

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fact that the nation could soon be faced with a government trying to put them into practice.

- For Scotland, a parliament with tax-raising powers (or perhaps not).
- For Wales, an assembly but with no power.
- For England, perhaps regional assemblies (or perhaps not).
- For London, an assembly with some unspecified tax-raising powers.

These proposals motivated by a mixture of fear of the SNP and Plaid Cymru, combined with a misplaced sentimentalism and a response to bogus grievances, fail to answer not only the West Lothian question but the issues of over-representation as well as the significantly different levels of public expenditure that exist in different parts of the United Kingdom. These issues are evaded whenever they are raised.

The Labour agenda only has a grain of justification to it if you believe that a regionalised Europe is to be welcomed and encouraged. It is, in my view, a path strewn with dangers for our country, not only in terms of its implicit acceptance that the nation state is increasingly outdated; that is dangerous enough, but also the desire to disintegrate at home, the erosion of Parliament's sovereignty and the unpicking of our constitutional settlement will create a fractious Britain, less certain of its role in the world. It is unthinkable that at an historic juncture in Europe's development and with increasing global political inter-dependence, Britain should seek for herself a lesser role in the councils of the world.

Labour contends that the creation of national and regional parliaments throughout the United Kingdom will relieve what they believe to be the tensions of an over-centralised state. They say their objective is to ensure the Union is more

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responsive to the needs of its constituent parts. But their solution to the problem, as they perceive it, is borne more out of political expediency than a genuine desire to improve the government of this country. That is why their ideas are so dangerous. For once the process of disintegration is set in train, there is no way back. The establishment of Scottish and Welsh Parliaments with their own government will represent an irrevocable shift away from the concept of a unitary state towards the forces of disunity and separation. No parliament, which is established in this constitutional upheaval, will ultimately be content with the powers Westminster bestows upon them. Thus, the creation of these anomalous constitutional entities will, in due course, unleash tensions and strains from which only the separatists can benefit. Even those of us who have in the past been sympathetic to the principle of devolution cannot escape that conclusion.

Not content with establishing competing parliaments with Westminster, Labour wish to play around with the Westminster system itself. The House of Lords, which often enjoys more public respect for the work it does than the House of Commons, is to be reformed. In response to virtually no public demand, the principle of heredity in the House of Lords is to be replaced by prime ministerial patronage. If the members of the House of Lords are selected in recognition of their lifetime's achievement it will be an even older chamber than it is now. Otherwise, they will be selected amongst Party supporters almost at random which would certainly be no improvement on the present.

In cold logic the House of Lords is hard to defend as it is presently constituted. However, the joy of being a Conservative is that we do not seek to rely solely on cold logic. Logic is the art of going wrong with confidence. We should be happy to accept the irrationalities of custom and practice if they work. And in this case custom and practice has presented us with an arrangement between the House of Commons and the House of

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Lords that works extremely well. The will of the people is understood to be clearly expressed by the House of Commons. There is no conflict between the two Houses. The knowledge and experience of the present varied composition of the Lords is much wider than could be expected from a body selected solely from the political class. Law Lords, bishops, hereditary peers, working peers and life peers provide the upper house with a unique variety and talent.

If the hereditary principle isn't good enough for the House of Lords, what about the monarchy? The logic that produces a policy to remove hereditary peers from our political structure will next be applied to our hereditary monarchy. It is known that many Labour Members of Parliament are closet republicans. Impelled by their impeccable socialist logic it can only be a matter of time before Labour has a desire to meddle. It has already been expressed by the most prestigious of Labour pressure groups in a Fabian pamphlet. These proposals were not disowned or repudiated. Labour merely have no official proposals, yet.

New Labour's concept of Britain in the 21st Century should give this country genuine cause for concern. In summary, it is deepening political integration in Europe and political disintegration at home. They appear to believe that only by binding ourselves ever more closely into the supranational structures of Europe and the creation of competing parliaments throughout the Kingdom, can we hope to realise our national potential.

We know that the Labour Party does not wish to face up to the reality of the constitutional mayhem which would inevitably result from these proposals. No one political party has the right to uproot our constitution – least of all on the basis of selfish political gain. Given all our experiences in the 1970s on this issue, one might have imagined that lessons had been learnt. Those that do not learn the lessons of history are destined to repeat them.

CHAPTER 7

CONSTITUTIONAL DANGER ABROAD

FOR A PARTY THAT only 13 years ago was fully committed to Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, Labour have undergone a most remarkable change. Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Peter Mandelson and the New Labour gurus seem now to be committed to a quasi-federalist political integration of Europe. This policy is based on the Labour modernists' belief that Britain is faced with a simple choice: either it will be in an integrated Europe or it will be outside. That belief is fundamentally flawed. We are engaged in a debate now about the future shape of Europe. There is no inevitability about a federalist political structure in Europe. Not only is the Conservative vision for Europe one that will enable the European ideal to survive and thrive, but it is also the only one that affords Europe the prospect of a competitive economic structure that will enable it to prosper. If Britain fails to win the argument and we were faced with a choice between being in an integrated federal Europe or on the outside, we would have failed to protect the British national interest.

If we have a Labour Government after the next election we will be put in a position where we have to make that choice. In their own mind the Labour leadership have already made the choice. It is a choice linked to their policies for devolution at home. They appear to see the nation state that is Great Britain as an outdated entity. There is no doubt that the gradual disintegration of the United Kingdom would make the achievement of a federal Europe including Britain much

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easier. The component countries of the British Isles would be like the present small states of the European Union.

One only has to travel to Belgium, to the Netherlands and to the Irish Republic to see and feel the importance of European identity to them. For small countries which have disproportionate representation in a continental political entity, this is entirely in accordance with their own national interests. Europe gives to the Irish Republic, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands a route to express their foreign policy in a way that is not wholly preoccupied by what happens to their much bigger neighbours – the United Kingdom, France and Germany respectively.

We understand and respect the self-interest of small countries in the European Union. It is a force for good where they seek to co-ordinate and give weight to collective positions in support of the general European interest. But the United Kingdom is not a small nation and nor do we wish to see our country reduced to a collection of small nation states.

The concept of the nation state that is Britain is not outdated. People look to their countries for part of their identity. Until that changes, and there seems no prospect of it, indeed the reverse as people take trouble to celebrate and protect their identity, the only prescription for a European construct that can command the support of its peoples is that of a partnership of nations.

It is in Labour's specific policies towards Europe that we can clearly identify the danger to our country.

First among these is their commitment to the European Social Chapter. This does not just represent a danger to jobs and investment. Back in 1988 the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party were convinced by Jacques Delors that this was a route to achieve socialism in the United Kingdom. The Social Chapter would integrate Britain with the *dirigiste*, statist, bureaucratic continental tradition and would be the means by

CONSERVATIVE BRITAIN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

which they could engineer their social objectives so beloved of the interfering left.

Second, their policy to extend Qualified Majority Voting in four key areas of policy either betrays them as naïve if, as they claim, they are trying to protect Britain's national interest. Or, and more likely, it represents a judgement by the Labour integrationists as to what is overtly deliverable to a sceptical party and public. Given Labour's behaviour on every other controversial issue one can be forgiven for assuming the latter is true.

At best Labour would pursue a policy which would give priority to a comfortable relationship with our European partners, rather than doggedly protecting the British, and, what we believe to be, the European long-term interest. They would be content to be rolled over by the weight of fashionable European opinion. This strategy accords with what the new Labour modernisers want. What is disgraceful about this is that this is not a policy which in clear terms Labour is prepared to put before the people. On this issue, one of the fundamental questions of British politics for the last 40 years, the Labour Party are putting a dishonest and misleading proposition to the electorate.

Britain's wider role in the world would also be undermined by Labour. Their commitment to the European social model would mean that our nation's commitment to global free trade, to the pursuit of competitiveness and prosperity, would be compromised. The commitment to free trade would be muddled up with commitments to global social conditions, to labour and employment standards that would seek to reproduce the Social Chapter on a world scale. We know that this would mean that the developing countries would be denied the first world market. The first world would act to protect their own short-term interests. This would deny the developing nations a route to advance their own prosperity and in turn providing new markets for our goods and services.

CONSTITUTIONAL DANGER ABROAD

Finally, ladies and gentlemen as Defence Secretary and now as Foreign Secretary, I am profoundly aware, that despite the fact that I am very optimistic about the prospect for a Conservative Britain, the unexpected and unforeseen may always be lurking around the next corner.

We have a clear idea of what our role in the world is. It is why when it comes to security no Conservative Government has ever given into the giddy internationalism that is the permanent position of the Liberals and the regular indulgence of Labour.

We have a clear idea of how our armed forces are expected to sustain and advance our security. We have rightly asked the armed forces to examine in the most fundamental way how they support and deploy their front-line capabilities. We have I believe exercised a proper judgement on the balance that has to be struck between armed forces that are too large and consume too much of a nation's resources, so that they prejudice the prosperity and hence the security of the people that they are seeking to protect, and of having an armed forces that are too small to secure our nation's fundamental freedom and independence.

Labour promise us a defence review. A defence review to be conducted by a Party that has shown that it values the unity and independence of our kingdom so lightly is a prospect that should chill the hearts not only of our armed forces and those who hold them dear, but all those who believe they are a vital part of the fabric of our nation. Labour propose unquantified change either because they are not prepared to face up to the public examination of their proposals before an election or because they really do have no vision of Britain's place in the world and the armed forces therefore required. Either way the victims of Labour's self-indulgence and vacuity would be the armed forces and Britain's security.

PERORATION

IT WOULD TAKE YEARS to undo the damage Labour could do to our armed forces. We could probably never undo what Labour propose to do to our constitution. We could never recover the economic ground lost if we take the easy options. The integrity of our country's position in Europe, preserved so determinedly by John Major, could probably only be recovered in the wake of a catastrophe for our own interests.

We have spent over 17 years laying the foundations for a great new era for our country. We must not surrender the prize now. We must convince our people that 1997 is the time to advance not to give up on the renaissance of the United Kingdom.

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