C·P·S·

How to be British

Charles Moore

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

How to be British

Charles Moore

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES
52 Rochester Row, London, SW1P 1JU
1995

The Author

Charles Moore is the Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*. From 1992-1995 he was Editor of *The Sunday Telegraph*, Deputy Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, 1990-1992 and Editor of *The Spectator*, 1984-1990. Among his publications are *The Church in Crisis* (with A.N. Wilson and Gavin Stamp), 1986 and *A Tory Seer: the selected journalism of T.E. Utley* (ed. with Simon Heffer), 1989.

This is the text of the annual CPS lecture which was delivered by Charles Moore on 12 October 1995 at the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool.

ISBN 1 897969 38 4

Centre for Policy Studies
52 Rochester Row, London SW1P 1JU

Book production by Crowley Esmonde Ltd
Printed and bound by St Edmundsbury Press Ltd,
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

How to be British

I have called this talk 'How to be British'. I have done so, perhaps, with a slightly satirical intent, for the conservative mind is rightly suspicious of books and pamphlets whose titles begin with the phrase 'How to …'. If everything that one needed to know could be contained in a 'How to' book, life would be very simple, totally programmatic, and the case for conservatism, with its belief in experience, history, human frailty and so on, would collapse. I cannot *really* tell you how to be British. No one can.

But I have also picked my title for a more serious reason. It seems to me that at the root of most people's thought about politics in this country lies a sense not very often spoken but constantly, painfully felt. This is that Britain is a great country, but a country that has seen better days. I believe that this feeling is shared by most people who are worthy of respect in all parties. The reactions to the feeling are various. Some are pessimistic, some nostalgic, some resilient, some resigned. But this is the animating feeling of our political culture, one which makes it quite different from that, say, of Germany, where the underlying feeling is still one of atonement and renewal, or of Russia, where it is a difficult mixture of pride and a sense of inferiority. This sense of one's country's difficulties and of its greatness is *far* more important in our politics than any all-embracing ideology.

It is impossible, if one lives in Britain and keeps one's eyes open, not to see a contrast between past achievements and present condition. I am not thinking so much of imperial glory, which was a late-flowering and in many respects unappealing growth, but of the sheer vigour – commercial, linguistic, political, scientific, religious, sporting – of this nation for 300 or 400 years. In the part of London in which I live I see this contrast physically embodied most days of my life. On one side of the Midland Road is St. Pancras station – fantastic, vigorous, aspiring, the home to the great new technology of the 1860s, drawing imaginatively on the past in order to welcome the future. On the other side I see the new British Library – wildly over-budget, wildly late, designed with no outward expression of the learned purpose for which it is erected, replacing a great Victorian reading room with a sub-industrial lump. In

Victorian Britain, people rose to the occasion. In modern Britain, it too often seems that the occasion itself has gone.

For anyone who loves his country, it is obvious that the first duty of its politics is to try to put this right, rather than to try to advance some abstract theory about the best of all possible worlds. The British resemble a family who have inherited a large and beautiful house. They love it dearly, but they find it hard to know how best to adapt it to modern use, and they have a terrible struggle to keep the roof on. Theirs is a hard task, but for a Conservative it is a congenial one. All Conservatives should surely agree that this – and not a project for international government, or for perfect free markets, or for state planning or for geo-political mastery – *is* the task. I certainly believe that this is the fundamental concern of those who are not blinded by the fumes of partisan argument or mired in the details of administration – in other words, of the voters themselves.

To understand how to address this task one might start by looking more closely at the words 'British' and 'Britain'. Most of the more sentimental or personal or emotional evocations of our country do not use that word. They tend to refer to England, or, as the case applies, to Wales or Scotland or Northern Ireland. Stanley Baldwin, just before he became Prime Minister in 1923 gave a famous evocation of his idea of England:

> 'the sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone, and the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been seen in England since England was a land, and may be seen in England long after the Empire has perished and every works in England has ceased to function, for centuries the one eternal sight of England.'

It is a fine passage, but it is also, when you think about it, piffle. Most of the sights and sounds Baldwin describes were not unique to England, and most of them, far from enduring, have largely disappeared.

Or George Orwell, beginning dramatically, in 1941, with the words, 'As I write, highly civilised human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me', evokes a distinct English character, one on which the present Prime Minister has drawn, 'the clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues

outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning'. Again, the description strikes home and receives friendly recognition in the mind of the reader, but it is no more than an impression, and one which is extremely subject to alteration. Today all Orwell's scenes have either changed or vanished altogether, but it does not follow that England has disappeared. The word 'England', then, is an immensely powerful and poetic one, but one that resists clear definition.

The word 'Britain' has different overtones. It is more official, less likely to be used in conversation, more likely to be used in documents. This is because it is fundamentally a political word. The word 'Britain' denotes a set of political arrangements, the Union between the component parts of the nation and the government which administers that Union. The word 'Britain' does not evoke so much a series of pleasing sensory images, like well-mown lawns or warm beer or whatever your particular fancy may be, but rather a way of running things, or to be more exact, a whole collection of ways of running things, an intricate network of institutions.

It follows that the study of how best to be British, how to understand our nation so that we may sustain and improve it, should arise from the study of that network.

And to do this, I think it would help to consider our national character in a rather more hard-headed way than is customary in most of those writings which celebrate it. In the essay which I quoted earlier, Orwell famously referred to the gentleness of the British. It is an attractive quality, and one whose apparent loss today most of us regret, but it is worth pointing out that it was not for gentleness that Britain made herself known in the world. Britain's reputation was for empiricism and practicality, for a refusal to be caught up in visionary schemes and an adaptability strengthened by ruthlessness. Britain was a place of liberty, yes, but not so much a place of the leisure to enjoy it. It cannot be an accident that *douceur de vivre* is a French phrase: it is a French concept. The British approach was more strenuous and active, plainer, rougher, tougher.

Until the end of the 19th century, the overwhelming impression of Britain was that she was *modern*. This expressed itself in the variety of scientific invention, in the quality of manufactures, in the aggressiveness of trade. It appeared in a certain adaptable informality which allowed a world-wide insurance business to develop out of a coffee-house, or a mass sporting entertainment to arise from the boys' game of kick-

ing a bladder about the street, or a great public school to form from a series of small lodging houses. To give an almost random sample of the range, Britain invented the spinning jenny and postage stamps, newspapers and limited liability.

This pragmatic modernity, very different from the *dog*matic modern*ism* of the 20th century, was apparent in and sustained by our system of politics. Without wishing to swallow whole the Whig view that everyone simply got happier and freer from 1688 onwards, it is true that British politics did not rigidify, like France, so that an explosive Revolution became inevitable, or disintegrate so that she became, like Germany or Italy for so long, a mere geographical expression, or stagnate, like Spain, with too much gold and silver and little urge to do anything useful with it.

British politics was vigorously, publicly conducted, and it succeeded in gradually extending its scope to the larger constituency which the industrial revolution produced. In the 19th century the word 'Reform' meant specifically reform of the franchise. What is sometimes described as the 'political nation' was expanded in an orderly manner and it was characteristic of the genius of British Conservatism that what was supposed to be the more reactionary of the two parties survived this expansion and profited from it. Who would have imagined that the party which opposed the Great Reform Bill of 1832 would receive, 160 years later, the largest number of votes ever cast for one party in Britain?

Further confirmation of the adaptability of the political arrangements which we made for ourselves comes from the fact that the countries which we founded and populated, and which then became independent – Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States – preserved many features of those arrangements and used them to develop polities which to this day remain successful, rich and free. It is very important to remember that no other European power had any comparable success in exporting free institutions, or indeed, in preserving them continuously within its own borders. Britain's achievement remains unique and this, as I plan to explain later, is added reason for renewing our understanding of what it is to be British and for resisting the imposition upon us of models of government developed elsewhere.

I hope I have by now said enough to give you a sketch at least of the distinctive and dynamic political culture which has been one of Britain's most vital contributions to the history of civilisation. The problem that the present generation has to address is the decay of that culture,

and how it might be arrested and reversed. And I deliberately use the word 'decay', rather than 'collapse', because I think the situation is very far from hopeless. To return to the simile of the family house, the old place has suffered from having some fairly insensitive and profligate occupants, but its foundations remain sound.

There is not time tonight to review the great debate about Britain's decline as a world power, whether it was caused by class rigidity or imperial overstretch or not enough vocational education or any of the innumerable explanations advanced. All that needs to be observed for our purposes is that we have suffered for more than 50 years from two damaging views of politics which have been strong among our rulers. The first was eloquently expressed and subscribed to by Orwell himself, again in the essay, 'The Lion and the Unicorn', which I quoted earlier. 'What this war has demonstrated,' he wrote, 'is that private capitalism – that is, an economic system in which land, factories, mines and transport are owned privately and operated solely for profit – *does not work.*' 'In a Socialist economy,' he added, 'the problems of consumption and production do not exist. The State simply calculates what goods will be needed and does its best to produce them'. That a humane and patriotic man like Orwell could have believed this even for ten minutes shows what an addling effect the experience of war had upon British freedom. The idea that the working life of a free people could and should be planned by government is something from which this country has only begun to recover in the past 16 years. It weakened prosperity, removed almost all enterprise in traditional heavy industries, destroyed the autonomy of numerous institutions and demoralised the poorer classes. It tried to build a new society on a Utopian model, an exercise which flies in the face of the entire British experience. I don't think I need say more to convince *this* audience of the point.

The other view among our rulers which has damaged our political culture since the war is harder to identify and to counter because it is not driven by a clear ideology. It is a view of politics almost exclusively confined to politicians, diplomats and bureaucrats. It is a view of politics which is interested only in international power. It is the view which is always fretting about Britain's 'role' and 'influence', and which uses the language of 'seats at the top table', 'places on the bus' and so on. If you believe that these things are what matter most for a country, you will, in modern British conditions, be pessimistic, even defeatist. The loss of Empire, the rise of the United States and changes in the world

economy will lead you to realise that Britain can only, in the foreseeable future, be a second-rank power, and so to conclude that Britain is 'finished', and can only exert power through some new international association, of which, of course, the European Community is now the most obvious.

An almost perfect illustration of this mentality is provided by the attitudes of the late Harold Macmillan. Let me quote from the diaries of Lady Gladwyn serialised in my own newspaper last month: the entry is dated January 18th 1957, at the British Embassy in Paris:

> 'Harold made a tremendous speech yesterday, full of pep, saying we were a great power, that everybody must work hard, that it was ridiculous to say we were finished. He is quite right to take this line, but it is further proof of the sickening hypocrisy of politicians. Only a few weeks ago, in this very Salon Vert, he was giving us a long tirade on how the European civilisation had come to an end, that England was finished ...'

Now of course every statesman ought to care about the international standing and power of his country. These are commodities in which he has to deal and which his skill can increase a little and his incompetence diminish very much. But the essential point about these things is that they cannot be chased after. A role, a voice, an authority on the world scene reflect a reality that comes from getting one's own political and economic culture right, not from trotting round the chancelleries of Europe. It was a great relief the other day to hear our new Foreign Secretary declare that influence was not automatically good in itself, but only if it could be won without the sacrifice of our interest. If we had heard that language a few years back we might have lost less out of the diplomats' fear of being 'isolated'.

In its most pernicious form, this preoccupation with power and influence leads our politicians to abandon whatever is strongest and most distinctive in our political culture and barter it for the appearance of international respectability – selling our birthright not so much for a mess of pottage as for a succession of quite outstandingly agreeable meals in Strasbourg, Brussels and wherever else two or three or 15 are gathered together in the name of the European Union. One of the most objectionable features of the EC as at present constituted is that decisions which will eventually have the force of law in all member states

are arrived at almost solely through private negotiations. These are meat and drink (literally) to the influence-peddlers, but poison to the principles of representative government upon which Britain's political self-respect depends.

Now I believe that only the Conservative Party can lead this recovery of self-respect. But when one says so, one meets at once a barrage of criticism, not only from the Left, but from many conservative-minded people who are outraged by what they see as 16 years of demolition of what is often called the social fabric. They believe that this period, particularly the 11 years when Lady Thatcher was Prime Minister, attacked British institutions. They think that our country has been strapped to the Procrustean bed of a callous free-market theory. They say that local government and the health service and the BBC and the universities and the regiments and the professions and a great deal more have been sacrificed in the name of a rigid ideology. They identify in modern Conservatism a utilitarian and anti-historical spirit which is as bad as socialism. They accuse it of combining two apparently opposite things in a deadly mixture – of increasing central state power and of throwing our people on the mercies of uncontrolled market competition. Many of them discern in the pleasant noises which emanate from Mr Tony Blair a reaction against this, and some even conclude that the best thing for a true conservative to do is to vote Labour. Extreme forms of this delusion have recently been visible in the region of Stratford-upon-Avon.

But we ought to admit that the accusations are not 100 per cent untrue. Some modern Conservatives *have* been crude in applying business models to institutions that do not have business purposes. It is simply inappropriate, for example, to speak of universities as organisations which 'produce' certain human commodities or clear economic benefits, as if they were factories. The government-imposed idea that dons should justify their existence by publishing more books is ludicrous. Similarly, I find it shocking that the Tomlinson report on the future of London hospitals makes no reference whatever to the historical achievements and expert traditions of institutions like St. Bartholomew's Hospital and talks instead of things called 'isochrones'. Again, the strand of *Sunday Times*-style Conservatism which sees the monarchy as justified only by some calculation about cost effectiveness and tourist revenue, seems to me stupid and disgusting.

But I would maintain that these are aberrations, and not the essence of the Conservative beliefs which revived under Margaret Thatcher, and

have won the Tories every election since 1979.

British free market Conservatism is not a Utopian ideology. It is an attempt to revive those past British qualities of an active and enterprising spirit which I described earlier, and adapt them to modern conditions. It gets much of its vigour from the sense of frustration at a great country brought low which I set out at the beginning as the underlying context of our political debate. It sees the legacy of the Labour victory in 1945 as something which has made Britain weaker and less free.

There is an understanding in free market Conservatism, though it is not often well expressed, that markets are not merely mechanisms. They are themselves institutions, and they are political and cultural as well as economic phenomena. They depend upon traditions of trust, fair dealing, business experience, family ties, habits of work, forms of education and the framework of law. The famous grocer's shop in Grantham did good business not on the basis of some abstract economic principle, but on the basis of respect in the community, knowledge of the market town, and the ethical traditions of Methodism. When people watch the London foreign exchange markets on television they often profess horror at the sight of young men with lavatory brush haircuts, too many telephones and estuary accents deciding the value of the world's currencies. I feel quite the opposite. It seems to me an admirable expression of the British empirical tradition and of our inherited and dynamic understanding of finance that people of quite modest backgrounds and small formal education can successfully turn over $464 billion a day where their counterparts in New York manage a mere $244 billion and in Frankfurt a paltry $76 billion. I feel that Britain is much safer with these Essex men than with the gentlemen of Whitehall, let alone of Brussels.

Almost everywhere that the Conservatives have extended markets in Britain they have brought not only greater prosperity but a more civilised society. People have now forgotten the boredom, frustration and sometimes corruption involved in getting a telephone put into your house before the mid-1980s, or the extraordinary imposition which forbade you to take more than £50 when you went abroad, or the shows of hands in British Leyland car parks which brought an entire industry to its knees. There is no better study of human ingratitude than all those hundreds of liberal journalists who attack the years of Tory rule without acknowledging that their far greater freedom, personal wealth, technological flexibility and harmony at the work-place are chiefly due to the Tory reform of the trade unions which, for the most part, they fiercely resisted. I

worked for the old Telegraph and I work for the new and I cannot think of a clearer illustration of the capacity of modern Conservatism to revive an old institution.

And people have forgotten the sheer nastiness of strikes. If you want to see how much stronger Britain has become as a result of modern Conservatism, try to remember how much you feared Arthur Scargill 15 years ago and then ask yourself how much you fear him today. In the world of work and commerce and manufacture and services we have become more cooperative, more diligent, more imaginative, more honest. The gains here are not only things that show up on the bottom line. They are gains for British civilisation, expressions of the British genius. If Conservatives do not see this, and do not advance further in this direction, they will find themselves quickly moving in the opposite one. The popularity of Mr Blair shows that many people still think that social democracy can work, yet we have the history of 1945-79 to show that it cannot.

Where modern Conservatism has been much less successful is when it has been more tentative. There are two main areas of relative failure, two areas where Britishness has to be revived and advanced in the rest of the century and beyond.

The first is in everything that comes under the heading of the welfare state. It is a truly remarkable political achievement of the Conservatives that they have persuaded most people that they are destroying the welfare state when in fact they have swollen it in a way that its founding fathers like Beveridge and Aneurin Bevan literally did not believe was possible. They have increased spending on health by 58 per cent in real terms since 1979. In 1979, 20 per cent of all families were living on means-tested benefit of some kind: today it is a third. They have nearly trebled the number of single parent families dependent on the state and multiplied the cost of housing benefit six times.

It is now widely understood that this vast swelling of welfare is economically unsustainable and has bad unintended social consequences. It is less widely recognised that it has also involved the demolition or weakening of a huge range of institutions which Britain pioneered. When people, many of them Conservatives, extol the National Health Service as a great British institution, they forget that it in fact destroyed the independence of hundreds of great British institutions – the hospitals. Though private, few of these were commercial. They were established and run on moral principles usually explicitly derived from Christianity. Barts,

for example, gave free treatment to all from the year of its foundation, which was 1123. Now it is closing, destroyed not by private greed but by the state. Again, it is a statist myth that the Forster Education Act of 1870 provided for all an education which the poor were previously denied. In 1870, 99 per cent of children already went to school and most of them went free. These schools were provided by the churches. Successive education acts have weakened the role of the church schools and damaged education in the process. A similar, creeping nationalisation of universities has taken place more recently, making them far too dependent on government money and thus subject to government direction. It should be a matter of shame for Tories, and not of pride, that, by government fiat, we all have to pretend that what were previously called polytechnics are really universities after all.

Or again, the state pension which tried, in its early days, to replicate the principle of a private system, was quickly debauched by government so that National Insurance contributions became no more than another form of tax, and those dependent upon the state pension are entirely at the mercy of governments for the amount of money they get. Because contributions have not been reserved and invested for their declared purpose, it is a paltry amount of money. This system and other forms of welfare are not only badly organised in themselves: they have also served to undermine the elaborate and multifarious private institutions in which Britain was once preeminent. The British spirit of practicality saw that self-help and mutual help were not opposites, but two sides of the same coin. Britain, with its innumerable friendly societies and clubs and institutes and charitable bodies and church organisations, created a private network of welfare which the state has undermined. This is an economic drain, of course. Worse, it is a vast system of demoralisation. And it damages most those it is most designed to help. The middle classes can survive it, though at a high cost in tax. The working classes are less fortunate: the welfare state has made them the *un*working classes. Think of that phrase 'the safety net'. It sounds reassuring, but as any fisherman knows, once you are in a net, you are helpless. I wish that people who call themselves 'One Nation' Tories would acknowledge that the welfare system which they still seek to defend has itself created two nations between whom a great gulf is fixed – the dependent and the independent.

The myth is that the Tories have applied Tory principles to the welfare state, with disastrous results. In reality, they have tried slightly to

modify a socialist system. Instead they should start working to replace it.

If I am right that Britishness is at root a political concept, then we have not yet discussed the most important area of the subject. For at the root of politics is the question of who governs, over whom, and by what means. Because this is the root question, it is the one which politicians try, very understandably, to avoid. Looking too closely at roots can, after all, damage the plant.

Unfortunately, circumstances force us to take a look.

It is now a commonplace of left and liberal thinking that the British constitution is rotten at its heart. Even the exceedingly cautious Mr Blair, who hates committing himself to anything, was happily explicit on the subject last week at Brighton. He reiterated that Labour would introduce a Scottish Parliament, a Welsh Assembly and a Bill of Rights, and would abolish the rights of hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords. Labour would 'implement the Nolan Report in full', restore a government for the whole of London, and so on. Other suggestions from similar quarters include the incorporation of the European Convention of Human Rights into English law, the further development of judicial review, proportional representation, and the replacement of the monarchy, though Mr Blair himself avoids these last two.

The current passion for these ideas can be attributed to some extent to partisan resentment. People assume that a country governed for so long by a party they dislike must be wrongly constituted. I predict, for example, that the Labour enthusiasm for devolution will evaporate if the party wins the election, and I observe that the furore about what is called 'sleaze' reflects more a general resentment of a tired government than a real and serious deterioration of standards. Much of what people like to call a 'constitutional malaise' has a funny way of disappearing when they successfully exercise their existing constitutional right to change the government.

But not all the criticisms are beside the point. We *do* have an overmighty executive. It *is* absurd that minute decisions about life in far-flung areas of the kingdom are taken by central bureaucrats rather than locally elected people, and it is true that although Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland get lots of public money – far more than is good for them as a matter of fact – they are in practice excluded from many decisions which affect them by a political culture too heavily centred in London.

But if we are to address any of these things we must consider, as the reformers do not, where the essence of the liberty which we all say we value actually lies. And I would maintain that it lies in the geographical entity and political community known as Britain and in the national forum of that community – the British Parliament.

To justify my claim precisely, I would need to enter into a historical analysis for which, you will be relieved to know, there is no time here. But anyway I do not think that I *am* compelled to justify it. It is a good conservative position that when change is proposed the burden of proof must be on those who advocate change. To return to the simile of a beautiful old house which I used earlier: it is the person who wishes to knock it down who must explain himself, not the occupant who wishes to keep it standing.

And what is very observable about those who wish to begin the demolition is that they see everything in terms of more law and more government. A Tory should love the idea of devolution if it means that government divests itself of power, and that local people choose and pay for local projects. It *would* be good for the Government to look much more thoroughly at increasing the scope, independence and revenue-raising freedom of existing Scottish local government, and ordered the Scottish Office to review all its responsibilities in order to find ways of removing government, national and local, altogether from as many of them as possible. And the same goes for the functions of central government in Wales, Northern Ireland, and in England itself. But that is not at all what the word devolution means in current political parlance. It means erecting new tiers of government, largely dependent on centrally raised money. More offices and salaries for politicians and officials, more rules for citizens to obey, more money for taxpayers to find. And those who have designed this devolution are not trying to complement the structure of the centre, but to weaken it.

Again, take the role of the courts. There is a very proper concern that the citizen is inadequately protected from the power of the state. New laws are too many and too intrusive. But why should it follow that general rights, drawn from speculative universal principles, should be expressed in law or upheld by a written constitution? Why would our lives be better if judges, who have no electoral sanction, were to be made the arbiters of essentially political questions instead, as they have traditionally been in this country, of being the precise interpreters of rule and precedent in the light of particular facts?

Take even the House of Lords. The reformers propose many things, but the only one specifically and immediately promised by Labour is the abolition of the voting rights of hereditary peers. This measure would remove the one element from the Upper House which is completely out of the control of patronage. This supposed modernisation would actually make the power of the executive even stronger.

In his new book *Ruling Britannia*, Andrew Marr, who favours constitutional reform, says 'Some of these issues – the Union, devolution, a Bill of Rights, power-sharing, proportional representation, referendums – have been gingerly placed on the national agenda by the Conservatives in their search for a settlement in Ulster'. This, he implies, is a good thing. Yet what is really striking about most of the reforms is what a mess they have made in Northern Ireland. The province is a cautionary lesson against devolution and constitutional experiment. The one policy that has *not* been tried – the full integration of Northern Ireland into the rest of the United Kingdom – is the policy that keeps the peace in all its other constituent parts.

It is hard to see the virtue of what you have always taken for granted, but this is what Conservatives ought to specialise in. Any clever commentator can find faults in the structure of the Union and its Parliament. He can point out that the design of the constitutional building does not accord with all modern specifications, and sometimes his anxieties will be right. But he needs to be reminded very firmly that people have lived under the same roof for a very long time, a fact which itself suggests at least a measure of harmony, and that he will not have the luxury of building any replacement on a green-field site.

Where I think the Conservatives really are open to attack is in their failure to keep the structure in good repair. The pace and scope of modern government tempt ministers to treat the House of Commons with impatience and even with contempt. It is a scandal, as Christopher Booker recently exposed in *The Sunday Telegraph*, that literally thousands of executive decisions are taken every year through the device of statutory instruments which avoids debate in Parliament. It is a bad feature of much modern legislation that it gives the relevant Secretary of State such wide powers to vary the rules at whim after the Bill has passed into law. And it is a continuing disgrace that legislation relating to Northern Ireland is not given proper parliamentary scrutiny, but passed through Orders in Council. I'm afraid this Government, like most governments, has shown precious little interest in such matters and deserves to be

harried for it.

Now it is part of the defeatist tendency in modern British elites, the tendency which I mentioned earlier to see everything purely in terms of seeking power and influence, to accept the reformers' analysis, though without the reformers' zeal. The one thing, for example, that our administrative class will not accept about Northern Ireland is that it should be unambiguously British. Not many of them want it to be unambiguously Irish either, but most see its salvation in the perpetuation, indeed the institutionalisation, of uncertainty over its constitutional status. They wish to blur the lines of authority, not seeing that by refusing to decide the issue of Britishness they throw it open for ever more dispute.

It is this attitude, and this elite, which has controlled most constitutional decisions in recent years. In the early years of the 1980s, the problems of economic and labour market reform seemed so great that the Government did not spare the time to develop a Tory political language about the constitution. It was too busy with other things. Mrs Thatcher, whose instincts on such matters were unfailingly Tory, thus found herself trapped by officials who had done the groundwork in a spirit quite unlike her own. And so we have the strange fact that she, of all people, signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong and the Single European Act. All three documents were based on the premise that British rights and liberties had to be qualified in order to obtain other supposed advantages. The result of the Anglo-Irish Agreement was a deepening confusion about Northern Ireland's status; the result of the Joint Declaration will be the unnecessary handover of the Queen's subjects to a Communist dictatorship; and the result of the Single European Act, although it did break down some artificial restrictions of trade, was to extend the regulatory power of the Brussels bureaucracy and remove from large areas the right of veto for member states. It was when Mrs Thatcher rested from this last piece of work, and looked upon it, and saw that it was not good, that she began the crusade for which her colleagues drove her from office but which now, five years later, most of them tacitly recognise was right.

For what the Single European Act, and the work of M. Delors, what our membership of the ERM and the signing of the Maastricht Treaty all made absolutely plain was that the prevailing project of the European Community was not to improve the trade, political cooperation and friendly communication of the member states, but to build a new form of government and a new entity to be governed. The plan for the Euro-

pean Union, of which, through Maastricht, we all find ourselves citizens, is what the name implies – that we should all be one in Europe, as we are, or have been, all one in Britain. We are to be one flock and under one shepherd.

In analysing why this plan is something which we should do everything possible to resist, Conservatives make a mistake, I think, when they make a universal argument in favour of nation states against other forms of government. It seems to me that there is nothing sacred about the nation state in general. Some are artificial, some are too weak or too poor or too divided. You have only to look at the fate of numerous nations created by the Treaty of Versailles or by African decolonisation or in the former Yugoslavia to see what I mean.

By the same token, it may well be that some nations in Europe actually distrust their own nationhood with good reason. Greeks and Italians have told me that they like being in the EC because it saves them from their own politicians. A similar idea, on an almost cosmic scale, lies behind Germany's entire approach to Europe. These are not contemptible notions. They have some historical validity. If your lecturer were talking today about 'How to be Greek', or Italian, I would not like to claim that he was automatically wrong to say that his country would be best served by European Union.

Which takes me back to my title, 'How to be British'. My observation of our history is that the British nation state is a coherent, working entity which has not been seriously disputed for nearly 300 years except in relation to Ireland. Our capacity to be British, our idea of ourselves and our sense of worth are built round this history. And it follows that our Parliament is crucial to our sense of worth as the Bundestag is not for the Germans or the Assemblée Nationale for the French. If you break up a coherent, working entity some trouble is certain and any benefit is very uncertain. Such a break-up would occur if the economic and monetary union provided for in Maastricht, or the political union aimed for in it, did take place. So anyone who is interested in being British should oppose both these things. I notice with great relief that more and more people, particularly in this party, are now doing so.

So am I saying that Britain is different? Yes, I am. But I am *not* saying that the British experience has no interest for or application to the other countries of Europe. It is part of the British character of which I spoke earlier to export. This is true in the literal sense that we have a higher proportion of our national wealth dependent on foreign trade than any

other first world country, but also in a more metaphorical sense. Ours has long been an open, though idiosyncratic society. It has given the world examples of how to do various things – how to make things and sell them, how to develop law, how to play games, how to fight, how to speak and write freely, and how to do politics. There is no one way to do any of these things, but we have developed some good ways, which the world has noticed.

I do believe that part of being British today is to promote a sort of political export drive, not in order to conquer anybody, not to win the world to any body of doctrine, but to show people that our empirical, practical way of approaching the business of government can be useful for everyone.

This may sound very arrogant. It is not supposed to be. I am conscious of what we should be learning from Germany's financial probity, France's cultural pride and America's love of freedom. But we should be more aware of our strengths and less hesitant in arguing from them. Take the structure of the European Community. How could it be that anyone with a British experience of parliamentary democracy could countenance a European Central Bank with the power, untrammelled by electorates, to impose slump upon a whole Continent? Yet this is what is proposed. How could it be that rule from Brussels should be conducted by a Commission of bureaucrats which initiates its own laws and is controlled by no parliament? Yet this is what already happens. How could it be that the Council of Ministers decides many aspects of our lives without any public record of its deliberations? Yet it is so. How could it be, above all, that the leaders of such a vast area feel so confident that they can reshape so much history so fast? Britain is culturally better equipped than any other nation to prevent it.

And here I return to what I said earlier about Britain's former reputation for being modern. Eurosceptics are often attacked for being vaingloriously nostalgic about their country's greatness. Yet the opposite is the case. The empirical, flexible, British approach is the most modern. How else to adapt to a world of precipitate social, technological and economic change? One of the strongest objections to the project of the European Union is that it attempts to impose an outdated bureaucratic order upon a Continent in flux. Just as London has adapted to the modern conditions in which money is traded better than Paris or Frankfurt so British practicality about what Europe can and cannot do puts us ahead of France or Germany as they struggle to rescue a grand, but inappropri-

ate design. On the future stage of Europe, it is they, and not we, who are behind the times.

For several years now, the Tory Party has torn itself apart on these questions. The damage is very sad, but the argument is necessary to have. I do not want to seem too sanguine, but I think I detect a better spirit now, and a greater confidence in our Government that it can and should inject reality into the European dream before it becomes the European nightmare. One likely result of this will be that those who most attacked the Eurosceptics at the time will take all the credit for doing now what they vehemently repudiated then. But one must not mind about that. What could be more empirical, more Tory, indeed more British than stealing one's critics' clothes?

A selection of recent publications

LIBERATE THE TUBE!
Radical proposals to revitalise the London Underground
Stephen Glaister & Tony Travers
£6.95

THE MYSTERY OF JAPANESE GROWTH
Ramesh Ponnuru
£5.95

LOCAL LIMITS
Cutting the costs of good councils
Edward Lister
£5.00

LESS THAN MEETS THE EYE
The modest impact of CAP reform
D. Gale Johnson
£5.95

A subscription to the Centre

The Centre runs an Associate membership scheme which is available at £35.00 per year (or £30.00 if paid by bankers' order). You will receive all previous publications at half price and whenever possible half price fees for the conferences and seminars which are held at the Centre.

For more details please write, telephone or fax:

The Secretary
Centre for Policy Studies
52 Rochester Row, London SW1P 1JU
Tel: 0171 828 1176
Fax: 0171 828 7746