



'CONSERVATISM & THE PARADOX OF EUROPE'

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THE PARADOX OF EUROPE

One of human nature's most popular impulses is to eat your cake and still have it in front of you. This is especially true in politics, where persuading everybody that you are keeping them happy can mean the difference between office and obscurity. In Britain we are seeing the crucial debate over the future of the European Community and our participation in it develop in these terms.

I had better explain at the start what I mean by "the paradox of Europe" as it affects Conservatism. On the one hand we, as Conservatives, want to be in the European Community because we believe in Free Trade and co-operation with our geographical neighbours. We want to be in a large manufacturing and commercial area without political restraints that can pursue to the zenith the Cobdenite ideal of the most efficient division of labour. We want a large trading bloc in which market forces encourage the competition that allows the growth of participating nations to be maximised. Whatever the wider concerns about defence and other foreign policy co-operation, or the more personalized desire to move about Europe on business or pleasure with a minimum of inconvenience, that was the economic impulse that attracted so many Conservatives to the idea of a European Economic Community.

However, the philosophy of Europe has moved on since then. What began as the European Economic Community is now just the European Community; centralization of policy affects far more than just trade. It has become a vehicle for removing much of our ability to govern ourselves as an independent sovereign nation. And, at the moment, the next stage of that debate is about whether we should make the most important sacrifice yet; whether we should give centralised, unaccountable institutions in Brussels the power to run our economic policy.

Most Conservatives, myself included, were happy to join the Exchange Rate Mechanism, once most of the conditions enunciated by the Prime Minister at Madrid last year had been met, especially the abandonment of exchange controls by France and Italy. We all

seek to arm ourselves with Germany's legendary resistance to inflation, but many of us have serious reservations about definitions of European integration that take us much beyond the point Britain has already reached.

Here the paradox presents itself. Conservatives have been basically free traders ever since the arcane debate about Imperial Preference went to the grave with Joseph Chamberlain and my rather dreary countryman, Andrew Bonar Law. Many of our efforts as Conservatives over the last 70 years have been to secure free trade as a way of achieving the economic aims I have just outlined. Yet the majority of our European partners now tell us that if we wish to participate fully in this attractive free-trading enterprise we must be prepared to make further and much greater sacrifices of sovereignty. Although the Conservative party has always, first and foremost, upheld and defended the British constitution, many Conservatives see the surrender of our sovereign powers as acceptable in the name of the emotive and nebulous concept of "European Unity".

Europe has been the site of three of recent history's most important and welcome developments: the rapprochement of ancient foes, especially France and Germany, the implosion of Communism, and the reunification of the Germans. Even before the last two events, the concept of Europe had become contemporary history's greatest fad, the wave of the future, the future that we saw and that worked, to borrow some platitudes from our friends on the left. To the tepid and the unconvinced, Europe was a phenomenon which, since it was an incumbent fashion, Britain should be a part of. It is a powerful, though usually an implicit orthodoxy in Europe, that the World Wars and the barbarities of the Third Reich require nothing less from us than the complete submergence of European nationalism.

The facts that I am a Canadian who was raised in the august imperial twilight of the late Churchillian era and am today a part-time resident of both Canada and the United States, perhaps strengthen my conviction that the continental Europeans, whether they

realize it or not, are also partly motivated in their effort to drag Britain into an exclusive Europe by a desire to sever Britain's connection with the Commonwealth and the United States. Often in its history Britain has had to choose between Europe and the world and no one should minimize the difficulty of reconciling these alternative orientations now. Many Europeans are inexpressibly resentful that western Europe has not been, these past 50 years, the political centre of the world, and Britain is being asked, in effect, to prove its loyalty to Europe by renouncing its long, profound and benign association with the rest of the English-speaking world.

Europeans purport to hold Britain responsible for strengthening democracy by throwing its lot in with an assimilationist European community and undergirding Euro democracy from within. Who among us does not admire the success of most western European political institutions, especially as the four principal western continental countries, Germany, France, Italy and Spain, have all been fascist dictatorships within living memory? Of course we respect and admire these great and allied nations, but not, I suspect, to the point of betting centuries of our political maturity on the constitutional aptitudes developed since 1949 by the Germans, since 1958 by the French, since 1975 by the Spanish, even more recently at the European Commission, and whose emergence in Italy we are still awaiting.

If I seek to achieve anything this evening, it will be to remind those Conservatives who support European integration of their inherently Tory responsibility to safeguard the constitution of this sovereign nation. To affect a Churchillian resonance, this Conservative government has not been elected to preside over the dissolution of British sovereign power. I hope to show that Britain is not only not ready for such a sacrifice, it is not suited for it; and, indeed, in order to maintain and improve the free-trading union of which we are all in favour, such a sacrifice is not desirable and probably not necessary.

Moreover, those Conservatives who would make this sacrifice should recall not just what the Prime Minister, said at Bruges two years ago, but what she said at Aspen last August. Europe does not just involve the twelve nations of the EC; and maximising our economic growth and trading performance does not just involve Europe. We must consider ways of moving closer to America in trading terms; and we must consider, with even greater urgency, ways of bringing the newly-liberated countries of Eastern Europe into our trading system as the Prime Minister recently said in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and of helping the Soviet Union to embrace the market economy and become a more active trading partner.

These are the issues that should now engage the attention of the Western European nations. Bureaucratic obsessions with common currencies, economic, monetary and political unions and - dare I say it - with the creation of a European superstate are not strictly relevant to what the world's leading nations should be seeking to do now. Moreover, if I may be provocative, I should remind those Conservatives who still feel this fervour for union that the blueprint they are being offered is essentially one of "market socialism", embodying all the evils of intervention, centralisation and unaccountability that have no place in our Conservative philosophy. It is not necessary to be a little England humbug to have serious misgivings about both the jurisdictional appetite and ideological tenor of the European Commission.

Ancient History

A short diversion into the past would perhaps be germane. Charles II, William III and George I, on arrival here from different parts of Europe to assume the throne of this country, all objected to British Tory insularity. George I complained of the fallacious "old Tory notion that England can subsist by itself whatever becomes of the rest of Europe". I do not recommend or feel myself any respect, or even nostalgia for that parochial and rather xenophobic view of the world.

When the future of Europe was considered at the Congress of Vienna in 1814 and 1815, Britain eschewed the sort of meddling, centralising role that, then as now, our European neighbours found so attractive. Our only concerns, rightly, were freeing up trade, and maintaining a balance between the great powers and between the conservative and liberal forces of Europe. The Quadruple Alliance of 1815 that formed the Concert of Europe was as far as we would go. Castlereagh was happy to enter into an accord that policed the settlement of frontiers, and which pledged to keep a Bonaparte off the French throne. He would not, though, back intervention in the internal affairs of any other state. Without revolution, though not without difficulty, Britain abolished slavery, emancipated Catholics, repealed the Corn Laws, and reformed elections, while Metternich and the restored French Bourbons and their cousins ignored or misjudged democratic forces until they were swept away by them. In his public career of over half a century, Palmerston was alternately the delight and terror of the radicals.

Britain recognised that the economic advantages conferred on it by its Empire made trade with Europe less imperative than it might otherwise have been. Britain is a maritime nation conditioned through the centuries to have a vastly different outlook on the world, and on our role in it than some of our neighbours. Though there is no longer a British Empire, this strategy of market diversification still makes sense, provided the whole world is not segregated into exclusive trading blocs, in a scramble for markets slightly reminiscent of the 19th century's pursuit of colonies.

More to the point, Britain refused to join the "Holy Alliance" of Russia, Prussia and Austria, being rightly sceptical about this invention of a Christian union of love, peace and charity - not unlike the blessed Social Charter. Metternich called the Holy Alliance "a high sounding nothing", Talleyrand "a ludicrous contract" and Castlereagh, unduly charitably, "a piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense". It is an example of co-operation over-reaching itself.

In effect, the Alliance was a Trojan horse that allowed unbridled interference by the great powers in the affairs of the Christian European countries that were duped into signing up to its aims. That, too, could be a lesson for today.

Britain has been notably resistant to pan-European institutions, especially those identified with the hegemony of foreign culture or arms. Even those European countries that have shared or succumbed to some of these forces, have distinct characteristics borne of being in a Europe of nations. All this background may make integration harder than the Community's idealists imagine and it is this Europe of nations, with all the cultural and philosophical advances made by the interaction of so many different traditions that is the true European. Nor would it be right to pretend that Britain is the only country to be worried about protecting sovereignty. For this reason, federation on an American basis is a fantasy. There are not, and never have been in civilised times, the conditions in Europe that there were in America in the era of Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton and Franklin. Nor, despite the merits of some of the advocates of European unity, is a cast of such arresting personalities in evidence.

The Tory Impulse

Conservatism - or, in this case, its Tory progenitor - has always been concerned with protecting our nationhood. What made us shrink from the Holy Alliance was our difference of outlook, embodied by the Tory Castlereagh, but upheld by the more liberal Canningites and Whigs as well, between constitutional and autocratic states. The autocracy with which we are now faced in Europe is that of socialist centralism, the political force that has (in one form or another) dominated Europe since 1919, but which we in Britain cast off in 1979. Castlereagh complained that the Holy Alliance cared much about the divine right of monarchs and little about the rights of subjects. That, too, is true of the unaccountable and insufficiently democratic race towards European federation. At least Castlereagh could move Britain away from the Quadruple Alliance

when its absurdist tendencies became too pronounced. There is no sign that any such escape route would be available from European federation.

In modern times Conservatives have wavered back and forth about the EEC. Indeed, since the European Coal and Steel Community was initiated in 1950 there have been few who could match the consistent, blinkered, febrile passion for the Community of, let us say, Edward Heath. Many have been down that road, seen what lay at its end, and decided that their Tory impulses compelled them to turn back. The most famous is Enoch Powell, who is still the Tory High Priest of the Anti-EEC movement. It is not necessary to subscribe to Mr Powell's irrational anti-Americanism and assorted other Quixotries, to judge his views of the European Community worthy of consideration.

"I was not," he wrote in 1971, "an opponent of British membership of the EEC in 1961-62. I was prepared to accept it, on the grounds of trade, as the lesser evil, compared with being excluded. But we were excluded; and the events of the years which followed convinced me that this judgment had been mistaken. Meanwhile it became clear that the community, if indeed it survived at all, would be something quite different from a free-trade area, and something to which Britain could not belong. It also became clear that the sense of forlornness produced by realisation that the Empire and Commonwealth no longer, for practical purposes, existed, was the real cause which underlay the rationalised case for British entry. Hence the anxious doubt, so misleadingly expressed: 'surely we cannot go it alone?'"

What Sovereignty means

We should be in no doubt that the Euro-socialist led direction of Europe is aimed squarely at Federation at the submergence of our distinctiveness and the marginalisation of our institutions. And we should, equally, be in no doubt that federation is viscerally unacceptable to the British. But what loss of sovereignty are we talking about? Does not

Sir Leon Brittan base his own case for union on the fact that our sovereignty consists of the 20 minutes of power we enjoy between the Germans putting up their interest rates and us following?

Sir Leon exaggerates, but like a good lawyer he does so from a scintilla of truth that makes his contention harder to repudiate. What economic and monetary union would mean, as we all know, is a common currency; and a common currency means a common economic policy. We would have almost no control over that policy. To paraphrase Mr Nicholas Ridley, those British electors aggrieved by the effects of that policy - which could well mean spiralling unemployment - would be told to take their complaints to the unelected (and, by this stage, almost certainly unelectable) chairman of the European Central Bank. The British government would have lost all power over the currency, and all the ramifications of that power. Moreover, the British people would not be able to call to account those who wield that power. We must dispel any fog of illusion - or delusion - that has come to surround the forthcoming Intergovernmental Conferences. So far their import is not being spoken of in polite company. What Britain will ultimately be asked to do at that Conference - let us not deceive ourselves - is to send such a plan to Parliament for ratification. That ratification would be the last properly sovereign act of our Parliament; it would find itself called upon to approve its own forthcoming impotence. Is Westminster really prepared to meet, like the last parliament of the French Third Republic at the Vichy Casino, albeit in more majestic surroundings and infinitely kinder circumstances, to declare itself effectively superfluous?

This Government has, of course, brought this state of affairs largely on itself. The Single European Act, which it somewhat recklessly ratified five years ago, commits us to eventual union. It commits us to surrendering to other nations effectively to decide how we are to be governed, and to removing from the British people the right to elect those who will govern them. Even a beefed-up European parliament, to which the economic institutions might be made more accountable, would be no proper substitute for what we would have lost. I see no evidence that Britain is really ready, much less eager, for this.

I doubt that the Conservatives, at least, knew what they were getting into with the Single European Act, or even with the 1972 European Communities Act, after Mr Heath had apparently exceeded the mandate given him by the British public at the 1970 election. Is it not time we as Conservatives learned not to be so careless of our constitutional system? We shall begin to do this by recognising the starkness of the choice facing us on economic and monetary union and its political sequels, and by ceasing to pretend that some miraculous diplomatic finesse is going to make that choice any less stark. The issue should not be the pace at which we proceed inexorably toward ceasing to be a sovereign nation. The issue should be the point at which we end our descent toward loss of sovereignty without, for that, ceasing to be conscientious participating Europeans by all but the most assimilationist standards.

Ending Conservative Delusion

Enoch Powell put the question to his party 20 years ago: "Will you, or will you not, continue to be governed by the Queen in Parliament?" Mr Heath knew the importance of this choice to the British people. He told them in 1970 that Britain's entry to the EEC would proceed only "with the full hearted consent of parliament and people". It proceeded, but with no such consent; the European Communities Act was passed by just eight votes. Rather half-hearted than full hearted, with the result that the dissension has never died down in the intervening two decades. We are not whole-hearted for absorption into a common European political system, and only a fantasist would pretend that we ever will be.

Why, though, should Conservatives fight to preserve what we have as a constitutional heritage, rather than commit themselves to a fresh, pan-European start as part of a federation? Well, it all depends on what one understands to be the guiding principles of British Conservatism. I apologize for quoting Enoch Powell one last time. However

aberrant or even bizarre some of his views, he remains an authentic, as well as a fearless conservative:

"I was born a Tory, am a Tory, and shall die a Tory. It is part of me, an inborn way of apprehending human life and society and the history and character of my own country. It is something I cannot alter...I never yet heard that it was any part of the faith of a Tory to take the institutions and liberties, the laws and customs, which his country has evolved over centuries, and merge them with those of...other nations into a new-made artificial state and, what is more, to do so without the willing approbation and consent of the nation." If he were not burdened with a demonological misconception of the United States, Mr Powell would be equally righteous about the Tory duty to preserve the overseas option and aptitude which this country uniquely possesses.

What he does say is rather mystical stuff, but then however physical it seems, our nation and all nations are essentially at heart a metaphysical concept; part of the "faith" Mr Powell talks of. Was not, though, this the sentiment that underpinned, in less emotional but no less direct terms, Mrs Thatcher's speech at Bruges two years ago? And, indeed, at Aspen two months ago when she advocated "a Europe based on willing cooperation between independent sovereign states; a Europe which is an expression of economic freedom which rejects central control and its associated bureaucracy which does not resort to protectionism and of supreme importance for Britain, a Europe which always seeks the closest possible partnership with the United States?"

Mrs Thatcher's challenge

It should be clear to all but the most ostrich-like idealist that the institutions the interventionist bureaucrats at Brussels are planning for Europe's future are likely to be largely useless to that future. Mrs Thatcher has issued them the challenge to stop their introspection and to take practical steps to bring the newly capitalist countries of Eastern

Europe into the community. These countries will not want their new independence compromised by the European super-state. Mrs Thatcher has made it clear that to involve these countries, to build links with the reforming Soviet Union and to develop crucial trading arrangements with North America, the centralising institutions as presently envisaged are no use, and should not be persisted with. As she said at Aspen, freedom should be redefined in Europe not only to include the elements generally defined by Mr Churchill and Mr Roosevelt in the Atlantic Charter of 1941, but also "freedom of the market place, freedom to own property, freedom to maintain nationhood, and freedom from fear of an over-mighty state".

To try to suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate would be highly damaging and would jeopardise the objectives we seek to achieve. Like the economies of the respective European states, their respective objectives do not, of course, converge. Ours, as I have stated, are of unbridled free trade, deregulation and fair competition; those of Brussels, and the socialist governments (of whatever colour) in most of Europe's capitals are of unbridled centralised interventionism. This brings us back to the most shining beacon in the Bruges speech, the clearest expression of our brand of Conservatism: "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the State in Britain, only to see them reimposed at a European level, with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels." It is not reassuring to hear M. Delors describe himself as "Le Président de l'Europe" or to say, as he did to the Trilateral Commission in Washington in April, "I can manage 12 countries, but not 16 or 24". Does anyone who heard his address to the T.U.C. conference two years ago with his promise to give back to the unionized British worker from Brussels what he implied Mrs Thatcher had taken away, or who remembers his performance as M. Mitterand's finance minister, want him to manage anything to which Britain adheres?

The Delors Report

Mrs Thatcher spoke at Bruges before the Delors report on economic and monetary union was published. She spoke, though, after the European Council meeting in Hanover in June 1988 had noted that "in adopting the Single European Act, the Member States of the Community confirmed the objective of progressive realisation of economic and monetary union". She will have remembered that the final stage of this union does, in the words of the Report, mean "irrevocably fixed exchange rates between national currencies and, finally, a single currency". And that, as the report goes on, "this, in turn, requires a high degree of compatibility of economic policies and consistency in a number of other policy areas, particularly in the fiscal field".

One of the principal purposes of our sovereign parliament has been to raise and disburse revenues. Fiscal compatibility will mean that our taxation policy will be regulated. A key part of sovereignty - one of the policies that wins or loses elections, and which influences the way people vote - would, therefore, be sacrificed to Brussels. Delors talks of "a transfer of decision making power" to the centre from individual governments. The confidence-trick of "subsidiarity" - the principle by which nothing is carried out centrally that can just as easily be discharged by national governments - counts for little here. The transfer of decision making is, as Delors says, necessary "to avoid unsustainable differences between individual member countries in Public Sector Borrowing Requirements, and place binding constraints on the size and the financing of budget deficits". The annual ritual of the Budget, one of the most profound exercises of power of our national government, would be emasculated. Our Chancellor of the Exchequer and our First Lord of the Treasury would lose control of the fundamentals of economic policy.

Socialist Evils

The cold language of Delors, however logical it might or might not be in economic terms, pays no regard to the human nature of the citizens of democratic countries in Europe jealous of their constitutional rights and privileges, indeed of their independence. Delors' view is, in the most literal sense, politically ignorant, yet is argued by apolitical economists and socialists with an astonishing flippancy and even negligence. Britain, now a nation, would be relegated to the status of a region, governed by people whose ideological acceptability, cultural amenability and competence, if not goodwill, would require, but might not successfully withstand, serious scrutiny.

What is more, our economic efficiency could be penalised by subsidising the inefficiencies of others. We have seen this all too clearly in the iniquity of the Common Agricultural Policy, whereby our efficiency raises resources that buy for other governments the votes of peasant farmers on smallholdings all over Europe - notably in France and Germany. How long will it be before Europe takes the advice and follows the example of President Bush, and helps create a proper non-interventionist market in agricultural produce?

Delors presents further evidence of the move to interventionism that we, as Conservatives, should reject out of hand. He says that "wage flexibility and labour mobility are necessary to eliminate differences in competition in different regions and countries of the Community. Otherwise there could be relatively large declines in output and employment in areas with lower productivity." This takes us back once more to Mr Ridley. Delors continues: "It might be necessary in certain circumstances to provide financing flows through official channels." That is what you and I know, without the benefit of euphemism, as subsidy.

Delors, as he said in his egregious speech to the T.U.C. in 1988 and on many other occasions, seeks to undermine the basic ideology of the Right. Elsewhere, he says that "the constraints imposed by market forces might either be too slow and weak or too

sudden and disruptive. Hence countries would have to accept that sharing a common market and a single currency area imposed policy constraints." Thus we, as Conservatives, are being asked not just to countenance centralised interference, but to do so in the unashamed desire to subvert the basis of the new Conservative creed of the predominance of market forces. Remember, too, that we do not believe in market forces for their own sake, but because they maximise economic efficiency and pay the most regard to the freely determined wishes of the individual consumer. Such philosophy is anathema to Jacques Delors.

As my fellow Daily Telegraph director, Sir James Goldsmith, remarked in the address last June in which he proclaimed the "unbundling" of the Soviet Union, "as the European self-adjusting mechanisms, among them devaluation, are blocked, a further system of bureaucratically controlled regional transfers would develop so as to attempt to equalize the standards of living of those who run their economies well and those who do not." He added that the "two apparently harmless words, "tax harmonisation" signify the desire of certain governments not to have to compete."

It is our duty here to call things by their rightful names, and, where necessary, to affront Euro complacency. Europe itself, for all its greatness and current virtue, requires demystification. Except for Thatcherite Britain, almost every European country has too great a public sector share of GNP, an unbearable over-commitment to social spending, and an unsustainably high level of unemployment. The European fear that absence of a generous social safety net leads to mob rule and political extremism is comprehensible, but it contrasts with the American view, enunciated by former president Reagan, that "the only welfare system we ever had that worked is a job". In the eight Reagan years, the United States created 19 million net new jobs, or eighteen million more than the entire E.E.C. The United States has re-emerged as the world's largest exporter and has a growing trade surplus with the E.E.C. Even the Federal Republic of Germany, Europe's undoubted powerhouse, has a larger public sector debt as a percentage of GNP than the USA even before paying the reunification bills, and,

without America's racial problems or defence commitments, has less than three quarters of the American standard of living and barely a sixth of the U.S. GNP. Despite the almost universally cherished Euro-mythology, there is very little evidence that Europe as a whole can compete externally with the Japanese or the Americans. Narcissism is no substitute for competitiveness.

Federation by Stealth

What Jacques Delors seeks is federation by stealth. All the policies of economic union add up to political union: indeed, they are unworkable without it. Nor, of course, will political union confine itself to controlling political economy; it will seek to formulate a common foreign policy too. Where would that have left Britain, for example, at the time of the Falklands War? The ludicrous, if sometimes hilarious, fiasco of our EEC partners' military response to the Gulf Crisis can hardly be reassuring on this point. While Germany brandished its foreign non-intervention constitution and Italy and Spain sent token forces while renouncing any military initiative, France went from an "embargo civilisé" to an "embargo fort", to the despatch of an aircraft carrier with no airplanes on it. Canada, and even Argentina, seemed more purposeful than most of our brothers in the Community. In broader terms, what role would be left for the British government? What would be the significance of the British monarchy? These are all constitutional issues of which the bureaucratic planners in Brussels take no account, but which we, as Conservatives, should care passionately about, for we are their political guardians. At the moment, though, we are being drawn into federation mainly because the French fear the power of a resurgent united Germany and wish to dilute it, the Germans have yet to overcome their embarrassment at their resurgence, and understandably wish to reassure their neighbours, and the Italians have made such a shambles of government they are ready to embrace any plausible alternative to the status

quo. Many others, including many in this country who should know better, are mere political surfers riding a wave.

The Intergovernmental Conferences

All this drama will be played out at the Intergovernmental Conferences, starting in December. Just as I have argued that we should be under no illusions about the starkness of the choice that will face us there, so too should we be under no illusions about the strength of our bargaining position. Our friends are just starting to emerge from the woodwork.

Ever since Cardinal Wolsey's time, Britain has cultivated and been popular with the secondary states of continental Europe. She remains so today. We have a vital European role that consists first of all in championing the maximum convenient level of national distinctiveness.

Mrs Thatcher is often spoken of as isolated in the cabinet. This is not true. Many ministers share her concerns about European centralisation. In a speech in July the Chancellor of the Exchequer said: "The more I examine the present proposals, the more I feel that they would lead us away from common objectives, rather than towards them." He admitted to the prospect of "severe effects on jobs and output in some regions" if economic and monetary union were proceeded with on the Delors model. But that is what our partners seem to want. In Brussels, too, there is a mixed reception for the Chancellor's idea of the Hard ECU. On the one hand they congratulate us for making a constructive suggestion; on the other, they say it is too late. In fact, with our eyes on the newly liberated countries to the east and America to the west, it is their idea that is "too late". Everyone in Europe, including the Germans and the Russians, acknowledges the desirability of a continued alliance with the United States. What could be more implausible than to exclude the North Americans from commercial Europe while urging

the retention in Europe of American and Canadian expeditionary forces. What could be less appropriate to the vitality of western Europe and the power of its message than to slam the door on our Canadian and American allies, kindred nations and tested friends, while refusing to offer all the encouragement we can to the eastern Europeans who yearn to join us? Mrs Thatcher is not a little Englander. M. Delors is a little European.

Not just a Conservative problem

It will take immense courage, and immense resolve, for the British Government to defend the constitutional rights of the British people against this benign onslaught from Europe. But defend them it must, in the interests of our national autonomy. It must convince our partners that, with the introduction of much more fresh blood into the community, this huge free-trading system can flourish and maximise its potential far more efficiently without centralisation than with it; far more efficiently while retaining the nationhood of at least some of the individual states than by homogenizing them all. This is the duty of the Conservative party if it wishes to preserve not just its ideology, but also to preserve the rights of the British people to choose the Government and the policies that they wish to see implemented in Britain. It is also, as growing numbers of Europeans are coming to realize, the best course for continental Europe as well.

In defending these rights, and standing out against airtight economic and monetary - and therefore political - union, the Prime Minister should know that she has the backing of more than her own party. Parliament, when given the chance to vote on the principle of union, has never supported it. The Labour party, which longs to use economic policy for the purposes of social engineering, is now realising the danger of the ideal of European Unity. While in many of its aspects it may be too socialist for the Conservative party, in many others it is not socialist enough for Labour. As Peter Shore said in July: "If the Delors version of economic and monetary union comes into effect, we shall say goodbye

to democratic self-government, for we shall no longer be able to make the key economic decisions that affect our life."

No Conservative could have put it more succinctly. We need all the allies we can get in the battle to retain the right of the British people to elect the Government it wants for Britain with the policies it chooses for Britain, and the right of Europe to flourish in cooperation and not stifle itself in oppressive homogeneity. The Euro-masquerade of the Labour Party's image-managers has not convinced the shadow cabinet or the party executive. It is unlikely to impress the voters.

Before I finally subside, I must ensure that I have not short-changed the Europeans. The achievements of the European unifiers, including Jacques Delors, are great and admirable. Germany's reconciliation with France and peaceful reunification, in particular, are among the great political triumphs of human intelligence of this century. They were achieved by outstanding statesmen acting on behalf of great nations. The desire of many Europeans to regain political influence in unity is comprehensible and perhaps not altogether unrealistic. Britain can provide a stabilizing influence and a powerful commercial participation in Europe, but if present trends continue we will be asked to choose between assimilation in Europe and virtual abstention.

It is not too late to press for more flexibility. Partisans of European political integration should not be denied it because of us. We and other less perfervid joiners should not be made the villains of a Manichean drama. An inner Europe of full political adherents probably based on the original six, should be formed in close association with an outer Europe of common marketeers practicing a more restrained political participation. The emerging democracies of eastern Europe could join this group relatively soon, a group which M. Delors could be assured that he would not be called upon to "manage". Britain could lead both echelons of Europe in ensuring an uninterrupted and amplified economic and strategic alliance with the useful elements of the Commonwealth and more importantly the United States. This would doubtless cause Enoch Powell's Philippics

about Europe to be succeeded by Jeremiads and glottal stops over America. In furtherance of so desirable and urgent a cause, I even promise the personal sacrifice of enduring Enoch Powell's easily foretold reflections in quiet, if not in silence.

The great achievement of Europe must not be doubted or jeopardized, neither by scepticism nor an excess of misguided zeal. Like other great prime ministers, including Palmerston, Disraeli, Salisbury, Churchill, and even Lloyd-George, Mrs Thatcher too will be able to strike an appropriate balance between Europe and the world. All conservatives should play their part in resolving this historic, perennial paradox.

The British people have the right, if they are so myopic, to choose a government (such as a Labour government) that is allowed to implement policies that we here would regard as wrong and harmful. Shortly after the 1945 election, Mr Churchill exclaimed, from his bathtub, "If the people want Attlee, they can have him. That's why we fought the War". Mr Churchill referred to the privilege of democracy. It is a privilege that we as Conservatives must do everything to ensure remains with the British people.

Conrad Black
London, October 1990.