



A EUROPE OF DIVERSITY

Britain, Spain and Catalonia
in the Europe of 2000 AD

HUGH THOMAS



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Centre for Policy Studies
1989

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ISBN 1-870265-78-5

c Centre for Policy Studies, September 1989

Printed in England by Chameleon Press Ltd.
5-25 Burr Road, London, SW18

ADDRESS DELIVERED ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIESTA OF THE PATRON
SAINT OF TARRAGONA, 22 SEPTEMBER 1989

I CONFESS TO A RELUCTANCE TO TALK OF EUROPE TODAY. IT SPRINGS from the fact that the great events in the world seem to be happening elsewhere. We think of the Soviet Empire, which seems at last to be breaking up; we think of nations and peoples which we had quite forgotten existed, or of which perhaps we have never even heard, now making their way through the headlines of our Western papers into history.

Nor is it just a question of the Soviet Empire which makes our affairs in this little cape at the western end of the Eurasian continent seem small. Earlier this year travelling across Chihuahua in Mexico I had a sudden, vivid, sense of how even a country as relatively underpopulated as Spain seemed in comparison to Mexico almost like Switzerland.

It is in Latin America now for the first time that the great novels are being written, the great paintings devised, the great modern architecture rising to the sky -- and indeed the heroic actions being performed. One does not have to be a man of the new Right, surely, to see the decision of Mario Vargas Losa to seek the presidency of Peru as an epic gesture.

My knowledge of modern poetry in Europe is modest but I do not know a European country where a poet has the standing which Octavio Paz has in Mexico. Here in Europe we try and prevent the destruction of old monuments, we restore old palaces, we fight, as our gallant Prince Charles does, against bad new architecture, and our television screens are full of versions, some excellent in their way, of nineteenth century novels. In much of our culture we look backwards not forwards.

Further, although we can, in this little European cape, do many things together, the great problems of our time are not continental ones so much as global. From the oil which we need to power our superfluous wanderings along motorways to the atmosphere we breathe, the drugs and diseases we fear, the decisions of importance are taken in the Middle East, in cocaine-making Colombia, in Africa where Aids was born, in the rain forests of Brazil where the planet's atmosphere seems under threat.

Next to those places in the eye of the storm, Europe seems like a charming grandmother full of good intentions but without much capacity to alter things one way or another. One of my favourite lines of poetry comes from Rimbaud's Le Bateau Ivre, when he causes his drunken vessel say that, like Ulysses, he regrets 'l'Europe aux anciens parapets'. The point is, of course, that they are indeed 'anciens'.

Three years ago, I gave a lecture in Palma de Mallorca on the subject of the need for a European patriotism. A teacher whom I met at dinner -- a man who had abandoned a good job in Madrid to live in Mallorca so that he could swim every day in the Mediterranean -- said in the restaurant a little wearily, looking out over the summer sea 'well you may be right, but I have the feeling that nothing will come of it all, Europe's moment was in the eighteenth century, when we were killing each other in naval battles off the Caribbean. Those were the days of Europe's greatness. It is only now when we have no real creative energy left that we have become partners".

There is also the fact that so often when we read about Europe in the Press, it concerns some parish-pump quarrel about the size of tomatoes, the shape of radishes, the cost of eggs. There is a lack of nobility about the dreams of closer union when it comes to the workaday world.

The language of Brussels is definitely not the language of Goethe. Nor of Cervantes. The language of the European community, indeed, is too often desiccated, barren: the language of civil servants wandering in an official wasteland.

Most great political movements of the past had some association with artistic movements. Manzoni's novel and Verdi's operas were inspirations behind the ideas of Italian reunification. Goethe and Beethoven prepared the way for the reunification of Germany in the minds of all cultivated men and women.

One could even, at a pinch, claim that the novels of Henry James and Hemingway helped to show to North Americans the integrity of the North Atlantic Community, though perhaps Henry James may not daily be on the lips of Supreme Allied Headquarters in Brussels. But where are the great novelists, poets, painters and musicians who inspire modern Europeans to be Europeans? They are not here.

Yet, small cape though it may be, I am going to talk of Europe. First of all, because, however disillusioned we may be by the language of the new Europe, or by its bureaucracy, the word does represent a marvellous heritage, a great collection of historical and artistic memories, which at least since the sixteenth century has dictated the onward movement of mankind.

Secondly, however petty our affairs may sometimes seem to the majority of the world, the future of Europe is fundamental to us. Here we are, Spanish and British, Catalans and Welsh, French and Germans, in this unusual association -- adventure -- of nations known as the European Community.

Something remarkable has been begun here. Neither we the British nor you the Catalans and Spanish were present at the

beginning of it, alas, but consciously, deliberately and (in our British case) after much heart-searching, we decided to ask for membership.

Even from the point of view of our own self esteem, in our own interests we must make a success of it. Too much has been invested in it for failure to be other than something which would cause despair and much disruption -- the dimensions of which we cannot predict.

It may not matter, after all, that we are always looking to the past. Marx was among those who have pointed out that great revolutions have often been inspired by a vision of the past, even if the vision bears little relation to the reality: the anarcho-sindicalists in Spain, for example, sought to revive a village community before the time when it began to be bullied by the State. Similarly in Europe, we can look on the present enterprise as an attempt to revive the Roman Empire but on a democratic and creatively decentralised basis.

You may have been thinking that there is no reason whatever to talk of despairing; that, on the contrary, we are moving steadily towards the completion of the Single Market by 1992; that the project of economic and monetary union has been begun and that, at Madrid, even the rigorous English agreed with some qualifications to support the idea in principle; and that other projects, such as a European company law and a European transport policy, may at last be within sight. Much activity is going on.

All that is true. Yet the European idea is in more difficulties than it at first seems. First, certain countries have doubts about possible loss of 'sovereignty'. That is now particularly true of Britain, but it could happen in Germany. Indeed, the rise of a new nationalistic Right in Germany is partly related to this problem.

Under certain circumstances this could perhaps become a problem in Spain, too, and -- who knows? -- even in France, where of course the issue was the determining one in General de Gaulle's approach to Europe in the 1960s. With the smaller states, the matter is less important, since a small state always knows that the freedom which sovereignty appears to confer is in practice always limited.

Each nation in Europe is adapting differently to the challenge of what is now, after many years, beginning to look like a real attempt to carry European integration forwards into a permanent political association.

The smaller states are, of course, pleased. The future should give them an opportunity of acting on a larger stage than could have seemed possible to their fathers. For Italy and Germany this new move to integration marks the culmination of a history in which, except for a short period in the twentieth century, national identity has never been very strong. That short period is forever associated with the tragedy and the failure of the Fascist and the Nazi eras.

Both countries for different reasons have always expected to be part of some kind of a larger whole: Germany, because of her past which links her not just with East Germany but with Austria and all the countries of eastern Europe (where German minorities have historically been substantial, and where to-day West Germany certain faces obvious temptations); Italy, because of her imperial, renaissance and papal history.

There are in the European Community three nations which have strong national identities : Britain, France and Spain.

Indeed, to say that they have strong identities is an under-

statement. They -- we -- invented the idea of nationhood. The strong national institutions created in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the most important political innovations of early modern Europe. With their prime ministers (I think Olivares was the first man to be so called), their cabinets, their secretaries of state or ministers, their aspiration (not always achieved) to centralised taxation, their general rejection of the Italian and German ideas of free cities, they were the model for other nations throughout the world until the second world war.

France was once, in the days of de Gaulle, the most reluctant of Europeans. To-day, she is the most enthusiastic, the most determined and the most forceful of the European states. The speeches of her leaders, indeed, suggest that they seek a political union which will become a European nation.

I heard Monsieur Rocard speak at UNESCO a few months ago on 19 May, at the end of a colloquium about the French Revolution. He said 'et si nous parvenons un jour, comme je le souhaite ardemment, bâtir une nation européenne, nul ne sait précisément ce qu'elle sera.' He then added 'Mais on peut préjuger ce qu'elle ne sera pas : ce ne sera pas une monarchie'. Well, perhaps one should expect that rhetoric from a man celebrating 1789.

Later in that speech Monsieur Rocard made it clear he would like to see Europe as something different to a mere nation: 'Si nous voulions bâtir une Europe qui soit une superpuissance, ce n'est pas pour qu'elle soit la troisième, la seconde ou la première des superpuissances, mais pour qu'elle soit autre : la première superpuissance qui agisse décidément au service de l'humanité'.

Many of us have heard such expressions from our French friends before. I recall, for example, in Henry James's novel

about anarchists in nineteenth century London, how a French emigré printer made the same point but in reverse: 'If I suffer I trust it may be for suffering humanity, but I trust it may also be for France'.

I am among those Englishmen who have consistently shared some of the hopes of Monsieur Rocard about the idea of European unity. Like him, I have always liked to see myself as 'a European by culture, by a desire for efficiency and by élan'.

All the same, I do confess to a few worries. The Treaty of Rome talks, in its very first clause, of the desirability of 'ever closer union' -- a phrase which could no doubt be more precise, but the intention is clear.

It is not Spain which sees herself as in danger of losing her national identity because of what is happening. So far as I can see there is no controversy here about these matters. That may be because the idea of collaborating on a permanent basis with other countries in a close-fitting association still has an exciting and innovatory stimulus after forty years of civil war followed by Francoism.

It is also that the contribution which Spain could make to European affairs was for too long unable to be delivered.

I am thinking of Britain as the most obvious country now concerned to preserve her own ideas of sovereignty, but there could be others: Denmark, Greece perhaps. So the time which I spend on discussing Britain at the moment may have relevance to the rest of the Community. I have in the past often talked about Spain in Britain. I see no reason why I should not talk for a few moments about Britain in Spain. Even if what I say has no immediate relevance here, the story is in itself instructive.

The British Cabinet, of course, read the sentence about 'an ever closer union' when they applied formally to accede to the Treaty in 1961. After all it is, as I said, the first phrase in the preamble of the Treaty. There was a famous instance in the 19th century when half the Cabinet were asleep when the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, forced a vote on the question of going to war with Russia, but I am assured nothing like that happens nowadays.

There have since been other statements such as the Solemn Declaration of Stuttgart in 1983, which also stated formally that the Heads of Government of the Community (which of course by then concluded Britain) were 'resolved to continue the work begun on the basis of the Treaty of Paris and of Rome and to create a united Europe'; and the Single European Act of 1986, which talked of the Member States having the 'will' to 'transform relations as a whole among their States into a Union'.

All these documents, and a great many others which make up the so-called 'acquis' of the Community (by which new members formally agreed to be bound), specify many social, political and other activities leading towards close association or a 'union' in Europe in respect of matters which cannot be regarded as merely economic.

In Britain, too, there is the fact that the Conservative party, now in power, has always been 'the party of Europe', and proud to have been so. That was one of the reasons why I joined it in 1975 -- at a time when the Labour Party seemed to be narrowly nationalist. In its last electoral manifesto, on which it won the election of 1987, the Conservative Party stated that 'This Government has taken Britain from the sidelines into the mainstream of Europe'. However mixed the metaphor, the message was plainly intended to be firm.

Yet there are still doubts in Britain about the extent of the integration envisaged -- not only this autumn during the French presidency of the Community but throughout the next few years, till 1992 and beyond. Often in politics this happens: you convince someone of the principle of a thing, they accept it completely but only with their heads. The difficulty consists in persuading people to apply the principle which they have accepted. Then all sorts of ancient passions and fears arise. That seems to be being so with Britain and Europe.

These hesitations are to be found throughout the country, among the intellectuals as well as the instinctive, among the young as well as among the old, the poor as well as the rich.

The mood derives from a general sense that Britain is on the one hand an island, whose connections since the Reformation have often been based on suspicion of, if not combat with, the continental powers; and on the other hand, that Britain has always seen herself as a great maritime power, with interests even today in every quarter of the globe.

It is idle to point out in answer to this mood that, for example, half of Shakespeare's plays are set on the continent, that even the stone of our leading cathedral, Canterbury, came from France (as for that matter, did the hangman who cut off the head of Anne Boleyn). It would be more appropriate to recall that in relation to the greatest governmental preoccupation -- that is, defence -- we have already made basic surrenders of what some would call 'sovereignty' to NATO for over forty years.

All the same the British are a hard-headed people and believe that they must discuss further the political side of the enterprise upon which we are now all engaged.

The reluctance of our Government to agree fully to enter

the European Monetary System is in part based on economic arguments of complexity. And it is also, reasonably enough, in part because the Government thinks that a new state of affairs will exist in 1990, after all the states of the Community have made their currencies convertible (not just the British and the Germans, as at present).

But our reluctance also, I suspect, stems from a feeling that the framers of the Delors Report hope that joining the EMS will commit us irrevocably to what looks like a permanent series of arrangements leading to a common currency and a common central bank; thus bringing a final end to national independence. English Conservatives who have seen the fundamental change in our economy since 1979 feel passionately that we have not made an end of regulations at home, only to find ourselves faced by new regulations made in Brussels.

Also, given the hostility of British trade unions in the past to modernisation it is easy to understand why the British Government should have doubts about a social charter which gives rights to union members on company boards. (Although, like Mr Leon Brittan, I am sure that ways should be found to give employees a real sense of belonging to the companies in which they work.)

The end of independence pur et dur, as the French would put it, was foreshadowed in the Treaties from which I have quoted. But we have experienced a national reluctance to face the extent of the European commitment. Few thought that anything too serious would come out of Europe. There were other more pressing concerns. Most people in the early 1980s assumed that 'Europe' would remain a customs union with a few trimmings. This has proved not to be so.

Thus it looks as if we may expect in Britain another long argument about our relations with the rest of Europe. If this

leads to serious debate about the political shape of our institutions, then that is all to the good. For example, it has even been suggested that, given the pace at which the Community has now at last begun to move, we should seek deliberately a second-rank position, abandon any attempt to influence the future of the Community, establish a position on those sidelines of which I spoke a few minutes ago (but which the last Conservative electoral manifesto rejected), and revive, for ourselves and for such other countries as wish to join us, some new version of the old European Free Trade Area, whereby we would benefit merely in the advantages of the Market of Europe, but withdraw from any political or social policies.

Such a policy might be possible to work out, though legally (given the direct application of European law for fifteen years since we became members in 1973), it would be very difficult.

It may be, however, that the French would assist us in establishing a position whereby we would be essentially dependent on a Europe dominated by France, without having the capacity to influence it. Monsieur Mitterand would thereby have achieved more than Louis XIV, more than Napoleon, more indeed than General de Gaulle -- a Britain independent in name but subservient in economic fact to the continent. Actually, I believe Monsieur Mitterand to be an anglophil and so he might not be happy to allow us to commit suicide in that way. Most far-sighted Frenchmen (as he is) recognise in the end that Britain has a part in Europe. Nor do I think that Britain could seriously contemplate such a position as I have indicated. It would be better to leave Europe absolutely.

I believe that Britain should seek a different policy. We should recognise that the hesitations which are now coming to the surface once again (and which, of course, the Government cannot ignore) have all been discussed ad nauseam over the last genera-

tion, and have in fact been largely resolved. We have committed ourselves to a Union of some sort. We had a referendum on the matter. Business has committed itself to 1992 and beyond. The documents are there. The signatures of British statesmen are there. A Union must mean something not too far distant from what Monsieur Rocard says. We should now, surely, accept psychologically what we have already accepted legally and from the mainstream not the sidelines -- from the centre not the suburbs -- seek to shape European democracy and devolved identity.

We should seize the opportunity and look on membership of the Community as the chance for a great adventure; and prepare to press, throughout Europe, for that beneficial simplification of the economy which we have achieved in Britain.

Here my disquisition about Britain and Union is at an end. My remaining remarks affect Catalonia, and everywhere else in the Community.

Monsieur Rocard in his time has said some hard things about Britain with which I have disagreed. Nevertheless, in the speech last May from which I quoted, Monsieur Rocard specifically said that he did not know what shape the European 'nation' of the future would have. Let me try to suggest something to him.

It would be appropriate for the countries which built the nation state in the sixteenth century to inspire a new form of political association: one which might inspire other groups of states geographically and economically interdependent, but with different political traditions, to associate benevolently.

We should insist on two things. The Europe of the future must not become a unitary and centralised political entity. It also

must become fully democratic. The two matters are, as every Catalan knows, intertwined.

A year ago, Monsieur Jacques Delors, the President of the European Commission, made a speech in which he suggested that, by the year 1995, 80 per cent of economic decisions in Europe would be centrally made by a European Government in Brussels.

I do not know in what mood M. Delors then was. Perhaps he was deliberately trying to tease the British Government. The idea is unrealistic. Countries like Spain have not spent so much time achieving autonomous governments with considerable powers in the regions of the country in order to revive a new central government in Brussels. Further, the remark itself goes against the whole spirit of a new concept expressed in the mysterious word 'subsidiarity'.

That word, ugly though it may be, of which we shall hear more in future, means that an institutional body on a higher level should never undertake a task which an institutional body on a lower level could accomplish just as well. That principle has been adopted as a rule governing the conduct of the Community and was specifically mentioned in the text of the statement issued on the subject of Economic and Monetary Union after the meeting in Madrid of the European Heads of Government last June.

What we really want -- and here, I suspect, that the British and Spanish could be close allies -- is a Europe of real diversity: within the embrace of union, there should be the maximum freedom of action for the constituent nations, as indeed for the often neglected nations within the old nation states, Catalonia and Wales among them.

Did not Eugenio D'Ors once say that 'the Spanish loved a uniform provided that it is multi-form.' No one can wish the

European nations to repeat the astonishing bleak absence of variety which characterises so much of the United States, so much so that one of the characters in Usigli's great play El Gesticulador remarks of the North Americans : 'to me they are like the Chinese: all equal'.

Of the three nation states which I indicated earlier as having the greatest sense of national identity in Europe to-day, two, Spain and Britain, have failed in the past to establish adequate inter-relations between the centre and the periphery; and the third, France, has lately not been without a certain amount of trouble.

It is hard work to count the numbers of governments which fell in Britain in the last century because of unwise policies towards Ireland. And one government -- in 1979 -- fell tactically because of the Scottish question.

As we all know, the unsuccessful treatment by Madrid of the issue -- above all of Catalonia but also of the Basques and, towards 1936, of the Gallegos, each in different ways contributed to the tragedy of Spain between 1830 and 1975. Whether or no we fulfil M. Rocard's dream and build a European 'nation,' no one can possibly want to repeat at a European level the mistakes which centralising national governments made in the past.

Not long ago I heard an eloquent speech by Senor Jordi Pujol on the question of a Europe of regions. I was largely convinced by what he said. I hope he has already set about trying to achieve his aim, perhaps in a tactical alliance with friends such as the Welsh, Scots, Bavarians and indeed the Bretons.

But Senor Pujol must insist that this Europe of regions is not just a pressure group but has real responsibilities, harnessed in some way or other with the European institutions.

Perhaps there could be another chamber at Strasburg, able to articulate the wishes of these nations, which have not, to be sure, established themselves over the centuries as full nation states, but whose survival proves a most remarkable resilience?

This brings me to my second main point, the democratic one: the national parliaments have understandably been reluctant to cede power to the parliament at Strasburg. Institutions, like kings, rarely give power away. But the consequence of this reluctance has been that European directives and regulations do not receive adequate scrutiny. Opponents of the European community have a good argument when they complain that European law, when declared to be such by the European Court at Luxembourg, becomes immediately applicable in the territories of the member states, without need for it to be considered either in the national law-making bodies, or by the national judiciaries.

The only comment which I make on those who criticise Europe from that angle is that those who make such complaints are usually the least inclined to agree to make any sizable shift in power from the national to the European parliament. I recently heard Monsieur Régis Debray describe the European Community as becoming a new Holy Roman Empire, a conglomeration of states without a democratic centre. That should be soon remedied if the European movement is to retain its self-respect.

As to the word which will describe the goal of our endeavours, 'federation' does worry some people. I remember that, in 1977, at the time of the first elections after the Restoration of the monarchy, a most distinguished man -- un espanol, of course, -- whom I greatly admire, spoke to me in Madrid of the desirability of that devolution to autonomies which has actually occurred. Then he stopped and said 'but not federalism. That would be very dangerous.' He was speaking of near total devolution of state power such as had occurred in the 1870s at

the time of the first Republic.

But in Britain the word also distresses people, though not for the same reason: not because it suggests excessive devolution of power, but, on the contrary, because it suggests a handing-over of sovereignty to foreigners. Words which seem the same do not always mean the same in different languages.

I have a final point: whatever arrangements we make in Western Europe in the Community, those plans must be flexible enough to allow for what may be a change of the greatest significance -- a series of applications to join from Eastern Europe.

The process may not be straightforward. But if the changes which have happened in those nations over the last twelve months are any guide to the future, it may move faster, and in a more direct manner, than we expect. We must give to such requests generous replies. The Treaty of Rome and the Single European Act both provide that 'any European State may apply to become a member of the Community'.

A similar point can be made about many of the policies on agriculture. Britain and Spain are not in a good position to argue about these things because neither of us were present at the creation of the Community. Britain could have been but chose not to. The structure of decision-making in Europe was then influenced by the fact that the real architect of the Community at the beginning was Monsieur Jean Monnet, who before that had drawn up the plan for French economic modernisation in the late 1940s. The consequence was that there are many practices which the Anglo Saxons, brought up in a different legal and economic tradition, dislike intensely.

That is an inevitable consequence of joining a club the rules of which were written before we joined. But, given the

principle of 'subsidiarity ' to which I have referred, this should not prove, in the long run, an impossible obstacle; and the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy has already begun.

In this lecture, I have devoted too little attention to Tarragona. Its grand Roman past, its prosperous present both speak for themselves. Its future as a part of the new Europe is obviously assured. During the War of Independence, the Duke of Wellington said of a battle near here between the English and the French, 'both sides ran away' -- both the English general Sir John Murray and the French commander, the brutal General Suchet. I hope that, on this occasion, I have at least not run away from facing some hard questions about the future of Europe.

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