

# EUROPEAN STUDIES CENTRE

St Antony's College • University of Oxford

ST ANTONY'S COLLEGE • OXFORD • OX2 6JF

TELEPHONE +44 (0)1865 274470 • FAX +44 (0)1865 274478

EMAIL [european.studies@sant.ox.ac.uk](mailto:european.studies@sant.ox.ac.uk)



## Annual Lecture to the European Studies Centre

### A Speech by the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg

#### The EU and British angst

I've often asked myself why, here in Britain, we are so restless about our membership of the European Union. Other EU countries may have their doubts – just look at the rise of Eurosceptic parties across the EU in the run up to this week's elections – but no country has been as bedevilled for so long about its membership of the EU as Britain.

Whilst there have been many twists and turns to the European debate in our country over the last forty years, I believe the seeds of our ambivalence were sown when we first joined the European Community back in 1973.

For the Germans, the French, the Italians and the Benelux countries, European cooperation represented the victory of peace over war, propelled by the historic reconciliation between France and Germany.

For Spain, Greece and Portugal, membership signified the victory of democracy over fascism as military dictatorships gave way to modern governments.

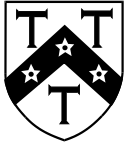
More recently, of course, a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe have joined the EU as the crowning act of their post-Communist transformation and as a guarantee of their independence from Soviet rule.

In other words, joining was above all a statement of something big and positive, an affirmation of a better future after the bloodshed and extremes of the past.

Yet, for us, joining the EC was seen as a lesser of evils: better than going it alone, but a sombre admission nonetheless that the days of Empire were well and truly over. It was a case of 'if you can't beat them, join them'. In the 1970s membership was sold to the British people in pounds and pence. It was an entirely rational calculation based on two sides of a ledger: the economic benefits of joining in one column, the costs of not joining in another, with the former just about winning out.

We are not entirely unique. Denmark and Sweden, for example, were originally resistant to membership. They wanted to protect their strong and healthy welfare states and it was only when continued Scandinavian welfare exceptionalism grew increasingly improbable that they accepted the need to join.

But the fundamental point is that Britain, unlike much of the rest of the EU, did not join Europe as a way of embracing a new and modern identity. This was not a step towards the kind of nation we wanted to be, but rather a step away from the kind of nation we once were.



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We were driven by arguments for the head. We have rarely been encouraged to value our place as a leading European nation in our hearts.

This, in my view, is where much of the angst stems from. And it is why so much of our European debate is not, in fact, about Europe at all. It's about Britain. Our identity. Our sovereignty. It reflects what has been a lack of clarity about where exactly we stand in today's world, and who we stand with.

## **Britain and Europe: joined by history**

What is striking about all of this is that it is a complete misreading of who we are.

The history of these Isles has been intimately linked with our continental neighbours since Roman times and our membership of the European Union is simply the latest expression of what has been a long tradition of engagement.

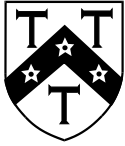
We have had Danish kings, Norman-French kings, one Dutch King and a succession of German kings. We have been allied with the Dutch against the French and the Spanish, with the Spanish and the Prussians against the French, and with the French against the Germans. Britain became an imperial and global power in competition, first with Spain, next with the Netherlands, and then with France.

We have been a cosmopolitan nation for centuries – long before modern trends of mass migration. No doubt the Libyan auxiliaries who guarded Hadrian's wall intermingled with the native Britons. Retired legionaries from across the Roman Empire were settled in Britain. Viking settlements shaped many of our place-names, Norman settlers shaped our language. Huguenot refugees colonised East London - among them the ancestors of Nigel Farage. Germans migrated to England in our industrial revolution. Russian and Polish Jews fleeing Tsarist persecution transformed first our clothes manufactures and then our retail trade.

Enterprising British also flowed the other way. There were Scots Generals in both the French and Russian armies. Donetsk, now caught up in the troubles of eastern Ukraine, was originally called Yusovska, after the Welshman – John Hughes – who set up the first iron smelter there.

And the modern British values we now cherish were developed alongside European values. The English Reformation was closely linked to reforming ideas in the Netherlands; the Scottish Reformation to preachers in Geneva. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Enlightenment interacted with the French Enlightenment; David Hume and Adam Smith both spent time in Paris. The growth of scientific and technical education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century drew heavily on the German model.

So when in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century we joined the EU, it was hardly some great historical departure. And far from being the outcome of some sort of simple, arithmetic equation, it was the best and only way that we could make sure that our European continent was going to be run with



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Britain's interests in mind, with British ideas shaping the big decisions that affect us and with our modern, tolerant, open and outward-looking approach driving things forward.

## **The EU: shaped by Britain**

And we should be proud of what has been achieved since that moment.

If political scientists from Mars landed on Earth today they wouldn't look at the European Union and remark at how extraordinary it is that the Widget Directive is decided in the Council on the basis of Qualified Majority Voting. They would see Europe for what it is: imperfect, yes, but still the most successful example of international cooperation in modern history, anywhere in the world.

What originated as a Franco/German peace settlement to allow the continent to rebuild itself out of the ravages of the Second World War has evolved into the most sophisticated response to globalisation anywhere on the planet. 28 different states working together to tackle the greatest challenges of our time, all of which are international by nature, whether that's advancing free trade, regulating our financial systems, promoting democracy, countering terrorism, tackling climate change, protecting ourselves from cross-border crime.

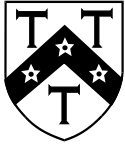
And it has British fingerprints all over it. Just look at the two greatest achievements of the EU – the Single Market and European Enlargement – each of which has brought stability and prosperity to millions of people and each of which has transformed the world in which Britain is able to operate.

The EU is now the world's largest borderless marketplace, home to 500 million consumers. Margaret Thatcher and Lord Cockfield launched it, and it now supports millions of British jobs.

And it was Margaret Thatcher who, in her Bruges speech, declared that Warsaw and Budapest were European cities; and once the Berlin Wall came down we pressed our reluctant partners to accept EU enlargement to the central and eastern European countries – spreading peace, security, political freedom, economic empowerment and the rule of law to the very edges of the continent. UKIP now suggests enlargement was an historic mistake. Well, that so-called mistake has allowed Britain to cut our defence spending in half since 1990, and to bring back from Germany the 50,000 troops we had stationed there, on the front line of the cold war, for 40 years.

English is the primary working language of the Union. Enshrined in its founding texts are the British values of fairness and human rights. Its institutions are working to deliver our political and economic priorities. The Head of Europol is a Brit. The last head of Eurojust was a Brit. We have been at the forefront of building the most advanced system of cross-border policing in existence.

So far from being foisted on passive and reluctant British governments, the European project has long been shaped by Britain. And the great irony behind the claim that we should leave



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the EU because it is somehow anti-British is that we would be doing so just as the big principles we have long advanced – openness, competition, free-trade – are enjoying greater continental consensus than ever.

When I first worked in Brussels, the Single Market was viewed as a dangerous Anglo-Saxon conspiracy. When I worked for Leon Brittan as a trade adviser on the EC I remember him calling for a European Free Trade Agreement with America – which we are now in the process of negotiating. Jacques Chirac held a press conference to label him a ‘dangerous recidivist’.

Why, having finally won so many of the big arguments, having spent decades ensuring that the European Union embodies our values and priorities, having grounded British prosperity in European trade, would we walk away now?

## **Making the case for IN**

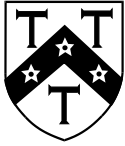
Ukip. Conservative backbenchers. Isolationists. They are not thinking about Britain's interests. They shroud their narrow nationalism in the language of patriotism. They mask their hostility towards Europe as British bulldog spirit. But these are false patriots. The isolation they offer is a breach of our history, of our great British tradition of engagement, and of our enlightened national self-interest. If the forces of insularity and chauvinism get their way they will ensure that Britain no longer benefits from the political and economic advances in Europe that we have shaped. And they will hand the keys to running our European continent to the Germans, the French and others, while we retreat back across the English Channel.

Perhaps that should have been my election slogan: ‘UKIP: friend of the French’.

For all these reasons the Liberal Democrats have approached Thursday's European Elections as Britain's party of IN: unashamedly and unapologetically pro-European because we believe that is how we best serve Britain.

We are not starry-eyed about Brussels. On the contrary we have a very clear idea of the way in which it needs to be reformed: so that it does more of what it's good at and less of what it isn't. The EU needs to stop meddling in things which ought to be the preserve of member states, for example by ensuring national parliaments play a bigger role in scrutinising EU proposals, sending the Commission back to the drawing board where those proposals are unacceptable. At the same time, where scope for greater cooperation will allow for greater prosperity and stability, that should be pursued relentlessly – and nowhere more so than in the completion of the Single Market. In many ways we need to return the EU to its original purpose: facilitating cooperation in the areas where nations are increasingly impotent alone, but where together we can be greater than the sum of our parts.

It may not surprise you to hear that I think the Liberal Democrats are now the party best placed to drive this reform, not least because we are the only major party that is unified on the fundamental question of whether or not the UK should be in the EU. I do not believe that



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a party can implement a programme of reform when it has to keep returning to this basic point, and both Labour and the Conservatives remain deeply divided on this issue. And both are terrified of haemorrhaging votes to UKIP if they take the argument head on.

When I challenged Nigel Farage to the TV debates I did it because I wanted to show that there is a clear, polarised choice here about the kind of nation we want to be. Open versus closed. Engaged versus detached. Outward-facing versus inward-looking. Great Britain versus Little England. In versus out.

In other words, the cold, incremental terms in which this debate was had and won over forty years ago when we first joined the EC will no longer do. This is the debate of the heart, not just the head. A vital debate, in the end, about who we are.

We need to show people that our role as a leading European nation is in keeping with our history and vital to our future.

We must not allow the sceptics to monopolise the arguments of the heart while we limit ourselves to arguments of the head.

The isolationists want to make this a debate about identity – well I relish that debate. Because there is nothing more British than standing tall in our own backyard, working with our neighbours to pursue our values and showing what tremendous advances are possible when nations work together.

I hope as many of you as possible will join me in making that case. Thank you