# Foreign policy and national identity in the United Kingdom

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*William Wallace attributes the divide over foreign policy running through the British political elite to two alternative views of Britain's national identity and role in international politics. He explores the European and the Anglo-Saxon versions of Britain's myth of nationhood, and argues that adherence to the theme of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism will continue to exert deep strains on British foreign policy until the confusion between the two conceptions of Britain's role is sorted out and the present is disentangled from the past.*

We can talk about foreign policy at many different levels There is the pragmatist's definition, that foreign policy is whatever governments do in dealing with foreign governments. There is the diplomatic definition, of foreign policy as the general orientation of one government towards other governments: building alliances and coalitions in pursuit of defined national interests and preferred models of international order. And there is the 'grand strategy' definition, that foreign policy is about national identity itself: about the sources of national pride, the characteristics which distinguish a country from its neighbours, the core elements of sovereignty it seeks to defend, the values it stands for and seeks to promote abroad.

This was de Gaulle's definition of foreign policy: 'a certain idea of France... and that France could not be herself without greatness'.[1] This was the conception he used when he remarked, 25 years ago, that Britain did not *have* a foreign policy: that we had, as Dean Acheson put it, lost an empire and not yet found a role De Gaulle set out to redefine France's sense of identity through foreign policy—with a fair degree of success, adapting grand objectives to reduced circumstances, providing new symbols for national pride. The criticism that both French and American observers, from different standpoints, made of the Macmillan and Wilson British governments was that *they* seemed, in contrast, unable to formulate a new grand strategy or national identity as the Empire faded into the Commonwealth and the Anglo-American special relationship became less and less special.

[1] Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre* (Paris Plon, 1954), Vol 1, p 5



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The temptation in the winter of 1990/91 is to write about British foreign policy in terms of the immediate Gulf crisis; or, alternatively, about the intergovernmental conferences on European political union and economic and monetary union launched last month. I want to discuss British foreign policy at the strategic level, however: about its links with national identity and with British concepts of our position in the world, from which flow presuppositions about which other nations are our natural allies or enemies, which share our values and which do not.[2] Because it seems to me that each recent crisis in British foreign policy, from the Falklands War to the Westland affair to the management of current developments in the Middle East and in Europe, reveals underlying divisions within our political elite about Britain's identity and international position: between 'Anglo-Saxons' and 'Europeans' on both sides of the House of Commons and on both front benches.

## National identity and nationhood

Nationhood and national identity represent necessary myths which underpin foreign policy. They constitute the distinction between the 'national community' which the government represents abroad and the foreigners with whom it deals; more than that, they legitimize the actions of government in defence of the 'national' interest. As nineteenth-century states increased the demands they made upon their citizens, in taxes, in contributions to the national economy and in military service, so they reinforced the symbols and myths of national solidarity and the claim to national sovereignty that marked off the boundary between domestic politics and foreign policy and linked the 'nation' to the 'state', creating the bonds of loyalty which mobilized the population to work or fight in support of 'national' aims.

The experience in two world wars of the limits of effective sovereignty, and of the dangers of national myth slipping into aggressive nationalism, led in the occupied or defeated states to deliberate efforts to redefine the basis of nationhood. Arguments over the reinterpretation of national history were still breaking out in the 1980s in Germany and Japan and echoing faintly in France, the Netherlands and Belgium. The Soviet Union emerged among the victors of the 'Great Patriotic War' and its leadership relied very heavily on the solidarity that victory forged for its authority over the next 45 years; but as memories of the war faded, it has faced increasingly sharp challenges to the official history, to the authority derived from that, and to national solidarity.

Even for countries spared the experience of occupation, the transformation of international economic and social relations through advances in technology, management and communications—grouped together under the label of 'interdependence'—has necessitated a degree of redefinition or forced into the open an anxious debate. Inward and outward investment, multinational production, migration, mass travel, mass communications, all erode the

[2] This article has been adapted from an address given to the Royal Institute of International Affairs on 26 Sept 1990



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boundaries that nineteenth-century governments built between the national and the foreign. American think-tanks and presidents seek repeatedly to redefine 'national goals'. Japanese and Korean governments set up commissions to anticipate economic and social trends and to define national objectives in relation to them.[3] To a greater or lesser extent, all advanced industrial democracies face similar problems in adjusting national identity to internationalizing trends.[4]

Britain has been something of an exception in this process. The first industrialized nation, it opened its markets to foreign trade while others were struggling behind protective tariff walls to catch up. British levels of inward and outward investment were far higher than most other industrial countries 75 years ago and they remain so today. Outward migration from Britain began in the modern era with the Pilgrim Fathers, inward migration with the Moravians and Huguenots, the first of a succession of refugees and economic migrants over the past 350 years, including Germans in the nineteenth century, Jews from southern and then from eastern and central Europe, displaced Ukrainians and Poles after the war and immigrants from all parts of the British Empire.[5] Partly because the loss of national autonomy was disguised and diffused by the partnership with the United States within an English-speaking world; partly because free trade and openness to refugees have become parts of the British national myth; partly because the wartime experience reinforced the sense of national solidarity and revalidated the symbols of national identity for Britain—successive governments have adjusted to increasing interdependence and decreasing British standing in the world without thinking it necessary to redefine national goals or to launch an agonized debate about history and identity.

[3] In June 1989 the Korean government set up a Presidential Commission on the 21st Century to develop 'strategic choices and decisions through a public consensus of opinion and ideas about long-term objectives on national development [for] unification, international relations, economics, social welfare, science and technology, socio-cultural affairs and so on' The Commission hoped 'to provide the public with a clear and hopeful vision of the future and to strengthen the nation ' Its programme thus included 'traditional values', education and culture as well as technological innovation and economic development. Communication from Commission soliciting 'international cooperation in all areas of its research', July 1990

[4] This discussion draws on a substantial literature on national identity, nationhood, nations and states See, for example, Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and states* (London Methuen, 1977), Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford Blackwell, 1983), Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London Verso, 1983), Anthony H Birch, *Nationalism and national integration* (London Unwin Hyman, 1989) On France, see Ian Davidson, 'A sense of unease hits a lucky land', *Financial Times*, 26 June 1990 See also Bailey Morris ('America finds itself with an identity crisis', *Independent on Sunday*, 25 Mar 1990), who describes a Washington seminar on the increasing internationalization of the US economy with increasing 'offshore' production by US companies counterbalanced by foreign companies producing in the US—at which Professor Robert Reich argued that American economic policy-makers must now redefine 'Who is us?'

[5] Mass immigration from former British possessions outside Europe only developed after the Second World War, with recruitment of labour from the Caribbean in the 1950s and the development of commercial air-charter bringing large flows from the Indian subcontinent But Britain had had resident communities of non-Europeans in several cities since the late nineteenth century Lascar, Caribbean and Chinese seamen in Cardiff, Liverpool and East London, middle-class Indians pursuing professional advancement in London and Manchester Several such Indian professionals stood, unsuccessfully, as parliamentary candidates in British constituencies in the decade before the First World War



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At the pragmatic, day-to-day level of dealing with other governments, British foreign policy has altered radically over the past two decades. Ministers travel abroad week after week for multilateral negotiations and consultations, getting to know their French and German opposite numbers almost as well as their colleagues in the British Cabinet. Planeloads of officials from most of the Whitehall departments precede and follow them, bargaining hard in pursuit of their understanding of Britain's national interest and implementing the agreements reached when they return. They promote the interests not only of 'British' companies, but also of foreign companies which manufacture in Britain. They travel to Tokyo, to Washington, to Chicago, Los Angeles and (until August 1990) to Kuwait to encourage further investment in Britain and to maintain good relations with these substantial foreign stakeholders in the prosperity of Britain.

British society has also become more international. British residents made eight times as many journeys overseas in 1989 as in 1969, with tourism extending beyond Europe to the United States, Africa and the Indian Ocean. In 1989, 15,000 British subjects bought properties in France, bringing the total of British property-owners in France to an estimated 200,000, with another 75,000 resident or owning property in Spain.[6] Tightening controls on inward immigration have slowed but not arrested the internationalization of British cities.

The difficulty for Britain is that national rhetoric and imagery contradict the reality of practical diplomacy. Indeed the gap has grown wider during the 1980s as the approach of 1992 spurs British-based companies to operate within a European home market. The preoccupation of politicians with the defence of national sovereignty, and the hysterical tone in which some parts of the press discuss European integration,[7] reflect—though we may not like to admit it—an underlying crisis of national identity: a self-image which does not fit our daily experiences and interests, and which differs more and more widely from the image which others have of Britain.

For Mrs Thatcher and for many members of parliament in both Conservative and Labour parties, our head is in Europe but our heart is still elsewhere: with Churchill, reliving the history of the English-speaking peoples, choosing the open sea (as Anthony Eden put it) in preference to the English Channel, harking back to the English 'Glorious Revolution' of 1689 even as the glorious European revolution of 1989 brought to an end the Atlantic imperative of the Cold War years The language which peppered prime ministerial speeches and parliamentary exchanges on European and East–West developments in 1989–90

[6] *Independent*, 31 Mar 1990, quoting BNP Mortgages and Barclays Bank, Paris For a fuller discussion of the transformation of the context of British foreign policy, see William Wallace, 'What price independence? Sovereignty and interdependence in British foreign policy', *International Affairs*, Summer 1986, 62 1

[7] The most hysterical yet was an editorial in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 Oct 1990, envisaging the possibility of a 'European civil war' as Britain and other nations fight to resist imposed centralization The *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Express* have also contained some alarmist comment around the theme of the 'threat' posed by Brussels to the British way of life



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is deeply ideological, conjuring up all the elements of the English national myth: Magna Carta, parliamentary sovereignty, the continuity of our 700-year-old parliamentary traditions, our island status, 'the British people', 'the nation'.

This is a crisis of Britain's political class. On the evidence that is available, both official and business elites have reoriented their mental maps to position Britain within a wider European context.[8] Public opinion, particularly in the younger generation, has long shed the image of an Anglo-Saxon world or of the peoples across the Channel as a threat.[9] But the close links between the concept of the British state, the centrality of the Westminster parliament, the distinctive traditions of English common law and the myth of English exceptionalism—a free country confronting an unfree European continent—have made it peculiarly difficult for the political elite to come to terms with the redefinition of national identity needed to cope with international economic and social interdependence and with Britain's altered international position.

Each of the main political parties has split over the issue of Europe.[10] Both Labour and Conservatives have lived with bitter internal disputes for over 30 years, living from compromise to compromise without fully confronting the contradiction between the Anglo-Saxon and the European conceptions of Britain. On the other great symbolic foreign policy issue—nuclear weapons and a 'strong defence'—the fault-lines have cut between the two parties, or between the Labour Party front bench and its supporters. But the fault-line between Anglo-Saxons and Europeans has cut across both major parties, with Mrs Thatcher echoing the phrases and sentiments of Hugh Gaitskell 30 years before, with Michael Foot standing next to Enoch Powell in opposition to Roy Jenkins and Edward Heath, and with Oliver Letwin advancing, in 1989, arguments that Peter Shore and Douglas Jay used in 1961–2.[11]

[8] See Geoffrey Edwards and David Sanders, *British elite attitudes and the US continuity and change, a pilot study* (London RIIA, 1989, Discussion Paper 18) The RIIA's plans to follow up this pilot survey with a broader study of elite attitudes to Britain's European and transatlantic partners ran into a veto by the head of the Civil Service on questioning serving officials about attitudes towards foreign countries

[9] In a poll published in the *European*, 13 May 1990, only one-third of British respondents listed the United States as a 'partner', a lower proportion than in the major West European states or in the Soviet Union See also Robert Worcester, 'Attitudes to America, Americans and American foreign policy Europe', paper to 1988 IPSA Conference, Washington, DC

[10] In the late 1950s the Liberal Party was the first to split Its political weakness left little incentive for its 'free trade' wing to stay once it had lost the bitter arguments with the 'Europeans' Arthur Seldon, Oliver Smedley and others moved on to found an independent think-tank to promote the ideas of economic liberalism, the Institute for Economic Affairs This became a powerful influence in domestic and foreign policy over the Conservative Party in the 1970s and 1980s See Jorgen S Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party* (London Constable, 1964), pp 133–42, Alan Watkins, *The Liberal dilemma* (London MacGibbon & Kee, 1966), pp 91–102

[11] There is a useful research project to be undertaken on how far different wartime experiences predisposed political attitudes Those who fought on the continent and shared in its occupation and postwar reconstruction (such as Edward Heath, Lord Carrington and Denis Healey) were later to be found in the 'European party', those whose wartime experience was of Anglo-American cooperation in London, Washington, in the Far East or at sea are usually in the Anglo-Saxon camp Gaitskell and Thatcher both saw the war through 'Anglo-Saxon' eyes he reinforced in his attachment to '1,000 years of British history', she to '700 years of the British Parliament' In 1989 Oliver Letwin was advancing political and cultural arguments for Britain holding itself aloof from a corporatist European continent that the Labour Left was using in its first anti-Common Market campaign in 1961–2 see Oliver Letwin, *Drift to union?* (London Centre for Policy Studies, 1989)



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While the world around us is transformed, the whole ethos of this country's foreign policy continues to be biased by ideological assumptions which date from the Edwardian era and before. All national myths necessarily look back to a golden age, a heroic era which shaped national character and institutions. But as de Gaulle appreciated, a sense of national identity which becomes fixed on nostalgia for the past becomes an obstacle to the pursuit of altered objectives in changed circumstances. Political elites in many countries have taken care to reshape national myths and symbols to fit current needs. The development of 'English history' has itself been marked by the redefinition of the national past in terms of present preoccupations, first over the turn of the century and then again in the period of partnership between 'the English-speaking peoples' after the Second World War.[12] But it is a painful and politically highly sensitive business: exceptionally sensitive in Britain because the constitution of the 'union' of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which emerged out of the Home Rule debates of the late nineteenth century and the eventual secession of southern Ireland, is so intimately linked with the idea of the sovereignty of the 'Imperial Parliament' at Westminster and the intrinsic superiority of English liberty, democracy and law over their continental counterparts.

## The myth of England

The myth of Anglo-Saxondom is as old as Shakespeare, matured through the experiences of the English Civil War and the struggles against the threat of Catholic absolutism, first from Spain and then from France: a free England defying an unfree continent. 'Our national identity and our ancient traditions and heritage, which have done so much for the world' (to quote Mrs Thatcher reporting on the Dublin European Council to the House of Commons on 1 May 1990) are rooted in the evolution of the English common law, the idea of Magna Carta as the charter of English liberties, and above all in the sovereignty of Parliament. When James the Sixth and First suggested that a written constitution might unite his two kingdoms, his English parliamentarians cited all these reasons for resisting. When Jacques Delores appears to threaten the imposition of a European written constitution, the reply, 395 years later, is in the same terms.

Until the end of the nineteenth century this essentially Protestant and liberal sense of national identity divided Britain primarily from France and the Catholic and corporate states of southern Europe. As much as America and the Empire, Protestant northern Europe—above all Germany—was seen as sharing Britain's values, its work ethic, its moral approach to world order. Fritz Stern has recently reported that he told the Prime Minister at the now-famous Chequers meeting on Germany:

[12] Keith Robbins, '*History*, the Historical Association and the "national past"', *History*, Oct 1981, Robbins, *Insular outsider? British history and European integration*, Stenton Lecture, University of Reading, 1989 I have also drawn here on Lord Russell's commentary on the Report of the National Curriculum History Working Party, given at a general meeting at the RIIA, 26 Apr 1990



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that Anglo-German alienation, a mutual mistrust that took shape in the 1890s and matured into full-scale hatred in two world wars, triggered a troubled relationship that has been one of the most important, indeed tragic developments of the 20th century.[13]

From that alienation developed, during the Boer War, the doctrine of 'Splendid Isolation'. And with the turning away from Europe, as German industrial strength came to dominate European markets and the continent reoriented itself around this central power, came also the growth of an idealistic view of the special character and moral authority of the Anglo-Saxon peoples, based on their shared English heritage of free institutions and common law, and enlisting America in support of a role which Britain could no longer manage on its own: an image already formed before the trauma of the First World War, but sharpened by that experience. Donald Watt, writing of Anthony Eden's approaches to President Roosevelt in 1938, defines:

the basic doctrines of English pan-Anglo-Saxonism [as] the unquestioning identification of British and American leadership, the naive assumption that British leadership would be welcome and acceptable, the identification of Anglo-American hegemony with the achievement of universal peace, and an optimistic idealism about the influence of a united Anglo-American opinion as a deterrent against the use of force to upset the world status quo.[14]

It was, Watt notes, a doctrine far more widely received in England than in America, in the 1930s as in the 1980s: idealistic, romantic, combining liberal claims to moral superiority with conservative hopes of using American strength to reinforce Britain's threatened global role.

The Second World War enormously reinforced this Anglo-Saxon world view.[15] Britain and the United States *were* the champions of freedom and democracy, a source of support and a symbol of hope against a totalitarian threat to the resistance in occupied countries. Throughout the war years and for a decade afterwards, there was a real special relationship between Britain and the United States which gave British governments additional influence in global developments and an alternative to closer commitment to the European continent. Behind the rhetoric of partnership, the reality however was one of British dependence on the United States from 1940 onwards, as Correlli Barnett and others have made brutally clear.[16] And from the outset there was an underlying tension between American pressure for greater British commitment to European integration—in 1950, in 1954, again in 1959–60, and yet again in 1989–90—and British desires to use the Anglo-American relationship precisely to resist further entanglement, to escape from Europe to the open sea.[17]

[13] *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 July 1990, trans in *German Tribune*, 12 Aug 1990

[14] D C Watt, *Personalities and policies studies in the formulation of British foreign policy in the twentieth century* (London Longman, 1965), p 45

[15] David Reynolds, '1940 fulcrum of the twentieth century?', *International Affairs*, Apr. 1990, Vol 66, No 2, pp 325–50, argues that it was the unexpected military collapse of France that ensured the triumph of an Anglo-Saxon perspective, which had until then had many detractors

[16] Correlli Barnett, *The audit of war* (London Macmillan, 1986)

[17] For American pressure on Britain in 1950 see Robert Marjolin, *Memoirs 1911–1986* (London Weidenfeld, 1989), for the 1953–4 period, Edward Fursdon, *The European Defence Community. a*



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I want to emphasize how ideological is this dimension of British foreign policy, in contrast to the pragmatism which is claimed to govern our foreign affairs. Pragmatism is for Europe—'the Europe of facts' as the British Foreign Secretary calls it.[18] Symbolism is for the Atlantic; as 'informed sources' made clear in briefing the press on 11 September that 'the Government's primary aim' in planning to commit ground forces to Saudi Arabia 'was to demonstrate solidarity with the United States with a further emphatic "symbolic gesture"'.[19] President Reagan has addressed the assembled Houses of Parliament, stood surrounded by Beefeaters in the Guildhall, received honours at Buckingham Palace. Chancellor Kohl and President Mitterrand have come in and out of London with far less pomp and circumstance, to do business, not to symbolize shared identity. The contrast in style as well as frequency between Franco-German heads-of-government meetings and those between the British Prime Minister and these two governments in the late 1980s was striking. According to officials in Bonn, it was at the specific request of the British government that British–German meetings have been so unceremonious.[20]

The legacy of the Second World War reinforced this feeling of separateness from the continent and of the special character and moral quality of Anglo-Saxon institutions. Vansittart, A. J. P. Taylor and others reinforced the image of a fundamental difference of national character between free British and authoritarian Germans, first established in the popular imagination in the 1914–18 war.[21] The collapse of France in 1940 strengthened established national stereotypes of continental corruption and English exceptionalism.[22] Many of the exiles from Vienna and Berlin who enriched the intellectual life and universities of England and America in the 1930s and 1940s, escaping from authoritarian and corporate states to countries with a long tradition of freedom, reflected and reinforced this contrast in the history, economics, and political science that they taught, becoming in some ways more Anglo-Saxon than the Anglo-Saxons in their admiration for the idiosyncrasies of the British constitution, their commitment to economic liberalism and their resistance to closer relations with the European continent. This alliance between Anglo-

*history* (London Macmillan, 1980), for the exchanges of 1959–60, see Miriam Camps, *Britain and the European Community, 1955–63* (London Oxford University Press, 1964)

[18] 'There will always be some tension inside the Community between the Europe of phrases and the Europe of facts We all belong to the political profession, so we cannot be entirely scornful of phrases and declarations, because they are the tools of our trade Having said that, Conservative Members—and, I think, people in the country—have a strong preference for the Europe of facts' Douglas Hurd, *House of Commons Official Report* (Hansard), Vol 174, No 118, col 22, 11 June 1990

[19] *Independent*, 12 Sept 1990

[20] Officials in Bonn and Paris also regret the falling away from the intention of maintaining a regular six-monthly cycle of meetings in the 1987–9 period, the gap between German–British bilateral summits stretched to almost 18 months

[21] For Vansittart see David Wedgwood Benn, 'Germany II Britain and the "enemy image"', *The World Today*, Oct 1990

[22] For the rise of the image of 'the moral disease of France' in the anti-French propaganda of English periodicals in the 1790s, see Gerald Newman, *The rise of English nationalism a cultural history, 1740–1830* (London Weidenfeld, 1987), pp 238–40 In 1942 Mrs Thatcher's father observed that France was 'corrupt from top to bottom' the perception of a strict Methodist Sabbatarian linked to France's 'decadent' Catholicism Quoted in Hugo Young, *One of us a biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London Macmillan, 1989), p 9



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Saxons and exiles also included a substantial colonial contingent, notably in the many Canadian and Australian economists who preached North Atlantic free trade against protectionist European integration, and in the powerful Canadian and Australian presence in the British press.[23]

## Pride in the past

The war and the decade that followed it remain a powerful point of reference for British identity and foreign policy, even for those too young to remember: the glorious 1950s, the 'new Elizabethan age', before the decay of moral standards and the drift towards continental social democracy which in the mythology of the new Right the 1960s are seen to represent. It was natural for John O'Sullivan to recall as a golden age the years 'before Suez', welcoming the re-emergence of Anglo-Saxon partnership in the response to the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. This was pride in the past, pride in Britain as a military power, an attempt to regain and reassert a status which marked us off from the defeated nations across the Channel: contrasting—to use Peregrine Worsthorne's graphic and revealing language—the 'selfless, even self-sacrificing, idealism' of Britain's response with the flabbiness of a European Community dominated by 'a lobotomized German economic giant, psychologically unable to spill blood even in a good cause.'[24]

One of the central claims of the present government is to have re-established Britain's reputation abroad, to have recovered its national pride after the defeatism of the 1970s. It *is* a matter for legitimate pride that Britain has reacted quickly and decisively to successive threats to international order, in the Gulf as in the Falklands. But we should also remember the other elements of Britain's self-image as a proud and great nation in the 1950s: as an industrial power of the first rank, as a leader in military and civil high technology, as the possessor of the world's second reserve currency and second largest GNP, the base for one of the world's largest merchant navies trading in and out of London and our other great ports—as well as the home of the strongest and most deeply rooted democracy in Europe, an example of free debate and honest criticism carried to other countries through the world's leading international news medium, the BBC. I even recall Conservative ministers in the 1950s taking pride in our position as the world's most highly developed welfare state.

[23] During the 1980s the Australian/American-owned *Sun*, *Sunday Times* and *Times* newspapers challenged, at different ends of the market, the *Sunday Express* and *Daily Express* in the vigour of their defence of British sovereignty and Anglo-American partnership from the European 'threat' The *Express* group, under the Canadian Lord Beaverbook, had been exponents of an imperial and Anglo-Saxon world view since the 1930s The most lyrical prose on Anglo-Saxondom in the late 1980s appeared in the Canadian-owned *Sunday Telegraph* The *Mirror* newspapers, whose owner Robert Maxwell fought on the continent in the British army during the war as a refugee from Czechoslovakia, were equally vigorously pro-European Maxwell went on to launch the weekly *European* in the spring of 1990 In 1989/90 the British-owned *Mail* group, traditionally firm supporters of the Conservative Party leadership, became noticeably warmer towards the European Community than the Prime Minster

[24] John O'Sullivan in the *Independent on Sunday*, 19 Aug 1990, Peregrine Worsthorne in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 12 Aug 1990



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One by one, we have lost or abandoned those other elements. Britain is now a net importer of manufactures. The Deutschmark has long since replaced the pound sterling as a key currency. In high technology Britain's nuclear programme has run into the sand; our aircraft industry depends very heavily on cooperation with European partners; our computer industry has passed under Japanese control, and our motor industry has been divided between the Americans, the French, the Japanese and the Swedes. The British merchant fleet in 1990 is a tenth the size it had shrunk to in 1980: 'a seafaring race', as Churchill once described us, with barely 350 ships sailing under its flag.[25] The Kuwait crisis marked the passing of international leadership in global news communication from the BBC to CNN.

The claim of superiority in democratic and libertarian practice is still made, indeed is being vigorously reasserted.[26] But it is less readily accepted abroad, and less widely believed at home. There is legitimate pride in the rediscovered vigour of Britain's enterprise economy—though under present circumstances of inflation and recession it ought to be somewhat conditional. The strength of the emphasis which the Conservative press puts on Britain's military capability and determination thus carries the unspoken message that this dimension of national tradition and foreign policy may have become the only remaining source for unreserved national pride: the only aspect of national identity with which *all* the people of these islands now readily identify.

## Redefining national identity

In circumstances like this, political leaders should appropriately go back to basics, to redefine national identity and national role, taking their example from the redefinitions that grew out of the experience of the war: the explicit Churchillian emphasis on the links between the English-speaking peoples and the formulation of the 'three circles' doctrine which justified Britain's continuing claim to global status. Mrs Thatcher's speech in Aspen in August 1990 was seen by some of her advisers in these terms: as 'an opportunity to convince the American political community' (and less directly the British political community) 'of Britain's wholehearted commitment to Europe' and vision of its particular contribution to the future development of European society, values and institutions. It is unfortunate that its message was overshadowed by the immediacy of the crisis in the Gulf, and that 'some of her closest advisers' saw the occasion more as the opportunity:

[25] According to the joint Ministry of Transport/General Council for British Shipping report on the UK shipping industry (Sept 1990), summarized in *Financial Times*, 20 Sept 1990

[26] Readers may recall the vigorous dismissal by Mrs Thatcher and columnists in the Conservative press, commenting on the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution in July 1989, of that Revolution's claim to have fathered the European commitment to individual liberty These comments echoed those of Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the revolution in France* (1790), in which he championed the inherited rights and institutions of England against 'extravagant and presumptuous speculations' of abstract 'Rights of Man' Mrs Thatcher's comments were made in an interview with *Le Monde*, 13 July 1990



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to reassert Britain's moral authority ... As more and more countries try to join the list of democratic nations, it was seen as the job of the world's most experienced democracy to set out the pattern and pitfalls [27]

In some ways the establishment of a Working Party to define a national syllabus for British history, in January 1989, represented the first step towards such a reformulation. The disintegration of the history syllabus as a transmission of national tradition and values over the last 20 years had itself been a reflection of increasing confusion about national identity and core values. I regret that the excellent report which the History Working Party produced, and the controversy which surrounded its work, has not become the focus for a more explicit debate on the links between the transmission of national traditions and values and foreign policy—largely, it seems to me, because the continuing divisions between Anglo-Saxons and Europeans within the Labour Party made the Opposition reluctant to exploit an issue on which the government itself had divided views. Those who assert that we English know who we are and have no need to redefine our collective identity should note the careful and critical conclusions of the Working Party report: that *English* schools have not been teaching *British* history; that 'a truly *British* history syllabus' has yet to be constructed which would take into account 'essential elements of Welsh, Scottish and Irish history' as well as the contributions of more recent migrants to 'the richness and variety of British culture'; and that any historical treatment of the evolution of our multinational and multi-ethnic state must accept that British history is inextricably interwoven with that of Europe, because (the Report states bluntly) 'Britain is part of Europe'.[28]

I have said nothing here that diverges very far from Michael Heseltine's latest book, or from the themes that George Walden and George Robertson have developed in Chatham House meetings and elsewhere.[29] If we are to escape from a posture in which successive British governments are pulled reluctantly backwards towards closer European political integration, babbling of sovereignty and past centuries as our economy loses autonomy and our society becomes more multinational, then we have to set about redefining the self-image and the sense of national purpose which lie at the root of foreign policy. The 'Europeans' on both front benches and beyond who have muffled their rhetoric and silenced their symbolism must raise the debate to that level: if the issue is one of fundamental national beliefs, why should the Anglo-Saxons have all the best tunes?

We have to start by recognizing the link between the domestic constitution and Britain's international entanglements. The passion with which the unitary basis of the British state and the supremacy of its Parliament are defended reflects the clear and present danger to the basis of our nation-state as

[27] The quotation is taken from Peter Stothard, *The Times*, 6 Aug 1990

[28] *National Curriculum, History Working Group Final report* (London HMSO for Dept of Education and Science/Welsh Office, Apr 1990)

[29] Michael Heseltine, *The challenge of Europe can Britain win?* (London. Weidenfeld, 1989), esp ch 1, George Walden, 'The year peace broke out', *London Review of Books*, 26 July 1990, George Robertson, 'Britain and the new Europe', *International Affairs*, Oct 1990, Vol 66, No 4



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constructed in the nineteenth century. Bill Walker, the Tayside MP who has so vigorously resisted any tendencies towards devolution within the Scottish Conservative Party, made the link quite clear when questioning Mrs Thatcher on the April 1990 European Council. 'As Conservatives and Unionists', he said, 'we know what union means': the union of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, subject to a single all-powerful parliament, fundamentally incompatible with any concept of European union, however federal or confederal it may be.[30] That is an issue which governments have sought to fudge ever since Sir Derek Walker Smith, Michael Foot and other lovers of parliament and the English common law first raised it in the debate over Harold Macmillan's application to join the EEC. The doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty *is* incompatible with Britain's European entanglements, even in some ways with the whole network of rule-based interdependence within which British governments now operate. A successful reformulation of foreign policy doctrine requires a reformulation of the constitutional doctrine, to accommodate the international realities within which any British government now has to work.

The incompatibility of British constitutional doctrine and practice and the dynamics of British foreign policy go further than this. It is absurd to plead the principle of 'subsidiarity' against Brussels while denying that it has any relevance to the communities, regions and constituent nations of the United Kingdom; it was after all the German *Lander* which did most to open the current debate.[31] The Labour Party's own internal difficulties over local government and over devolution have allowed the government to fudge this contradiction so far; but there is an underlying tension which is likely to break into the open at some point. The quality of Britain's democracy and civil liberties may themselves not be beyond question, abroad as at home, when they are held up so proudly and so frequently by our leaders as an example to lesser breeds. The superiority of English liberty in 1216 is, after all, rather less relevant as a guide to the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe than the character of British democracy in 1990.

Next, we have to grasp the issue of Britain's relationship with its neighbours across the Channel, above all with Germany—the nettle grasped so vigorously by de Gaulle 30 years ago in redefining French foreign policy. It is extraordinary that our Anglo-Saxon partisans have so completely overcome the wartime hostility to Japan that hopes of industrial recovery have largely been built on the encouragement of Japanese investment, while hostility to Germany still boils in politicians, editorial writers, even judges.[32] Britain did a great deal to transform German political culture and to build up German democratic

[30] Hansard, 1 May 1990, col 921

[31] See Marc Wilke and Helen Wallace, *Subsidiarity approaches to power-sharing in the European Community* (London RIIA, 1990, Discussion Paper 27)

[32] On the Prime Minister's own views, see George Brock, *The Times*, 16 July 1990, the leaked Chequers minute on Germany is reproduced in full in *Independent on Sunday*, 15 July 1990 For the interview that forced Nicholas Ridley's resignation, see *Spectator*, 14 July 1990, pp 8–10 A later *Spectator* interview with Lord Denning linked a defence of English legal and constitutional traditions with an attack on Brussels and the Germanic approach of the Commission *Spectator*, 18 Aug 1990



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institutions in the occupation years after 1945, a contribution sadly forgotten in London but still wistfully remembered in Bonn. Britain has made a larger contribution to German security since the war than any other European country, with a third of its army and air forces based in Germany for the past 40 years. England has had a good deal more than 700 years of close links with Germans and with Germany, from Saxony to Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, largely unmentioned in the English history we were taught: with the Hanseatic League, with Hamburg and with Hanover, with the German regiments which formed fully a third of Wellington's army at Waterloo and the German entrepreneurs who helped to shape Victorian finance and industry. What is lacking is the political imagination to create—and symbolize—a new relationship with the democratic Germany which is now Britain's largest trading partner, and arguably also our most important partner in foreign policy.

After Germany, Britain needs a self-conscious redefinition of relations with France. Hostility to France was a defining element in the growth of English nationalism (as the rivalry with the Anglo-Norman kingdom was a central element in defining the French national myth). It was also an intrinsic factor in the evolution of the British multinational state, in the 'Auld Alliance' between Scotland and France against England and in French support for Irish resistance to English rule up to the abortive French expedition to Bantry Bay in 1796. Inside Europe and out, Anglo-French rivalry shaped national expansion. French domination of the continent was counterbalanced by British domination in India, the West Indies and North America.[33] The experience of alliance in 1914–18 and 1939–40 left disdain on one side and resentment on the other, setting the context for British rejection of Monnet's proposals in 1949–50 and for de Gaulle's veto on British entry to the EEC in 1963. Deliberate political efforts are needed to reshape national images and different symbols of shared history, to emphasize partnership rather than rivalry.[34]

But we must also confront, and abandon, the myth of the Special Relationship.[35] The United States now has several relationships as special as that with Britain—with Germany, much emphasized by the Bush administration, with Israel, even, in spite of the surface tensions, with France and Japan. If Britain portrays itself as America's most loyal ally, we must recognize that the

[33] In *The rise of English nationalism* Newman analyses the popular and intellectual resistance to France that accompanied the military struggle Later this became a broader opposition to French ideas and culture in which 'it was the Low Church zealots of the Church of England, the Methodists and Evangelicals who now sprang forward to become the chief standard-bearers of the nationalist movement' (p 234) Cf Mrs Thatcher remarking in *Der Spiegel*, 30 Mar 1990, that Britain had successfully resisted not only the two German attempts to dominate Europe but also that of Napoleon 'We have the oldest Parliament in Europe—it's 700 years old We are not easily dominated People should not forget what history teaches us' (my translation)

[34] This must of course be a *mutual* effort to overcome antagonistic images Interviewing successive French naval officers on European defence cooperation in 1982–3, I was struck by the frequency with which I was assured that they had 'forgotten' Mers-el-Kebir

[35] For one notable attempt to do this from an avowedly Conservative perspective, see Christopher Coker, *Who only England know Conservatives and foreign policy* (London Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies, 1990)



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counterpart to the reassertion of American leadership in the 1990s will be the reassertion of British followership: not the most stirring symbol for future national pride. Nor is the undiluted admiration for American values and institutions which we see on the British Right a firm foundation for rebuilding national identity. If the United States represents the 'City on the Hill' in an otherwise wicked world, in the phrase President Reagan loved to use, we become by analogy the village from which the pilgrims set out and to which only nostalgia occasionally draws them back.

Most importantly, we need to move away from a preoccupation with preserving those symbols of which our parents and grandparents felt proud towards a concern to create reputation, to build institutions and national capabilities of which our children will feel proud. We cannot rely primarily on military prowess, however professional our forces may be. Nor can we place too much faith in our financial skills and services. Nicholas Ridley's suggestion in the *Sunday Express* that we should see Britain's future relationship with the European continent as comparable to that which Hong Kong has with mainland China shows only too clearly the limitations of that as a national objective.[36] And we have, it appears, now gone too far in relinquishing national control over manufactures and high technology to look for future symbols of Britain's strength there.

## Pride in the future

States cannot survive without a sense of identity, an image of what marks their government and their citizens from their neighbours, of what special contribution they have to make to civilization and international order. Foreign policy is partly a reflection of that search for identity. Military power and traditions, commercial rivalry, are less and less available as national instruments for single states. In an increasingly interdependent world this makes the ideological elements in foreign policy—the defence of democracy, the promotion of human rights, even of 'civilization', according to the accepted national definition—more prominent.

We have, I suggest, to look at resources of 'soft power' rather than 'hard power' for future British influence and reputation and, we may hope, profit: at education, communication, cultural tradition and innovation.[37] Britain has the immense advantage of possessing the world's international language, which it does not have to yield entirely to its cousins across the Atlantic. We could invest to rebuild the international status and reputation of the BBC, in global television as in global radio: the battle with CNN is not yet lost. We could set

[36] 'Investors from all over the world have preferred to invest in Britain above any other Community country because of our commitment to free trade Outside EMU, but in the Single Market, we shall be at no disadvantage Indeed, we could become the financial centre of the world, the Hong Kong of mainland Europe That in fact has been our traditional role and we have always prospered when we have played it'. Nicholas Ridley, *Sunday Express*, 26 Aug 1990

[37] I have borrowed the concept of 'soft power' from Joseph S Nye, *Bound to lead the changing nature of American power* (New York Basic Books, 1990), ch 6



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out to capture the cream of Europe's students for part or all of their university education, building up centres of excellence to compete with Harvard and Stanford on the global stage. We could devise policies to make London and the other great British cities places to be proud of, with streets as clean as Paris, transport systems as monumental as Washington's or as fast as Frankfurt's, with museums as opulent as the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum or as well-designed as the Musée d'Orsay. We could invest more in national sporting excellence, the arena where so many other countries have pursued pride and identity: with the added advantage that pride in athletics, and even in cricket, will help to integrate the rising generation of black British into our national community.[38]

Pride in Britain's independence, or in the strength of its independent economy, is no longer an option: the transformation of national life and context over the past 20–30 years has taken us far beyond that. We could, like the French, look for pride in the particular contribution we make to the construction of Europe, as the Scots after union took pride in the contributions they made to the British economy and Empire. Britain disappointed the hopes of its Dutch and German partners when we joined the Community, who had looked to us to bring a concern for democracy and open debate to that technocratic organization; but it is not too late to recover that objective, if we can sort out our confusions over the structure of democracy at home and its compatibility with democratic institutions Europe-wide.

We could build onto our position as Europe's most attractive base for extra-European investment a more explicit and developed image of Britain as a link between Europe and the rest of the developed world—securely rooted in European cooperation, but pursuing close and mutual relations with North America and Japan by, for example, reviving American studies in British universities and rediscovering and re-emphasizing Britain's historical role in East Asia.[39] As post-Cold War defence discussions push all European states towards multinational forces and operations, we could publicize our established but unsung record in military cooperation in the British–Dutch marine force, in shared training and operation with the Dutch and Belgian navies and (through the Tornado programme) with the German and Italian air forces, to demonstrate the contribution that professional British forces and substantial British expenditure makes to European security.

There is room enough for further debate about future priorities and

[38] In a celebrated remark (reported in *Sunday Times*, 22 Apr 1990) the former Conservative Party Chairman Norman Tebbit queried the national loyalty of those who failed the 'cricket test' He was referring to British subjects of Caribbean or Asian origin or parentage who loudly supported the 'wrong' side when touring teams from the West Indies, Pakistan or India play against England. The rising generation of black British have, however, already begun to contribute players to the England cricket team John Regis's proud comment to British television after winning his fourth medal in the 1990 European Games, 'I did it for Britain', provided an alternative test of loyalty and identity to Mr Tebbit's The subtleties of 'English', as opposed to 'British', identity are too complex to explore here beyond noting that these coded phrases carry depths of conscious and unconscious meaning

[39] Jonathan Clark ('What we lose by neglecting the special relationship', *The Times*, 22 Aug 1990) notes 'the precipitous decline' in American studies in Britain in recent years



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objectives. What is important is that Britain should look forward, not back; and that we should match the symbols and rhetoric of British national life to the constraints of national capabilities and the limitations of the international context.

30 October 1990



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