RESTORING BRITAIN TO THE HEART OF EUROPE – AND ACQUIRING A KEY ALLY TOO JOHN MAJOR'S MARCH 11, 1991 BONN SPEECH

N. Piers Ludlow

John Major's Bonn speech is best remembered for its soundbite about putting Britain 'at the very heart of Europe' but also, more generally, for seeking to demonstrate how much the new Conservative government's approach to the European Community (EC) was going to diverge from that of its predecessor. So this chapter will assess Major's speech partly by measuring how it departed from Margaret Thatcher's much more famous – if not notorious – Bruges speech in September 1988, but also picking up on a number of striking similarities. But as I will go onto argue, the speech was not only about signalling a change of approach in terms of Britain's European policy, important though this was. It was also a very deliberate attempt to build a much stronger link between Britain and Germany in general and the Conservative Party and the German Christian Democrats (CDU) in particular. As such I will also cast a backward glance at a much earlier and less well-known Thatcher speech, namely the one that she gave in Hannover in May 1975. This also constituted an attempt to forge better ties between the two centre-right parties, then both in opposition. Here too, though, there are vital differences between the two speeches and their consequences that will be important to explore. Major, I will suggest, approached the task of building bridges to Bonn with a seriousness that was very different from that of Thatcher. It is thus all the more striking that this bid to forge a lasting intra-party alliance has now been so expunged from British collective memory that the Bonn speech itself does not feature in Major's well-curated online collection of speeches.[1]

I. Moving beyond Bruges

The first and most obvious purpose of the speech was publicly to signal that the Major government was intent on changing both the substance and the style of Britain's European policy. In terms of content, it was not a great visionary speech. The portion on Britain's approach to European integration is neither exciting oratory, nor great policy innovation. The speech is not, for instance, comparable to François Mitterrand's 1984 address to the European Parliament, or to Joschka Fischer's 2013 oration on the finality of European integration.[2] Nor was the rhetoric of the speech in the same league as that of an earlier British Conservative leader, Winston Churchill, a bound copy of whose September 1946 Zurich speech with its stirring call for a United States of Europe had been presented by Major to Helmut Kohl earlier that day.[3] Major's verbal style and delivery was very far from Churchillian; and the

[1] John Major's speeches, ordered by date, are preserved at http://johnmajorarchive.org.uk/1991-2/ (last accessed 25.10.2023). But the list contains no mention of the Bonn speech, including only Major's press conference with Chancellor Kohl from that day. Thankfully the text of speech was published as a pamphlet at the time by the Conservative Political Centre and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, so can still be found in good libraries. John Major, *The Evolution of Europe* (CPC/KAS, 1991). All quotations in this chapter come from that published version.

[2] For the former, see https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2001/10/19/cdd42d22-fe8e-41bb-bfb7-9b655113ebcf/publishable_fr.pdf (last accessed 26.10.2023); for the latter, https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2005/1/14/4cd02fa7-d9d0-4cd2-91c9-2746a3297773/publishable_en.pdf (last accessed 26.10.2023).

[3] UK National Archives (UKNA), PREM 19 3354, Powell to Gozney, 'Prime Minister's meeting with Chancellor Kohl', 11.3.1991. The idea of the gift appears to have originated in the FCO. See FCO 33 1142, Budd to Mallaby, 4.2.1991. For the text of the Churchill speech see https://rm.coe.int/16806981f3 (last accessed

substance of what he wanted to say was much more cautious and circumspect than that of his illustrious predecessor. One of the key portions, for instance, flirted with the banal in stating:

> Today the Community is contemplating the course of its future development. That is natural and right. The Community is a living institution: it must continually adapt and change to meet new circumstances.
> We are bringing our own ideas to the IGC [intergovernmental conference] on economic and monetary union and on political union. We are willing to discuss both our own ideas and the ideas of our partners openly and positively. Britain will relish the debate and argument. That is the essence of doing business in today's Community. And we want to arrive at solutions which will enable us to move forward more united not less. That is why we think it better that change in the Community is of an evolutionary not revolutionary kind.[4]

Caution was equally apparent when the focus moved from general affirmations about European integration to more specific policy goals. The section on monetary union for instance noted:

> We want the Community to move forward harmoniously. To do that we need to build from economic strength and confidence. The debate on economic and monetary union will have a real impact on our future prosperity. The stakes are high. So let me set out the British agenda.

This last emphasised price stability, free and open markets, and economic convergence – all factors that blended caution with an evident desire to speak to what the British perceived as some of Germany's own hesitations about the goal of monetary union.[5] Britain, Major went on to explain, had proposed the so-called 'hard ECU' plan precisely so that Europe could learn how a common currency might work without necessarily abandoning all national macro-economic policy making. And London was highly conscious of the dangers of excessive haste. 'Monetary policy should remain firmly in national hands in Stage Two.' Furthermore, Britain wanted the right to take any final decision on full engagement with Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) later.[6]

Likewise, the section on European foreign policy cooperation balanced a readiness to contemplate some degree of coordination with a very strong awareness of its limits:

> The key to a common policy is the convergence of interests. All Member States have a common interest in building up the Community's standing in the world We must punch our weight politically as well as economically. That is why Britain has set out ideas for a common foreign and security policy. But this notion has its limits. Are Germany's relations with the Soviet Union really going to be governed by Europe? What about France's relations with Algeria? Or

---

25.10.2023). For an analysis of that speech see Francesco Pierini, 'Friends and Sponsors of the New Europe: A Discourse Analysis on Churchill's Speech at the University of Zurich, 19 September 1946', in *Narrating Europe: Speeches on European Integration (1946-2020)*, ed. Michael Gehler, Maria Eleonora Guasconi, and Francesco Pierini (Nomos: Baden-Baden, 2022), 45–60.

[4] Major, *The Evolution of Europe*, 12

[5] UKNA, PREM 19 3354, briefing note, 'EMU: Prime Minister's Meeting with Chancellor Kohl: 12 March, 1991', undated.

[6] Major, *The Evolution of Europe*, 13-14.

> Britain's responsibilities for Hong Kong?
> One only has to ask the question to know the answer. A common foreign and security policy requires consensus. Another necessary condition is recognition of the vital need to keep Atlantic ties strong. As we look at the wider world, the pivotal role of the United States is clear - and in the last few dangerous months it has become clearer still. The Community must get its relationship with North America right.[7]

This was hardly visionary stuff. It could at best be described as very careful semi-engagement, falling a long-way short of the enthusiasm for more European integration displayed by most other European governments, including that of Chancellor Kohl.[8] But its importance lay in the contrast between it and the 'no, no, no' approach of Thatcher's final years in power.[9] Compared with her ever-greater antagonism, stridently articulated, Major's tentative engagement *was* a radical change of direction.[10] The contrast indeed was made even more vivid in March 1991 by the way in which Thatcher had made a series of public remarks in the US over the previous weekend about the dangers of German domination within the Community and the need to put the brakes on further integration. The former Prime Minister had predicted in an American television interview that 'The Germans would dominate because they are the biggest country. I think that many of us would not necessarily like that. So long as we are separate nations then each of us can control that.'[11] These comments came too late to influence the substance of Major's speech, which by then had been fully written, but they provided an unexpectedly clear foil against which the novelty of the Prime Minister's approach was that much more clearly visible.

The degree of change was most apparent in the tone that Major adopted when talking about European integration. The first big signal here came early on in the speech with his allusion to his age – 47. This allowed him to note that 'For many of my generation, Europe was a cause of political inspiration.'[12] This quite deliberately drew an implicit contrast with his much older predecessor, born in 1925, who had lived through the Second World War as a teenager and young adult, and whose views of Europe and Germany had been deeply marked by that experience. Major's generation, the audience was being told, did not share the prejudices and blind spots that had so coloured Thatcher's views of Europe. Even clearer – and the soundbite duly picked up by all of the newspapers in following days – was Major's declaration that:

> My aims for Britain in the Community can be simply stated. I want us to be where we belong – at the very heart of Europe, working with our partners in building the future. That is a challenge we take up with enthusiasm.[13]

---

[7] *Ibid.* 14.
[8] See the special issue of the *Journal of European Integration History* devoted to the Maastricht Treaty, 19/1, 2013; Michele Di Donato and Silvio Pons, eds., *European Integration and the Global Financial Crisis. Looking Back on the Maastricht Years, 1980-1990s.* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).
[9] Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography. Volume Three, Herself Alone,* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), 619–46.
[10] For a more general analysis of how Major's initial approach departed from that of his predecessor, see N. Piers Ludlow, 'The High Point of British Europeanism? John Major, Britain and the Maastricht Negotiations', in *European Integration and the Global Financial Crisis. Looking Back on the Maastricht Years, 1980-1990s.*, ed. Michele Di Donato and Silvio Pons (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 235–53.
[11] Robin Gedye and George Jones, 'Thatcher outburst embarrasses Major on eve of summit', *Daily Telegraph*, 11.3.1991.
[12] Major, *The Evolution of Europe*, p. 6
[13] *Ibid.*, 12.

The allusion to Britain being at 'the heart of Europe' was not a new phrase. Indeed, it was one that Major had used in several different bilateral meetings with fellow European leaders in the course of the first European Council meeting he had attended in December 1990. He had used it in his discussions with the host of that meeting, Giulio Andreotti, and again with his main interlocutor in Bonn, Helmut Kohl.[14] It was a soundbite Kohl had then quoted back to Major in the course of their February 1991 meeting.[15] But it was nevertheless significant that Major now felt able to progress from using this phrase in private discussions with his European counterparts to deploying it in a public speech that he knew would be extensively covered and reported upon in the British press. And it would be a phrase that he would re-use in a UK-based speech delivered a few weeks later.[16] This confident assertion of Britain's positive engagement was thus a message that he really wanted to convey – despite the way in which it has now been airbrushed from the PM's records.[17]

Those familiar with Mrs Thatcher's Bruges speech may recall that it too contained some phraseology that was not, at first sight, very different from Major's.[18] In one striking portion for instance Thatcher had told her audience that 'Britain does not dream of some cosy, isolated existence on the fringes of the European Community. Our destiny is in Europe, as part of the Community.'[19] Likewise the Bruges speech had contained a rather longer exposition than Major's speech on the degree to which Britain had contributed to and had been affected by European civilisation. Perhaps for these reasons, there are still Foreign Office officials, involved in the drafting of that earlier speech, who insist that it was actually a much more pro-European statement than is normally claimed.[20]

But the problem about the Bruges speech was that this articulation of British pro-Europeanism was drowned out by a series of much less positive comments, that sought to downplay any positive view of the European Community. The passage about Britain's European destiny, for instance, was immediately followed by this set of qualifications:

> That is not to say that our future lies only in Europe, but nor does that of France or Spain or, indeed, of any other member.

---

[14] UKNA, PREM 19 3321/1, Powell to Wall, 'Prime Minister's Meeting with Signor Andreotti', 14.12.1990 & *ibid.*, 'Prime Minister's Meeting with Chancellor Kohl', 14.12.1990.

[15] UKNA, PREM 19, 3352, Powell to Gozney, 'Prime Minister's Meeting with Chancellor Kohl', 11.2.1991.

[16] Interestingly Major's online archive *does* contain the domestic speech where 'the heart of Europe' phrase was reprised, perhaps because when used in a domestic context it could be much more heavily counterbalanced with a pledge that 'European partnership will never mean passive acceptance of all that is put to us'. https://johnmajorarchive.org.uk/1991/03/23/mr-majors-speech-to-conservative-central-council-23-march-1991/ (last accessed 24.10.2023).

[17] In explaining why the Bonn speech has disappeared, Major's memoirs, in which he describes using the 'heart of Europe' phrase as 'fateful' and as something that laid him open to the charge of being a federalist, are very revealing. John Roy Major, *John Major: The Autobiography.* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 268–70.

[18] There is quite an extensive literature on this speech: Eva Garau, 'Margaret Thatcher and Europe: The Bruges Speech (1988)', in *Narrating Europe: Speeches on European Integration (1946-2020)*, ed. Michael Gehler, Maria Eleonora Guasconi, and Francesco Pierini (Nomos: Baden-Baden, 2022), 227–44; Cary Fontana and Craig Parsons, '"One Woman's Prejudice": Did Margaret Thatcher Cause Britain's Anti-Europeanism?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 53, no. 1 (2015): 89–105, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12205; Oliver Daddow, Christopher Gifford, and Ben Wellings, 'The Battle of Bruges: Margaret Thatcher, the Foreign Office and the Unravelling of British European Policy', *Political Research Exchange* 1, no. 1 (1 January 2019): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2019.1643681.

[19] For the full text of the speech, see https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332 (last accessed 25.10.2023).

[20] Stephen Wall, *Reluctant European: Britain and the European Union from 1945 to Brexit* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 183–86.

> The Community is not an end in itself.
>
> Nor is it an institutional device to be constantly modified according to the dictates of some abstract intellectual concept.
>
> Nor must it be ossified by endless regulation.

Similarly, the section on European civilisation, contained a rather unfortunate emphasis on Britain's contribution to both World Wars, which however important, nevertheless ended up sounding like a claim that only Britain was capable of defending democracy and liberty.[21]

This negative strand continued when it came to Thatcher's discussion of what the Community should do in policy terms. Alongside the famous passage claiming that 'We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels' there was a long section criticising the CAP. And there was also a forceful return to the 'no more institutional change' mantra that Britain had adopted before its enforced retreat following the Milan Council of June 1985 and the negotiation of the Single European Act.[22]

Thatcher, in other words, had blended her declarations of Britain's place in Europe, with a combative and critical approach, which seemed as intent on highlighting the faults of the system that she was talking about, as identifying its merits. What she gave with one hand, she very deliberately took away with the other. The spin that accompanied her speech, especially as directed to the British audience, tended furthermore to emphasise the critical bits, meaning that the more positive language made little or no impact.[23] The way in which the speech became a rallying call for British Eurosceptics only confirms this negative tilt.[24]

John Major, by contrast, was cautious about specific policy commitments and somewhat short of what George Bush famously called 'the vision thing'.[25] But he was also careful not to devalue his positive affirmations with negative bluster. The net effect was hence much more comforting to his listeners than Thatcher's September 1988 oration. And this was quite deliberate. Major's policy intent in agreeing to talk in Bonn and in articulating a positive picture of a Britain engaged in active and fruitful partnership in the European Community, was to undo some of the damage done not just by Thatcher's Bruges speech but by the even more strident rhetoric and aggressive actions that had followed in Thatcher's last two years in power. Major's speech was hence a peace offering, a public declaration of the end of British disengagement and disillusionment, as well as just an outline of British European policy.

Here too it is worth underlining that the post-speech spin chose to emphasise the positive declarations, especially the 'heart of Europe' soundbite, rather than the more ambivalent or cautious passages, thereby ensuring that the manner in which the speech was reported varied little across the British media landscape (and contrasted strongly with the manner in which the Bruges speech had been reported three years earlier). It was perhaps not too surprising that a pro-European newspaper like the *Financial Times* should understand quite so well what Major was trying to do. Its editorial grasped the point exactly: 'Here is a British Prime

---

[21] https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332 (last accessed 25.10.2023).
[22] *Ibid.*; for discussion of Britain's earlier opposition to institutional change, see Hugo Young, *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 329–32.
[23] John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher : Volume 2 the Iron Lady* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), 606–7. For Moore's rather different take, see Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 144–52.
[24] Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher*, 608. By the early 1990s the most prominent group of Eurosceptics called themselves the Bruges Group.
[25] For Bush's comment, see https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,963342-2,00.html (last accessed 26.10.2023).

Minister who no longer looks at the European Community with suspicion, who does not regard a trip to the Continent as a sally into battle and who sees Britain as a full member without a grudge.'[26] Similarly the *Guardian's* front-page story immediately realised the dramatic departure from Thatcher's approach. 'John Major last night signalled a decisive break with the Thatcher era, pledging to a delighted German audience that Britain would work "at the very heart of Europe" with its partners in forging an integrated European Community.'[27] But rather more telling was the way in which the policy shift was captured by both the tabloids (the newspapers aimed at a more mass-market audience) and the more Eurosceptic portions of the quality press. The *Daily Mail* thus used its front-page to report that 'John Major last night cold-shouldered Mrs Thatcher's call for caution and made clear his intention to take the lead in forging the Europe of the 1990s. Just 48 hours after his predecessor warned against German domination, the Prime Minister paved the way for a new Anglo-German axis at the centre of the Common Market.'[28] And for Rupert Murdoch's *The Times* the message was similar, with the language of 'a clean break' with Mrs Thatcher's policy being used. Rather more space was admittedly given in *The Times* to the cautious passages about monetary union or foreign policy cooperation discussed above. But the 'at the very heart of Europe' line was given much prominence and the policy shift was acknowledged.[29] Perhaps most revealing of all was the front-page cartoon immediately adjacent to the lead story, which depicted a newspaper reader reacting to the headline 'Major loves Europe' with the comment that 'Sounds as if the back-seat driver has left the vehicle…', an allusion to Thatcher's notorious comment at the moment that Major acceded to Number 10 Downing St. that she would be 'a very strong back-seat driver'.[30] The *Daily Telegraph* similarly attached importance to 'the very heart of Europe' quote and acknowledged the implicit repudiation of the Bruges speech.[31] The British press, in other words, was in no doubt whatsoever that a significant change in Britain's policy had been signalled by the Prime Minister's speech.

II. A Party Objective

The emphasis on the speech as John Major's attempt to undo the Bruges speech and to distance himself from his predecessor does, however, somewhat obscure a second motive, which arguably was as important and which probably accounts for a greater portion of the text than does the section on Britain and the European Community. And this second motive centred on the re-building of ties with Germany in general and with the CDU in particular.

Here too, of course, one of the things that was going on was an attempt to roll back the negative effects of Mrs Thatcher. As is well-known, her relations with Helmut Kohl had never been easy but had descended to rock bottom following the Iron Lady's various tactless and misguided public pronouncements about the potential dangers of German unity.[32] It is

---

[26] 'Mr Major's Break-out', *Financial Times*, 12.3.1991.
[27] David Gow & Michael White, 'Major Reject's Thatcher's Europe', *The Guardian*, 12.3.1991.
[28] John Deans, 'Into the Heart of Europe', *The Daily Mail*, 12.3.1991. The *Mail* was admittedly still being edited by the relatively pro-European Sir David English, rather than the Eurosceptical Paul Dacre who would take over in 1992.
[29] Ian Murray and Robin Oakley, 'Major signals end of Thatcher line on the EC', *The Times*, 12.3.1991.
[30] The cartoon by Calman is on the front page of *The Times,* 12.3.1991. For Thatcher's 'back-seat driver' comment, see Jonathan Petre and Gerald Bartlett, 'Time for celebration as Party swings into action behind Major', *The Daily Telegraph*, 28.11.1990.
[31] George Jones and Robin Gedye, 'Major cements new relationship with Germany', *The Daily Telegraph*, 12.3.1991.
[32] For a charitable reading of her stance on German unification, see Patrick Salmon, "The United Kingdom and German Unification," in *Europe and the End of the Cold War. A Reappraisal*, ed. Frédéric Bozo et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 177–90. Rather different is the view in George Robert Urban, *Diplomacy and*

true admittedly that other leaders too had blotted their copybook over this episode, but Thatcher had gone further than most, so there was a lot of ground to recover.[33] This helps explain why right at the very start of Major's speech there was a fulsome tribute to Kohl's role in bringing unification about:

> The enormous skill and the quiet authority with which Chancellor Kohl and your Party steered Germany towards that goal were admirable. And I am delighted that the people of Germany have entrusted you with the leadership of your country in these vital years. It was a wise choice.[34]

Such flattery was very obviously designed to highlight the degree to which Major's views differed from those of Thatcher.

It would, however, be overly simplistic to read the long passages of the Bonn speech about the underlying similarities between the Conservative Party and the CDU solely as an attempt to kiss and make up after the Anglo-German row over Germany unity. Instead, I think one needs to interpret this as an important attempt to undo Britain's comparative isolation on the European diplomatic stage by forging a stronger link between the two centre-right parties, between the British Prime Minister and his German counterpart, and between Britain and Germany more generally.

This means that we need to have a look at a bit more of the text. One core section for instance emphasised the fundamental resemblances between the two centre-right parties. Entitled 'Shared Values' it observed:

> In working out how to deal with the new problems, we should start by considering how we have successfully tackled the old. When we do that, we see straightaway how central to success have been the values from which both my Party and yours have drawn our respective political philosophies. Our approach is not identical; we are not twins. Yet plainly we are members of the same family….
>
> Our philosophy has much in common with the basic tenets of Christian Democracy. Like you, we have also always stressed both the encouragement of individualism and the obligations that flow from our responsibilities to others.[35]

This section was then followed by a rehearsal of the shared belief in the market economy, and the very different way in which both parties viewed relations between the state and the individual from their left-of-centre rivals. And this portion of the speech ended with a real plaidoyer for intra-party cooperation:

> In our two parties, we are inspired not only by similar philosophies but by shared values. I hope we can build on this. The Conservative Party already enjoys immensely warm and profitable relations with the CDU. It is a special kind of relationship, closer I think than with any other Party. Politicians of my

---

Disillusion at the Court of Margaret Thatcher: An Insider's View (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 118–159.

[33] Ruud Lubbers and Giulio Andreotti were the clearest cases in point. See Bozo et al., *Europe and the End of the Cold War* for details.

[34] Major, *The Evolution of Europe*, p.6

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 8

> generation know their Christian Democrat colleagues well. Much of the credit for this belongs to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation….
> Let us build on this. As like-minded parties we can achieve great things together in Europe and for Europe. Our MEPs cooperate ever more closely in the European Parliament: I would like to see that relationship develop further. It must surely make sense for our MEPs to work together in the same team.[36]

So what is going on here? The answer I think lies in a growing sense within the British government, and within the Conservative Party, that one of the reasons that the late Thatcher government had become forced into a position of simply opposing multiple aspects of European integration rather than being able to participate as an equal in a discussion about how Europe should develop, was the way in which both Prime Minister and party had become far too isolated within the European Community and deprived of the allies needed in order effectively to operate within a multilateral discussion. Particular damage furthermore had been done by the Conservatives' non-involvement with the Christian Democrat network, organised at European Parliament level as the European People's Party (EPP), but centred, especially at its most senior level, on the figure of Helmut Kohl.

By the 1990s, Kohl had become the key personality in the European Council, a fact that not only reflected his and his country's stature, but which also sprang from the way in which the Chancellor had become an increasingly effective user of the EPP network to secure a strong body of support for whichever European policy Germany wanted to promote or to block. At a time when Europe was dominated politically by Christian Democrat parties, which were in government in the Benelux countries, Italy and Denmark as well as in Germany, Britain's exclusion from this network was something that increasingly frustrated its attempts at a constructive European diplomacy. It was not privy to some of the discussions that Kohl and his allies had had prior to each European Council meeting, nor could it count on automatic solidarity from them once discussions at each summit meeting began. Exclusion from the privileged Franco-German axis within the European Community had always been something of an irritant to British policy makers, much though they denied this in public. [37] But exclusion from two key axes of European coordination and discussion was even harder to accept. Establishing tighter links with Kohl in particular and organised Christian Democracy more generally was hence an integral part of restoring Britain to 'the very heart of Europe'.

Less important, but still of some significance, the Tories' exclusion from the EPP also blunted their effectiveness within the European Parliament (EP), an institution which had already won some belated additional political influence through the SEA and which was always likely to win more in whatever future European treaty could be concluded. Confined to the European Democrats group, where they were flanked only by a handful of MEPs from the Danish Conservative People's Party, the Conservatives could not become major players in Strasbourg, and were unlikely to secure the key positions as committee chairs or *rapporteurs* since these were largely allocated on the basis of group size.[38] Their isolation contrasted furthermore with the way in which the British Labour Party, now that it had thrown off its

---

[36] *Ibid.*, pp.9-11.

[37] British debates about how to turn the Franco-German axis into a Franco-German-British triangle had been going on intermittently ever since 1973, but despite repeated attempts to effect this change Paris and Bonn continued to share a tighter dialogue on European matters than either London and Bonn or London and Paris. For an early example of such hopes, see Wall, *Reluctant European*, 123.

[38] For an example of pressure from Tory MEPs to explore links with the EPP, see UKNA, PREM 19 3352, Turner to Patten, 6.2.1991. Given the relatively marginal position of MEPs within the Conservative Party, however, it seems unlikely that their lobbying alone would have led to such systematic efforts at senior governmental level to bring about closer ties with the EPP.

former Euroscepticism, was asserting itself as a significant force within the Confederation of Socialist Parties, soon to become the Party of European Socialists. Were the Conservatives able to bring themselves closer to, or even join fully, the EPP they would become a sizeable sub-group within the largest transnational party within the European Parliament. Their influence and ability to secure important positions would increase dramatically were this to come about. But for this to happen, enthusiastic support from Germany would be crucial, not least because several other Christian Democrat parties, notably the Dutch but also to some extent the Italians and Belgians had misgivings about admitting the Conservatives to their fold.[39]

Forging a strategic alliance, not just with Germany or with Kohl, but between the Conservative Party and the CDU hence made a great deal of tactical sense. It was for this reason that a lot of the drafting of the speech had been carried out by the Conservative Party Central Office and not just the Foreign Office (FCO). Indeed, of the two basic drafts that had been written up once Major had indicated that he would accept the invitation to give a speech in Bonn, that put together by the Conservative Party had been much more extensively used and built upon than its Foreign Office equivalent.[40] A few sections admittedly were drawn mainly from the text offered by the FCO Planners, particularly that on the Atlantic Alliance, the Gulf War and the attractions and limitations of European foreign policy coordination. Some of the language on EMU also bore FCO finger prints. But the vast majority of the language that made it into the final version of the speech was drawn from the Conservative Central Office text. It was they for instance who had suggested that Major begin by noting that his speech marked a series of 'firsts': his first speech outside of the UK as PM, the first address by a British Prime Minister hosted at the CDU headquarters, and the first speech in Germany by a UK PM since unification. Likewise, the sections on the underlying similarities between the British Conservative Party and the CDU were attributable to the party wordsmiths. Also revealing was the prominent role in finalising the speech and synthesising the two rival drafts played by Chris Patten, the Conservative Party chairman. It was at his insistence for instance that the lengthy sections that both initial drafts had devoted to British thinking on monetary union were substantially pruned, whereas those passages centring on 'the philosophical stuff' – i.e. the factors that could potentially bring the Conservatives and the CDU together – were left largely as they were.[41]

It is also important to note that behind the scenes Patten had been charged by Major to explore the possibility of a stronger institutional ties between the two parties, quite possibly going as far as Conservative Party membership of, or tight association with, the EPP. This was something that Kohl and Major had broached at both their bilateral meetings in the early months of 1991, expressing general support for the step.[42] And it was a possibility that both party apparatuses were clearly seeking to explore with growing urgency.

This background also makes the venue at which the talk was delivered that much more significant, since Major gave his speech not just in Bonn, but at the Bonn headquarters of the Konrad Adenauer *Stiftung* (KAS), the CDU party foundation. The speech was thus intended to set the seal on an increasingly close intraparty relationship. It was hence no coincidence that in the passage cited above Major described Conservative Party-CDU links as closer than

[39] Kohl placed particular emphasis on Dutch opposition, although was also confident that this could be overcome. UKNA, PREM 19, 3352, Powell to Gozney, 'Prime Minister's Meeting with Chancellor Kohl', 11.2.1991.

[40] The drafting process can be followed through UKNA, FCO 33/1142 & 1143. The two initial drafts are in the former; Chris Patten's re-draft drawing on both is in the latter.

[41] UKNA, FCO 33/1143, Patten to Powell, 4.3.1991.

[42] UKNA, PREM 19, 3352, Powell to Gozney, 'Prime Minister's Meeting with Chancellor Kohl', 11.2.1991. Annoyingly, the section of the March meeting devoted to Conservative Party/EPP ties was recorded separately, and was not in any of the files that I was able to see.

any other intra-party ties enjoyed by the Tories, or that he paid handsome tribute to the role played by the KAS in bringing the two parties together.[43] And in the short-term at least, this effort seemed to bear fruit. In the years that followed not only did the Conservatives succeed in their push to be accepted as associate members of the EPP, thereby vastly strengthening their position in Strasbourg, but the bonds between the two parties could continue to grow.[44] This would even include the channelling of KAS money into Conservative Party bank accounts – a later source of political controversy in Britain.

At one level of course it would be possible to argue that here too there were strong parallels between what Major was seeking to do in the early 1990s and Thatcher had sought in an earlier era. There has been some interesting research done by Martina Steber and others on the way in which the Tories sought to build ties with the continental parties of the centre-right during the 1960s and 1970s, especially with the CDU.[45] This was an effort that Thatcher had contributed to, especially while Opposition leader during the mid-1970s.

Her efforts had culminated in the May 1975 speech in Hannover which Thatcher had made to a gathering of European centre-right leaders. In that speech too she had evoked the communalities of interest and philosophy which linked the Tory party and the CDU and had spoken in enthusiastic terms of their capacity to work together, including in the anticipated first direct elections to the EP. Europe's political left would likely fight those elections on a partially common platform, she maintained; Europe's centre-right hence needed to do the same. Her core message had thus been:

> Each of us, in our own countries, have our different problems. But many problems—of maintaining free economies, of combating threats to our way of life both from within and from without—we hold in common. It is to solve those problems and meet those threats that we should bring ourselves closer together. I am convinced that the Christian Democratic, Conservative and Centre parties in Europe should now join together in an effective working alliance.
> I believe that this is a task of historic importance, and one in which we should all invest our energies.[46]

There were however two crucial differences between Thatcher's (surprising) enthusiasm for Conservative-CDU cooperation and partnership and Major's reiteration of similar themes a decade and a half later. The first is that in 1975 neither the Conservatives nor the CDU was in government. They were hence united by a common critique of what their socialist rivals were doing and by a strong sense that the continent was heading in the wrong way. Indeed, perhaps the most remarkable feature of Thatcher's Hannover speech is the depth of her anti-socialist passion and her implication that the internal danger posed to Western Europe by social democracy was almost as great as the external threat from Communism. But neither the Conservative Party nor the CDU were in a position to do very much to resist such dangers until they returned to power – something which did not happen until 1979 in Britain and 1982 in Germany, by which time many of the pieties set forth in Hannover had faded from

---

[43] Major, *The Evolution of Europe*, p.11.
[44] The European Democrats group at Strasbourg was dissolved in 1992, with both component parts, the UK Conservative and the Danish Conservative People's Party becoming associate members of the EPP.
[45] Martina Steber, 'Talking in Europe: The CDU/CSU, the British Conservative Party, and the Quest for a Common Political Language in the 1960s and 1970s', in *Inventing the Silent Majority in Western Europe and the United States: Conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s*, ed. Anna Von der Goltz and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 295–314. See also Gary Love, 'The British Conservative Party, the Scandinavian Conservative Parties, and Inter-Party Cooperation in Europe, 1948-78', *Contemporary European History*, 37/3 (2023), 398-431.
[46] https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103034 (last accessed 26.10.2023).

memory. The proposed coordination of centre-right parties was also rather slow to begin, and when it did, the Tories were not included in the Christian Democrat grouping. The Hannover speech was hence something of an end-point, with little by way of political legacy, whereas the Bonn speech was part of an effort to build ties with Germany and the CDU that would continue for several years at least.[47]

Second there was a striking silence in Hannover about cooperation on European matters. There was a lot in Thatcher's speech about shared values, about the challenge posed by socialist ideology and by the looming Cold War dangers. But apart from the brief reference to the likely direct elections to the European Parliament mentioned above, there was nothing else about European integration. This was not therefore seen as a key topic for conversation or for coordination between the Conservatives and their centre-right counterparts, despite the fact that at this point both Thatcher and her party were much more solidly committed to European integration than would be the case by the close of her premiership.[48] The potential tactical advantages at European level of cooperation between the two parties just did not seem to have been recognised.[49]

For Major, by contrast, coordination over Europe was *the* key value of closer ties with the CDU. The Anglo-German partnership had other dimensions too of course, as Mathias Haeussler has reminded us, and as significant portions of Major's speech underlined.[50] The section of the Bonn speech on the best approach to the ever-greater crisis in the Soviet Union was an obvious case in point.[51] The breadth of the agenda of the Anglo-German summit which had preceded Major's speech, including discussion of the Middle East, South Africa, global trade, Transatlantic relations, Western defence and policy towards the Soviet Union, was equally revealing.[52] But for Major the potential value of Anglo-German cooperation that mattered most was its ability to end Britain's isolation in the debate about Europe. This isolation had played a key part in breaking his predecessor and blunting the effectiveness of her government's policy. As a result, the principal value of closer ties with the German Christian Democrats for John Major was in making allies at a European level and ensuring that Britain could never again be as isolated and as marginalised within the EC as Thatcher had allowed her country to become.

III. Conclusions

Major's Bonn speech was not a piece of stirring, visionary oratory. The British Prime Minister was an uninspiring speaker, much mocked at home for being grey and colourless.[53] His delivery was therefore relatively flat and unexciting, with none of the verbal fireworks that a more accomplished orator might have included. The text of his speech furthermore bore all the hallmarks of a speech drafted by many pens, without the consistency of style or

---

[47] *Ibid.*

[48] Thatcher would confirm her enthusiasm for European integration by campaigning quite energetically for Britain to remain within the EC in the referendum campaign which would be fought the following month in the UK. Most of her party was solidly behind her in this cause. For details, see Robert Saunders, *Yes to Europe!: The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 110–13.

[49] https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103034 (last accessed 26.10.2023).

[50] Mathias Haeussler, *Helmut Schmidt and British-German Relations: A European Misunderstanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[51] Major, *The Evolution of Europe*, pp.14-15.

[52] UK National Archives (UKNA), PREM 19 3354, Powell to Gozney, 'Prime Minister's meeting with Chancellor Kohl', 11.3.1991.

[53] His *Spitting Image* puppet was painted grey. See https://spittingimage.fandom.com/wiki/John_Major (last accessed 26.10.2023).

approach that the best speeches display. There are one or two good phrases, well designed for quotation in the press, notably the 'very heart of Europe' soundbite, but no passages of great literary value. As such the speech would not merit inclusion in this conference or volume on the grounds of its language, style or delivery.

It was an important reminder, however, that even speeches of little rhetorical skill or flair can be historically significant. Major's speech mattered because of *when* in his premiership he delivered it. This was the speech of a still new Prime Minister trying hard to differentiate his position on Europe and on Germany from his forceful and high-profile predecessor. It mattered because of *where* it was delivered. In choosing to travel to Bonn, and more particularly in accepting the invitation to speak at the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Major was underlining his determination to engage with all of his European partners but more particularly with Kohl and his party, in a fashion that was totally different from Thatcher, especially towards the end of her premiership. And it mattered because of the balance that the speech struck between warm words about European cooperation and about Germany, and more hesitant and cautious language which conveyed Britain's ongoing difficulties with key aspects of the integration process. Both facets were there in the text and both were duly picked up by the newspapers the next day. But in marked contrast to Thatcher's Bruges speech, it was the warmth and the openness to further integration that came across most clearly from Major's speech in Bonn – a message encapsulated by the 'very heart of Europe' phrase.

It was therefore a highly significant speech in terms of repositioning the British government in the European debate, in reaching out to Kohl and to Germany as a potential friend and ally, and in signalling publicly the rejection of Mrs Thatcher's approach and the desire to break out of the isolation into which she had fallen. The speech is therefore a milestone in Britain's European odyssey, albeit one that was quickly overshadowed by the post-Maastricht outbreak of turmoil over the European question in Major's own party and the start of that internecine fighting amongst the Tories that would undermine much of his premiership. Ultimately the speech was a false dawn. But it provides a highly revealing insight into where Major initially wanted to go and how, had he been able to have his way, he might have put Britain's interaction with its European partners on a very different footing.