

# ‘Ultra-liberal and Gaullist, Margaret Thatcher spells out her European credo in Bruges' from Le Soir (21 September 1988)

**Caption:** On 21 September 1988, the Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir examines closely the content of the speech given the day before at the College of Europe, Bruges, by the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

**Source:** Le Soir. 21.09.1988, n° 221; 102e année. Bruxelles. "Ultra-libérale et gaulliste, Margaret Thatcher expose, à Bruges, son credo européen", auteur:De Waersegger, Serge , p. 4.

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## Ultra-liberal and Gaullist, Margaret Thatcher spells out her European credo in Bruges

Beneath the six-hundred-year-old vaulted roof of the College of Europe's hall in Bruges, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, invited to speak at the opening of the College's 39th academic year, used the opportunity to set out her ideas about Europe's future. The political credo that she expounded showed just how directly her *modus operandi* in Europe derives from the policies that she has developed at home in the UK. Her consistent approach — absolutely at odds with the federalist line that predominates, for example, in the European Parliament — might be described as a mix of ultra-liberalism and old-fashioned Gaullism.

She set the tone, albeit gently, right at the outset by noting that *Europe is not the creation of the Treaty of Rome*. Building on that truism, she recalled how closely British history is tied in to that of the Old Continent and how the two have enriched one another — not least through the blood spilled in two World Wars.

Commenting that Europe might well have found itself united long before now, although not in liberty and not in justice, she explained her conception of it as a type of civilisation which she described as *the democratic model of a free enterprise society*.

Having defined that model in liberal terms at home, she aimed to defend it with equal determination in Europe: *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*. Liberalism thus had to be institutionalised, with a minimum of power invested in the state and an underlying aversion to the centralising force of Brussels and its professional bureaucrats.

Enunciating the first of five guiding principles in Bruges, she therefore reaffirmed — in terms that would have warmed Charles de Gaulle's heart — that Europe should be a community of sovereign states. Britain did not dream of an alternative to the Community, she said. *Our destiny is in Europe, as part of the Community*. But she was quick to add that *the Community is not an end in itself*. Specifically, the best way to build a successful European Community was not by trying to suppress the concept of nationhood and concentrating power in a European conglomerate. *Europe will be stronger precisely because it has France as France, Spain as Spain, Britain as Britain, each with its own customs, traditions and identity*.

On that basis she welcomed the policies adopted at the most recent European Council in Brussels, placing tighter controls on spending in order to free up additional resources. That said, she regarded the task of reforming the common agricultural policy as far from complete, with the CAP still inefficient, unwieldy and highly expensive.

In passing, she delivered an apologia for the deregulation of business as promoted by herself in the UK. In monetary terms this meant sidelining the concept of a central bank in order to focus on developments already under way or in the pipeline at UK level: the free movement of capital, a free market in banking, financial, insurance and investment services, the abolition of exchange controls, and greater use of the ecu. Having achieved all these, she said, we would be in a better position to judge the next move.

While arguing for frontier controls to be streamlined, she was determined to maintain them as a barrier to drug trafficking, terrorism and illegal immigration. She also slotted in a reference to the social aspect of the Single European Market scheduled for 1992, urging that the projected European Company Statute should contain a minimum of regulations: *And certainly we in Britain would fight attempts to introduce collectivism and corporatism at European level!*

Following an entirely consistent profession of faith in anti-protectionism, she switched to the subject of defence with a plea that Europe should continue to maintain a sure defence through NATO. She regarded Western European Union (the defence organisation comprising the six EC founding countries plus the UK) not as an alternative to the Atlantic Alliance but rather as a contribution to strengthening the common defence of the West.

And Mrs Thatcher concluded by urging Europe's leaders to get on with decisions that would enable them to

move forward, without letting themselves be distracted by Utopian goals.

Her speech over, the assembled audience rose as for a national anthem, although this time it was the anthem of all Europe's nations, Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy'.

Serge de Waersegger