

'Thatcher's Europe' from El País (22 September 1988)


Caption: On 22 September 1988, discussing Margaret Thatcher's notorious speech in Bruges, the Spanish daily newspaper El País outlines the British Prime Minister's vision of Europe.

Source: El País. 22.09.1988. Madrid. "La Europa de Thatcher".

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Thatcher's Europe

On 23 February 1981, as Spain wavered between embarrassment and fright and a friendly government described Tejero's folly as 'an exclusively internal matter' for Spain, Margaret Thatcher made an impassioned defence of Spanish democracy, wished us well and offered her support. This attitude describes her perfectly. The British Prime Minister is solid in everything, including her democratic principles. During those dramatic hours, these were more important for her than any historic rivalry or political differences. There could be no better credential to accompany Margaret Thatcher on the historic occasion when a leader of the British Government is officially visiting Spain for the first time. She is welcome in a country where special gestures are not easily forgotten. The British and Spanish Prime Ministers already know each other as partners in the Community. Felipe González is a more convinced European than Margaret Thatcher. The degree of national sacrifice that his Europeanism demands does not as yet cause him the social and political problems that the British raise for their Prime Minister. They both hold respectable European stances, and it would be a positive step if, during her visit to Madrid, there was a full and frank exchange of views on the Community problems that most distance the United Kingdom from the EC, both politically (Near East, for example) and economically (European Central Bank, among others). Spain will not assume the Presidency of the EC in three months' time in vain.

The significant progress in Spanish-British relations over the last five years, epitomised in all its magnitude by Queen Elizabeth's visit to Spain next month, continues to be undermined by the intractable problem of Gibraltar. The new climate of relations between the two countries should ensure that, rather than being a millstone around the neck, the dispute becomes a platform for completely transparent negotiations allowing the parties to seek imaginative solutions.

The two governments are also very far apart on strategic issues. For the British Prime Minister, the defence of the West requires a nuclear commitment that our country cannot possibly meet. For the Spanish Government, membership of the NATO strategic system means overcoming significant internal inconsistencies and problems. For Thatcher, Western defence can be conceived only as a monolith headed by the USA. She does not see Western European Union (WEU) in any other light. For González, on the other hand, the European mainstay with all its ambiguities is the best way out of Spanish strategic difficulties. The British Prime Minister has said that if Spain wishes to integrate wholeheartedly into Western strategy, it must make a clear commitment to the nuclear option. In issuing this warning, she was also doing a favour for her friends in Washington, who are embroiled in difficult negotiations with Madrid. This is not the first time the US Administration has used its European allies to exert pressure on Spain.

For many centuries, Spain and the United Kingdom had a lasting influence on shaping the map of the world, in an arduous struggle that was sometimes punctuated by long and terrible confrontations. The scars of this rivalry periodically reopen in manifestations of crass nationalism. This has been accompanied, however, by a tradition of British academics who flocked to Spain from the end of the 18th century to study our languages and customs. These were the predecessors of the Hispanicists who lit up the dark days of Franco with brilliant works — from Hugh Thomas to Raymond Carr or Gerald Brenan — leading to the gradual formation of a network of relations that form an essential part of Spanish democratic culture. When talk begins of a European identity whose seeds were sown in the Renaissance and which has culminated in our identifying with the values of tolerance and pluralism particular to democracy, it is senseless to be blinkered by political differences which are more likely to be resolved in a context of reinforced European political unity — even if, as Margaret Thatcher wants, only of nations which are integrated without giving up their sovereignty.

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