

'How Mrs Thatcher functions' from Le Monde (22 September 1988)

Caption: On 22 September 1988, two days after the address given in Bruges by Margaret Thatcher, the French daily newspaper Le Monde comments on the British Prime Minister's positions on European integration.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Fontaine, André. 22.09.1988, n° 13577; 45e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Du bon usage de Mme Thatcher", p. 1.

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How Mrs Thatcher functions

Mrs Thatcher loves to repeat herself and belabour the point. So the speech that she made in Bruges on Tuesday 20 September was no bombshell. Most of her statements, which are always worded in that coarse and provocative style that she likes so much, already featured in the rather controversial interview that she gave to the BBC in July in which Jacques Delors was shown no mercy.

The 'Iron Lady's' obsessions are well known, and many European leaders have learned to live with them. They are twofold: (a) the rejection of a supranational Europe, represented by an unelected Brussels 'bureaucracy' with enhanced powers, and (b) the promotion of a liberal Europe (in the economic sense of the term) serving the interests of business and financiers rather than the unions. Mrs Thatcher adds two caveats to these two broad principles: Europe must avoid a trade war at all costs, especially with the United States, and it must accept increased defence spending, if only to avoid encouraging latent isolationism in America.

If the Bruges speech is nothing new, it nevertheless comes as a warning. The few years left before the single market becomes a reality in 1993 will be difficult, arduous and fraught with confrontation amongst the Twelve, the real significance of which has been masked by the reassuring tones of a number of leaders over recent months. As the deadline draws nearer, the obstacles become more apparent, and it will take a lot more all-night marathon sessions to minimise their effect, if not to overcome them.

The dispute over VAT that was sparked off again recently in Paris is a good example of the difficulties to come. Until Mr Rocard began to worry about a serious shortfall in government revenue, the watchword in Paris had been 'harmonisation'. The French Prime Minister's warning, having irritated a good few people, led to some re-thinking in the Élysée, if not in the Ministry of Finance, and it is very likely that in a few months' time the official French position will have shifted slightly. Paradoxically, it will have moved closer to Mrs Thatcher's position. She is fiercely opposed to tax harmonisation but for diametrically opposed reasons. The British Prime Minister is motivated by her concern for liberalism, free trade and competition, whereas in Paris people are beginning to wonder about the scale of the subsidies that should be available to the government after 1992.

The review process is only beginning, and it must be pursued as a matter of urgency. It is unfortunate that the current Greek Presidency is suffering from the effects of the political vacuum in Athens. There are plenty of other subjects for consideration — and for division — whether it be the planned European Central Bank or the social Europe criticised by Mrs Thatcher but dear to Mr Mitterrand and Mr Gonzalez. But the review must take place in the open. Too much rhetoric may well lead to an encouragement of anti-European feelings in various countries, and we can already see some of the symptoms of that emerging here and there.

There must be a guide to how Mrs Thatcher functions. It would be better to find it before she exploits the mistakes, indecision or dreams of those who have no choice but to work with her.