

'Mrs Thatcher calls for a Europe of the nations and a liberal Europe' from Le Monde (22 September 1988)

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Mrs Thatcher calls for a Europe of the nations and a liberal Europe

BRUSSELS (European Communities)
from our own correspondent

On Tuesday 20 September Mrs Thatcher set out on a European tour that is to take her to Belgium, Luxembourg and, from Wednesday evening, Madrid. In Bruges on Tuesday she gave a lengthy speech in which she once again expounded her views on a Europe that she wishes to be both Gaullian and liberal.

Mrs Thatcher's visit to Spain, the first by a British Prime Minister, will be followed one month later by an official visit to Spain by Queen Elizabeth. Aside from European issues, it will be dominated by the Gibraltar question.

'Europe is not the creation of the Treaty of Rome. Nor is the European idea the property of any group or institution ... The European Community belongs to all its members. It must reflect the traditions and aspirations of all its members.' In the name of legitimate diversity, during a speech given on Tuesday 20 September, in Bruges, at the opening session of the academic year at the College of Europe, Mrs Thatcher asserted Britain's right to be European in its own way.

Her line was both in line with de Gaulle's view and liberal and, on a good number of points, some way from the position advocated by most of her partners and by the Commission in Brussels. The Commission, apparently suspicious that new plans are afoot, is not very popular with the British Prime Minister at present, and, even though he is not named, it can be surmised that the repudiation is directed primarily at Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission.

NATO spending

According to Mrs Thatcher, 'willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states is the best way to build a successful European Community.' Long live a Europe of the nations! She remains distrustful of supranational ambitions: 'We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain only to see them reimposed at a European level, with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels.'

And, warming to her subject, she compared those who are inclined to such base ideas to the most backward-thinking of Soviets. 'It is ironic that just when those countries such as the Soviet Union, which have tried to run everything from the centre, are learning that success depends on dispersing power and decisions away from the centre, some in the Community seem to want to move in the opposite direction.'

Limiting regulation

With regard to economic integration, Mrs Thatcher unsurprisingly called on her partners to demonstrate pragmatism, to minimise the amount of new regulation and to beware of grand utopian ambitions. These include, high on the list – although she was careful not to reject it formally – the proposal for a European Central Bank, currently being discussed in Hanover by a committee of governors and experts appointed by the Heads of State and Government and chaired by Jacques Delors.

In her view, this is not the key issue. Her priorities are free movement of capital, the establishment of the Common Market in services and greater use of the ecu. 'They are what Community business and industry need, if they are to compete effectively in the wider world. And they are what the European consumer wants, for they will widen his choice and lower his costs. It is to such basic practical steps that the Community's attention should be devoted. When those have been achieved [...] we shall be in a better position to judge the next moves,' she added.

Nor is it any great discovery that the Prime Minister is suspicious of the project to create the 'social

dimension of the large market,' to which the majority of Member States are committed, in particular France and Spain, as well as the Brussels Commission. 'The aim of a Europe open to enterprise is the moving force behind the creation of the Single European Market by 1992 ... We certainly do not need new regulations which raise the cost of employment and make Europe's labour market less flexible and less competitive with overseas suppliers.'

Traditionally attentive to US concerns, she stressed that Europe must steer clear of protectionism: 'It would be a betrayal if, while breaking down constraints on trade within Europe, the Community were to erect greater external protection.' However, the United States will, above all, appreciate that the British Prime Minister supports its idea of more balanced sharing of defence costs within NATO and is calling for substantial defence spending. 'We must strive to maintain the United States' commitment to Europe's defence. That means recognising the burden on their resources of the world role they undertake and their point that their Allies should play a full part in the defence of freedom, particularly as Europe grows wealthier.'

In short, a Community based on understanding 'but relishing our national identity no less than our common European endeavour'.

Philippe Lemaître