

'Margaret Thatcher plays the de Gaulle card' from La Libre Belgique (21 September 1988)


Caption: On 21 September 1988, the daily newspaper La Libre Belgique comments on the address given the previous day by Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister, at the College of Europe in Bruges, in which she criticised the bureaucratic and centralising tendencies of the Community system.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 21.09.1988, n° 265. Bruxelles. "Margaret Thatcher «joue son de Gaulle»", auteur:Lamfalussy, Christophe , p. 1.

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Margaret Thatcher plays the de Gaulle card

Britain's Iron Lady calls for a Europe of the Nations. Bruges speech a stinging criticism of European 'bureaucracy'

In one of her first speeches devoted entirely to Europe, Britain's Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher, has voiced publicly, outside her home country, her disagreement with the way in which the 'appointed bureaucracy' in Brussels envisages the future form of the European Community.

Addressing an audience of almost 800 people late on Tuesday afternoon in Bruges' mediaeval Belfry, the British Prime Minister argued in favour of the Europe of the Nations envisaged by General de Gaulle. She, too, used the term 'a family of nations'.

'Europe will be stronger precisely because it has France as France, Spain as Spain, Britain as Britain, each with its own customs (Editor's note : the English word "customs" also means "custom duties"), traditions and identity. It would be folly to try to fit them into some sort of identikit European personality.'

This speech, keenly awaited on both sides of the Channel as an implicit response to Jacques Delors' statement that 80% of economic and, perhaps, fiscal and social decisions will soon be taken at European level, was delivered in the absence of Belgium's Prime Minister, Wilfried Martens, at a ceremony to mark the beginning of the academic year at Bruges' College of Europe.

GREATER EUROPE

Under the Belfry's great wooden arches, a stone's throw from the market square, Margaret Thatcher stressed Britain's attachment to a Europe that was not 'the creation of the Treaty of Rome' but had been forged by history. 'The European Community,' she said, 'is one manifestation of European identity, but it is not the only one. We must never forget that, east of the Iron Curtain, people who once enjoyed a full share of European culture, freedom and identity have been cut off from their roots. We shall always look on Warsaw, Prague and Budapest as great European cities.'

The Iron Lady believes Britain has no alternative to being 'in Europe, as part of the Community', but she is opposed to Europe as a 'super-State' and 'an institutional device to be constantly modified according to the dictates of some abstract intellectual concept.' Her convictions are based on five principles: first, the parliamentary powers of each country must be preserved; second, Community action must be practical, particularly when it comes to the reform of agricultural policy; third, Europe's economy must develop along decentralised, free-market lines; fourth, Europe must not be protectionist; and fifth, 'the most fundamental issue' in Mrs Thatcher's view, Europe must strengthen its presence in NATO and Western European Union (WEU) so as to increase its contribution to Western defence.

MOTORWAY UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Judging by the deployment of security forces, the Belgian authorities' main worry was an attack by the IRA, the Irish Regular Army. No fewer than 350 local police officers were deployed in Bruges itself. Members of the Dyane special operations unit were positioned on houses round the market square. And, along the motorway leading to the coast, gendarmes were posted every five hundred metres to protect bridges, access roads and tunnels. Moving at 80 mph, the convoy reached Laeken Palace at 7.30 p.m. precisely, the second stop on a journey that will take Mrs Thatcher on to Luxembourg and Spain.

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