

SPEECH TO THE FOREIGN POLICY CENTRE
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Of all the changes the Labour Party undertook in the 1980s and 90s, one of the most significant was its attitude towards the European Union.

Twenty years ago, the party fought a General Election on an explicit and straightforward policy of withdrawal from what was then the EEC. To quote from that now infamous manifesto, we promised to “open immediate negotiations with our EEC partners, and introduce the necessary legislation, to prepare for *Britain’s withdrawal from the EEC*, to be completed well within the lifetime of the Labour government.”

Such a course was by then no longer a viable one and the British electorate took the view that a policy of withdrawal would have been wrong.

Ten years earlier – and, more particularly, in the 1975 referendum – Britain did have a genuine choice about the strategic direction of its future relationship with the rest of Europe. Those of us who campaigned for a No vote did so because we felt a viable alternative course existed at the time.

Withdrawal today would however be nothing less than a betrayal of Britain’s fundamental national interests.

Britain’s deepened membership of the European Union is a vital part of our country’s economic prosperity and wellbeing, and an increasingly important element of our political and diplomatic influence in the world.

Almost 60% of our exports go to the rest of the EU, and 3 million jobs rely on our place in the largest single market in the world – a market that is set to rise to 450 million people from next year.

And the benefits to Britain extend well beyond the economic. Our air is cleaner and beaches less polluted because of binding environmental standards agreed across the Union. Workers’ rights have been enhanced and British people can travel with ease across our continent.

As a party, we have always believed that nations co-operating achieve more together than they can alone. After all, that’s why we have felt so strongly about the United Nations and other multilateral international organisations working for the common good.

So as an active and engaged member of the European Union, our Labour government has helped achieve further benefits to British citizens on a range of issues from working hours to tackling cross-border crime, from more effective measures to deal with asylum to the whole Lisbon agenda for economic reform.

And as Gordon Brown made clear in June, if and when we believe that the economic conditions are right and the tests spelt out by Gordon have been met, we will propose to the British people in a referendum that the UK join the Single European currency.

But perhaps the EU's greatest achievement is a more profound one.

It is easy to forget that but for the last 50 years or so Europe resolved its conflicts through violence and war. The visceral hatreds and animosities which existed between countries of our continent appeared to be insoluble to most of my parents' generation.

Yet the EU has helped to provide a means of reconciliation and friendship between once hostile enemies. By encouraging a genuine sense of shared destiny, it has helped achieve the most basic goal of its creators: the absence of war.

Moreover, it has done so by advancing fundamental values of freedom, tolerance and democracy across our European continent.

The prospect and reality of EU membership was an important element in the transition of Spain, Portugal and Greece from right-wing dictatorships 30 years ago to vibrant democracies.

And today, we are witnessing its most historic advance with the final end to the Cold War division of Europe and the welcoming of countries which for decades laboured under the tyranny of the Soviet bloc.

Eight of Europe's new democracies are to join the EU next year, along with Cyprus and Malta. For countries like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, EU membership will be a key part of their full emergence as strong, confident and prosperous nation states.

The expansion of the EU to Central and Eastern Europe will boost the influence and prestige of the Union. But it will result in a significant enhancement to Britain's own economic and political interests too.

It is already changing the culture and dynamics of the EU to our advantage. After all, countries which have successfully thrown off the shackles of Soviet tyranny are not about to agree to subsume their national identities into any superstate of anti-European myth.

And so I believe that enlargement of the EU should be the cause for celebration across the political spectrum here in Britain.

Yet over recent months we have witnessed the bizarre spectacle of senior Conservatives travelling to countries of this new Europe urging people in national referendums to reject EU membership.

They include David Heathcoat-Amory, the man whom the Conservative Party chose to be one of the British Parliament's two representatives on the Convention on the Future of Europe, and two Conservative MEPs, Daniel Hannan and Roger Helmer.

None of these can be dismissed as eccentrics on the fringe of the Tory Party. And while they have been spectacularly unsuccessful so far in winning over the people of Central and Eastern Europe the fact that they have received no censure from the Party leadership speaks volumes for how the Conservative Party's centre of gravity has shifted rightwards under Iain Duncan Smith.

Today's Tory party is a far cry from the one which took Britain into the EEC in 1973 and negotiated both the Single European Act in 1986 and the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 – the two European treaties which saw the greatest pooling of sovereignty in the last 30 years.

The dogmatic hatred of the European Union within the Tory Party is both deep and visceral. Pro-Europeans like Chris Patten, Douglas Hurd and Kenneth Clarke are marginalised, even ridiculed, by a new majority which views hostility to the EU as an act of ideological faith.

The election of the Maastricht rebel Iain Duncan Smith as Conservative Party leader two years ago was the anti-Europeans' greatest success – and he has not disappointed them.

Ten years ago, Iain Duncan Smith was part of a small but obsessive clique of right-wingers in the Conservative Party intent on wrecking the Maastricht Treaty and bringing down John Major's government.

A Government whip described the group to a Tory backbencher of the time as “nutters” (Ian Taylor, Hansard, 21.5.03, col. 1073).

Now, alongside Iain Duncan Smith in the Shadow Cabinet, and now seemingly responsible for policy on the forthcoming EU constitutional treaty, is the hardest nut of all, Bill Cash.

This would be funny if it were not so serious. Serious because Britain's main Opposition party is now run by people whose life's work has been directed at undermining Britain's place within the European Union.

Of course, in his bid for respectability, Mr Duncan Smith has been very careful. For 12 months, he barely uttered a word on Europe for fear of scaring the horses, and remarks made before his leadership election about renegotiation and withdrawal have not been repeated.

A stronger, more able leader might have used this opportunity to take on the destructive ideology of Tory anti-Europeanism as part of a strategy of returning the party to the mainstream of British politics. There was perhaps no one better placed to do it, just as Neil Kinnock was the only politician in 1983 able to begin the reform of the Labour Party.

But Iain Duncan Smith is no Neil Kinnock – and is as much a prisoner of the anti-Europeans as its spokesman.

The experience of one Tory Party pressure group committed to the prospect of UK withdrawal from the EU is telling. Conservatives Against a Federal Europe (Café) boasts Iain Duncan Smith as one of its Vice Presidents and, after years of acting as a thorn in the side of Central Office, decided to suspend active campaigning following his election as leader of the party.

Yet, for all this, Duncan Smith pleads that the Tory Party is not in favour of withdrawal. He accuses those of suggesting otherwise of “telling a lie” (Speech in Prague, 10.7.03). Indeed, in an attempt to convince people of his undying support for the European Union, he travelled to Prague last month to make that speech in which he described EU enlargement – the very same enlargement opposed by senior Tories in Estonia, Malta and elsewhere – as “historic” and the Union’s “greatest achievement”.

And in a phrase which would have made Bill Cash startle, he even commended the EU’s founders for their clarity of vision.

But Bill Cash and the others who share Duncan Smith’s history and instincts have no need to worry, for behind these warm words was an extraordinary speech which painted a picture of an EU of his dreams which, even if desirable, would never be attainable.

It inhabited a fantasy world of distorted logic and contrived demons to suggest that the EU had been hijacked by power-crazed and unelected bureaucrats determined to destroy the sovereignty of national parliaments and create a United States of Europe against the wishes of democratically-elected governments.

Quite apart from the fact that change within the EU can only take place with the agreement of member states, his answer to this demon appears to be to reject some of the fundamental aspects of the EU which Britain has long accepted and, instead, suggest the creation of some sort of European free-trade area where any one of 25 or more national parliaments could exercise a veto over any particular EU measure.

In doing so, Mr Duncan Smith appears far keener to re-fight the battle of 1993 – and even 1973 – than make constructive proposals for 2003 and beyond.

Little wonder then that Ken Clarke said that “Iain should not pretend this speech is not a call for withdrawal from the European Union in any recognisable form.” [Gallery News, 10 July 2003]

Mr Duncan Smith’s argument that the EU should not have “supremacy over our national laws” is extraordinary from someone who claims to be in favour of British membership of the European Union. From its outset with the Treaty of Rome, EU law has had primacy over national law in those areas where member states agree. The British Parliament accepted this in 1973.

How, for example, could the Single Market work if each member state decided to ignore agreed measures, and there was no supranational power to enforce it? That was, after all, why Margaret Thatcher agreed to give up the national veto on a wide range of issues in the 1986 Single European Act.

I know of no other EU country which has advocated such a proposal, and there was no effort made in this speech to suggest where Britain would receive support in the event that a Conservative government put it forward.

Even in the accession countries with which Duncan Smith crassly attempts to align himself there is no appetite for the changes he suggests.

Yet without support for such a wholesale renegotiation of existing treaties, this imaginary Conservative government would be faced either with capitulation or withdrawal. It is the choice which today's Tory Party would prefer not to acknowledge publicly. But it is the only choice there is. And either course would do lasting damage to Britain at home and abroad.

That is the reason for various attempts from senior Conservatives such as David Heathcoat-Amory to contrive some mythical alternative of "associate membership". Quite apart from the unfortunate position Britain would find itself – being subject to measures over which it had no say - such a prospect is the stuff of right-wing pamphlets and think-tanks and has no connection with today's EU.

For all the faults of Labour's 1983 manifesto, at least the commitment to withdraw from the EEC was honest and straightforward. It was based on the acceptance that one member state cannot dictate fundamental reform of what is now the EU without the agreement of our European partners. After all, collective organisations only work on the basis of consensus and accommodation.

The suggestion that a Conservative government led by Iain Duncan Smith will be able to subvert this logic in the future is at best hopelessly naïve, at worst profoundly dishonest.

Conclusion

The EU is not perfect. Far from it. That is why Britain has played a leading role within the Convention on the Future of Europe to propose ways of enhancing its accountability and effectiveness.

We have, for example, championed the case of giving for the first time national Parliaments a role in the decision-making structure of the EU. We have proposed giving greater strategic authority to the body which represents national governments, the European Council. And we are working closely with our friends across Europe to fashion a more stable, coherent structure for the EU which better delivers in those areas where it can make a positive difference to people's lives.

The draft constitutional text from the Convention on the Future of Europe does not have everything we want, but it is a good starting point for discussion between member states, and we will be working hard in the forthcoming Intergovernmental Conference to improve it. Yet our ability to lead change comes not from seeking isolation and marginalisation but by active engagement and support.

That is what has marked out our policy and with a dynamic, successful economy the envy of many and diplomatic authority across the world, we have been able to exert real influence within the European Union.

Yet far from seeking to promote ways of extending Britain's power and prestige, today's Tory Party, racked by ideological hostility to the EU, is committed to a course of diluting and diminishing that influence and authority.

At its heart, this flawed ideology represents a profound lack of confidence in Britain and what our country stands for. It is inward-looking and reactive and inhabits a time warp out of touch with the reality of Britons living, working and travelling in today's Europe. Fundamentally, it represents a raw deal for Britain and would set this country on a profoundly damaging course which would be catastrophic for British jobs and British prestige.

Today, there are clear dividing lines between the two main political parties on the vital issues. On one hand, there is a party committed to excellent public services for all, and engaged within the EU and on the international stage to promote national interests and values of democracy, freedom and the rule of law. On the other is a party committed to cutting investment in health and education and prepared to lead Britain to international isolation and withdrawal.

This is a divide we shall be confident to take to the British people at the next election.

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