

'Mrs Thatcher: will she finally become a convert to the cause?' from Europe (21 September 1988)

Caption: In his editorial of 21 September 1988, Emanuele Gazzo, Director of Agence Europe, explains why, in his opinion, the speech given in Bruges by Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister, adds nothing new as regards the objectives of the European policy pursued by Britain's Conservative Government.

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Mrs Thatcher: will she finally become a convert to the cause?

An on the spot commentary on Mrs Thatcher's speech to the College of Bruges this afternoon (see detailed report on the speech in today's P.D.) leads us to conclude that there exists a difference in tone and style between this text and other declarations and speeches made by the Prime Minister, particularly the interview given to the BBC on 23 July (cf. our commentaries from 5-9 September). In her efforts to be less aggressive, she no doubt took into account the appeals to be more moderate from within her own entourage and also the nature and attitudes of the public she had been called upon to address as well as the very event itself.

Whatever the reasons may be, we must give her credit for having made this effort, since the European debate is a thorny one, made up of ideas and interests, which are all legitimate, which excludes any form of dogmatism and fanaticism from all parties so that everyone is able to retain a coherency of vision and be open to ideas held by others.

On this occasion it would seem that Mrs Thatcher is concerned about her country being rejected because it is thought to be "anti-European", wishing to seek an alternative elsewhere, whilst at the same time proclaiming the fact that it is an integral part of "the European identity", and that it has made a worthy contribution to the development and safeguarding of this identity. Secondly, she insists on the fact that the Community is not all of Europe, but merely one of its manifestations. Here she is pushing on an open door. Many Europeans — including the author of these lines — fought for the United Kingdom to become a full member of the Community, even before Mrs Thatcher came onto the scene, because they felt that without the UK, Europe would not really be Europe. These people have not changed their opinion, indeed they continue to believe that whilst the present borders of "organised" Europe must remain certain and stable, they are by no means eternal.

Having said this, and having acknowledged a slight softening in style, we must now recognise — and indeed lament — the fact that Mrs Thatcher's speech in Bruges contained nothing new or different on her conception of Europe and of the objectives pursued by its European policies. We feel that it is very important to give a parallel reading (bearing in mind the differences in responsibility borne by a head of government and a great historian like Christopher Dawson and a teacher like Lukaszewski) of the two speeches made today.

We are struck by the presence of the word utopia in both of the speeches. As far as the English historian Dawson was concerned, the United States of Europe, which may well have appeared to be a utopia in 1942, was the only safeguard for the national liberties and cultural identities of the peoples of Europe. A head of government however, such as Mrs Thatcher, must not allow herself to be distracted by utopian objectives. Despite this, she did quote Paul-Henri Spaak, a statesman who always upheld the theory that today's utopia should become tomorrow's reality. Mr Lukaszewski no doubt reminded her of the fact that another statesman (British this time), namely Winston Churchill, said in 1948 that this objective, to form the United States of Europe, should be achieved as a matter of urgency, even though it may well appear to be a utopian objective.

It is possible to make many other comments, and doubtless the reader will do so. However it is enough to quote the erroneous interpretation of the European institutions as the product of a mania for centralisation and bureaucracy, whereas they were set up to eliminate national bureaucrats and to get rid of confusing and contradictory regulations by replacing them with common, simple and clear regulations. She also has a mistaken interpretation of federalism which is the opposite of a stateless centralism and presents the best defence of local, regional and national specific issues. Mrs Thatcher has failed to understand one fundamental point: the objective which she herself advocates — freedom and unity, at the same time retaining our identity — cannot be achieved with the Europe of last century. This requires a federal European power. Mrs Thatcher only has to become a convert in order to speed up the achievement of this utopia.

Emanuele Gazzo