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Britain and the Continent Transcript

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Britain and the Continent

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Ladies and gentlemen, this is the first in a series of lectures on Britain and Europe since the War. Now, as you all know, this is a key issue in British politics and, in a speech delivered in January this year, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, said that he proposed to negotiate a new settlement in Europe and that, if still in power, he would put this to the British people in a referendum by the end of 2017. In this referendum, we will be asked to vote on whether we want to stay in a reformed European union or whether we want to leave it. Now, what David Cameron has done is to put the legitimacy of Britain's continued membership of the European Union in doubt, and it is possible that we will in due course leave the European Union. We are the only one of the 27 members of the European Union whose continued membership is uncertain. Of course David Cameron has only taken this course in response to political pressures, in part pressures in Parliament from backbenchers in the Conservative Party, but much more perhaps from pressures in the country, where Euro-scepticism is much stronger than it is in Parliament, and all recent opinion polls show that a large minority at least would like Britain to leave the European Union, and some polls show that a majority would like to leave. We also have the growth of the UKIP Party, whose main policy plank is that Britain should leave the European Union.

But Europe is of course by no means a new issue in British politics. It is been a major issue in British politics since 1961 when the Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, first sought to make Britain a member of the European Community, as the European Union was then called. Now, that first attempt failed, thanks to a veto by France's President, General de Gaulle, and a second attempt, by Harold Wilson's Labour Government, also failed in 1967, and we did not finally enter the European Community until 1973 under the Conservative Government of Edward Heath. That of course did not end the argument, which continues until the present day.

Europe has been a toxic issue in British politics, and it has caused divisions, unlike most issues, it has caused divisions not only between the parties, divisions which perhaps could have been handled, but also deep divisions within the parties.

Europe broke up the Labour Party in the 1980s, in 1981. The Labour leadership was then hostile to Europe, Euro-sceptic, if you like, and there was a breakaway pro-European party called the Social Democratic Party, which eventually merged with the Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats, the current Liberal Democrats.

More recently, Europe has split the Conservatives, and the issue caused huge problems to John Major's Conservative Government in the 1990s when it sought to ratify the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, and divisions on Europe almost certainly contributed to the very heavy defeat of the Conservatives in 1997. Today, there are a number of Conservative backbenchers, probably as many as 80, who want to leave the European Union, although of course the official Government policy is to remain in the European Union provided a satisfactory new settlement can be reached.

Some might argue that the fundamental conflict in post-War British politics is not so much between left and right as between those who believe that Britain's future lies with Europe and those who believe it does not. This profound political divide has cut across the parties and it unites some very odd bedfellows: if you look at the pro-European camp, you have to include Harold Macmillan, Edward Heath, Roy Jenkins, and Tony Blair; the anti-Europeans are Enoch Powell, Michael Foot, and Margaret Thatcher – very odd alignments...

Now, the question is: why does Europe produce such profound divisions, and I think the answer is it gives rise to the most fundamental issue of politics, the basic attitude toward national identity, about what it is to be British. The main purpose of this first lecture is to show that Europe has always been a problem for Britain, in a way that it has not been for any other Member State. In future weeks, I shall look at how the problem has been dealt with by post-War Governments, from Attlee to David Cameron. I shall try and put both sides of the arguments fairly, but that is probably a forlorn hope given the passion on both sides of the Government, so I probably will not be successful, and it is in any case difficult to put forward political propositions which command universal assent. But my purpose is not to argue for a particular position, but to try to elucidate the arguments of both sides as fairly as I can, so I hope you will give me credit for trying even if I do not succeed!

The fundamental question is this: is Britain part of Europe? Geographically of course, the answer is "yes", but what is the political answer? For much of British history, the answer is "no".

Let us go back in time to 1900. Then, I think almost everyone would have said we are not politically part of Europe, we have nothing to do with the Continent, and people might have added "The less we have to do with it, the better!" We lived in what was called "splendid isolation". We were an imperial power and, at that time, the British Empire covered nearly a fifth of the world's surface. It was the largest land empire the world has ever seen.

Of course, we do not have opinion polls from that period, but it is reasonable to suppose that most people in Britain did not feel they had much in common with the Continent. The people on the Continent were very odd – for one thing, they did not speak English, for some strange reason... The people who spoke English were to be found not on the Continent, but in the Empire, in the dominions, in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa, in India, the African colonies, and of course the United States, and that was where our ties lay.

In the nineteenth century, the great German Chancellor, Bismarck, once predicted that the central political factor of the twentieth century would be that the Americans spoke English – a wise comment, I think.

Due to our island situation, our trading pattern was quite different from that of the Continental powers. As the first industrial nation, we had a much smaller agricultural sector than our Continental competitors. We were a maritime power, relying on cheap food from the colonies, and our commercial system was based on free trade, unlike the high tariff countries of the Continent, with their large agricultural sectors. Because we were a maritime power and an island, we could rely on the Navy to defend us and, unlike Continental countries, we did not need a large Army, so we did not have conscription, unlike them, in peacetime, until early-1939, just five months before the outbreak of the Second World War. We were not a military nation.

In 1900, we had no commitments on the Continent at all. Our only strategic commitment was the defence of India, of the Indian Empire, not so much against Indian nationalism, which was only just beginning at this time, but against Russia, which we thought was casting envious eyes on the Indian Empire. The defence of India was in fact a very heavy burden. The main purpose of our Army was not to defend our shores – the Navy did that – but the purpose of our Army was to defend India. The great imperial proconsul, Sir Herbert Kitchener, who was a military member of the Viceroy's Council at the beginning of the twentieth century, said the defence of India against Russia was a heavy burden – it required not only thousands of men but, in addition, three million camels. It was not clear where these camels were to be found...

We had no troops on the Continent in 1900, and we did not agree to maintain troops on the Continent in time of peace until 1954, and we had no alliances. We lived in splendid isolation, protected by the Navy and the Empire. Now, of course, that period of isolation has long still gone, but perhaps it still retains some of its impact upon the British people, who do not want ties with the Continent.

That was certainly the view of France's President de Gaulle when, just over 50 years ago, in January 1963, he vetoed Britain's entry into the European Community – his first veto. It may be that sometimes one's opponents see things rather more clearly than one's friends. In the press conference at which he announced his veto, de Gaulle said that the Treaty of Rome which established the European Community had been signed in 1957 by six Continental states which were of the same nature. Britain, by contrast, he said, was insular: "She is maritime. She is linked through her exchanges, her markets, her supply lines, to the most diverse, and often the most distant, countries. She pursues essentially industrial and commercial activities, and only slight agricultural ones." That, he said, was why Britain was so opposed to the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Community, which the French regarded as an essential element of it. De Gaulle concluded that, I quote: "The nature, the structure, the very situation" – "conjuncture" in French – "the very situation that are England's differ profoundly from those of the Continentals." But he did accept that Britain might evolve, and I quote, "little by little" towards the Continent, and he concluded by saying that if that happened, no one would be more pleased than France. That perhaps was not wholly sincere... So, Britain, de Gaulle said and believed, was insular and maritime, and fundamentally not European, and I think many Euro-sceptics would agree with that view, and certainly many British politicians do agree with that and have agreed with it.

In 1952, the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, was speaking at Columbia University in America, and the Americans at that time were eager, as they are today, that Britain should be part of the European political unit. The Americans now want Britain to stay in the European Union. Then, they wanted Britain to lead Europe in the post-War years. Eden rather rebuked them. He said this: "If you drive a nation to adopt procedures which run counter to its instincts, you weaken and may destroy the motive force of its action. You will realise that I am speaking of the frequent suggestions that the United Kingdom should join a federation on the Continent of Europe. This is something which we know in our bones we cannot do. Britain's story and her interests lie far beyond the Continent of Europe. Our thoughts move across the seas to the many communities in which our people play their part, in every corner of the world, and these are our family ties – that is our life."

Eden said the suggestion that the United Kingdom should join a federation on the Continent of Europe was something which "we know in our bones we cannot do", and that view was echoed by the Labour Leader, Hugh Gaitskell, ten years later in 1962, when the Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was seeking to enter the European Committee. Gaitskell declared that for Britain to join a federal Europe would mean "the end of a thousand years of history", and I think that view would have been echoed by Enoch Powell, by Margaret Thatcher, but also I think by David Cameron because, although David Cameron wants to keep us in Europe, he certainly does not want Britain to become part of a federation in Europe.

In the early-1950s, Anthony Eden told his Private Secretary what you have got to remember is that if you looked at the post-bag of any English village and examined the letters coming in from abroad to the whole population, 90% of them would come from way beyond Europe. They would come, I suppose, from relatives in Australia,

Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and so on. Europe, Eden said, was where their relatives who had died in two World Wars were buried. "People want to forget about Europe – their ties are with the old Commonwealth."

Now, pro-Europeans would say that this mindset was formed during the era of Empire, and that was an era which pulled us away from Europe by the coattails. The pro-Europeans would say that the era of Empire, even though it has so strongly coloured Britain's sense of national identity, was an aberrant period in her long history, during most of which Britain's fate and that of the Continent have been intertwined. After all, we fought Napoleon and we fought two World Wars because of conflicts that arose in Europe, not in the Empire. The First World War began with the assassination of an Austrian Archduke in Bosnia and the German invasion of neutral Belgium in 1914, nearly 100 years ago. Incidentally, I will be giving a lecture on 1914 next year to commemorate that occasion. The Second World War began because of the German invasion of Poland. So, the question arises of whether Britain's separation from the Continent is really fundamental or whether it resulted primarily from our imperial experience which is a deviation. Are we not more European than we think, or if not, could we become European?

Now, de Gaulle's successor as French President, Georges Pompidou, thought that we could in fact, and indeed were on the road to becoming European. In 1971, when negotiating Britain's entry with Edward Heath, he asked Edward Heath a rhetorical question. He asked Edward Heath what he thought of Europe, in other words whether Britain was really determined to become European, whether Britain, which is an island, was determined to tie herself to the Continent, and whether she was prepared, consequently, to loosen her ties with the open sea towards which she has always looked. Then Pompidou answered his rhetorical question, getting Edward Heath's response, and he said this: "And I can say that the explanations and views expressed to me by Mr Heath are in keeping with France's concept of the future of Europe." The question is: did Edward Heath's answer correspond with the British conception of the future of Europe?

Euro-sceptics would say it did not. They would say that a concept of Europe which included a Common Agricultural Policy and a Common Fisheries Policy, as well as the sacrifices of sovereignty involved, might in well with France's concept of the future of Europe, but not Britain's, and that the European enterprise was not actually in Britain's interests at all, and they would say that many on the Continent no doubt define themselves as European but we do not. We sometimes define ourselves by contrast with Europe – we talk of Britain and Europe.

As I have said, we fought two World Wars in the twentieth century because of what happened in Europe, because of what happened in what might be called faraway parts of Europe, and on both occasions, we fought in alliance with France, in large part to preserve the independence of France, and also, of course, of Belgium, and we did so because most people took the view that British independence would be worth little if a hostile power controlled France and the Channel ports. So, we thought that our security was very much dependent on what happened in the Continent, but the security of France, in turn, seemed to depend upon her having Eastern allies as a counterweight against Germany: Russia in 1914, and Poland in 1939. It is for that reason that what happened east of the Rhine, in the Balkans in 1914, and in Poland in 1939, affected us so deeply – we were dragged into disputes that seemed about very distant countries.

On that argument, our future depended not only on what happened in Canada, Australia, India, or Africa, but on what happened on the Continent, and in any case, the imperial alternative ceased to exist after 1945. Whatever the chances of imposing imperial unity had disappeared. The old dominions like Australia were moving away from the British orbit, while India and the African colonies became independent and there was no reason to believe that their interests were the same as those of Britain.

However, after both World Wars, the axiom in Britain was: never again! We did not want a Continental commitment and felt that we had been strongest and most secure when we stood alone. The main events, which have stamped our consciousness, seem to be those when we were alone confronting a Europe which was hostile, in particular the Napoleonic Wars and 1940.

1940 and World War II constitute a very powerful folk memory because they seem to show that we did not stand or fall as a nation with the other nations of the Continent. We, unlike them, could survive a military defeat because of the English Channel. We could withdraw our troops from Europe, as we did at Dunkirk, and, unlike the countries of the Continent, we could remain in the War. Because we were an island, we were free to carry on the fight after a military defeat.

The European country we were most similar to, ironically, was not any of the Continental states but Russia because Russia also, as the war against Napoleon and the Second World War showed, could not be defeated militarily, not of course because she was an island but because of her huge immensity of size. She could suffer, as she did in the Second World War, defeat after defeat, but not be finally defeated, and that made her similar to Britain.

So, the Second World War, I think, instilled into our consciousness the idea that our commitment to the Continent was bound to be limited, could not be a total commitment, and that has been the view of all British Prime Ministers I think, with the one exception of Edward Heath, about Europe: they have wanted to be in it but

not totally in it – it is a partial commitment. From this point of view, perhaps Pompidou was wrong to believe that Edward Heath had converted Britain to view herself as a European power. I think Edward Heath, for better or worse, stands alone. Had Roy Jenkins become Prime Minister, he too would have taken that view I think, but most British leaders have been what you might call limited pro-Europeans. Because, of course, the whole experience of the Second World War and the immediate post-War years seemed to reinforce the differences between Britain and the Continent.

Most Continental countries had either succumbed to Fascism or Nazism or been occupied, and we of course had escaped all that, so we alone did not have to be ashamed of our wartime history. The countries of the Continent had to begin again and they had to rethink their whole political system, their constitutions, and so on. But, with all that, they decided on a new idea, or rather on the resurrection of an old idea, the idea of European unity.

Before the twentieth century, lots of philosophers, intellectuals and prophets had said that European unity was a good thing and that Europe should be united, but politicians had not taken it up, but in the twentieth century, the ideal of the unity of Europe was to become a political reality, and that was in consequence, paradoxically, of a sense of European weakness and decline, a sense that the Continent was coming to be overshadowed by the growing power of the United States and Russia, and that the key decisions affecting Europe would be taken by those outside powers unless Europe got her act together. So, European unity arose out of a perception the decline of Europe, not of its strength.

Before the Second War, a few, in my view, farsighted, political leaders thought that Europe should be united, and in the 1920s, the Foreign Ministers of France and Germany produced a plan for European unity. This was commended at the time by Winston Churchill, who said this: “The conception of a United States of Europe is right. Every step taken to that end, which appeases the obsolete hatreds and vanished oppressions, which makes easier the traffic and reciprocal services of Europe, which encourages nations to lay aside their precautionary panoply, is good in itself.” But then, in words that prefigured his post-Second World War policies, he said this: “But we” – that is Britain – “But we have our own dream and our task. We are with Europe but not of it. We are linked, but not compromised.” I think Churchill’s phrase “We are with Europe, but not of it,” again summarises very well the policy of most British Prime Ministers towards Europe in the post-War era.

After the Second World War, I think for a time the idea of Europe became, for the first time, an element in the popular consciousness of the Continental countries and it became a popular cause. It was because it became a popular cause that the formation and development of the European Community was possible. It became a popular cause because the six founding members of the European Community, who were Germany, Italy, France, and the Benelux countries, had all suffered from Nazism, from enemy occupation, or from both. Britain alone of course had suffered neither. Now, for many on the Continent, they saw the struggle against Hitler as an aspect of a supranational struggle because Hitler, it seemed, had exploited divisions amongst the European powers to establish Nazi domination over Europe, so the war against him was not merely a conventional war between nation states, it was also a common European struggle, a struggle for a certain conception of European civilisation, and the War seemed for many to take on the character of a war of belief, in which nations themselves were divided.

Two of the leading elements of the Resistance were elements of the Catholic Church and the socialist movement, and the Resistance therefore gave rise to the possibility of a revived international socialism and a new political force, a democratic Catholic party called Christian Democracy. These two political ideologies could come together – they disagreed on all sorts of things, but they could come together in the cause of European unity. They are still the two most powerful forces on the Continent and the two most powerful forces in the European Parliament: the socialist group and the Christian Democrat group, which is called the European People’s Party. The constitution of the European People’s Party explicitly commits it to a federal Europe – Angela Merkel, incidentally, of course of the Christian Democrats in Germany, an important part of that – a commitment to a federal Europe, and it is a remarkable supranational party because any individual in any member state can join it directly, though I suspect that very few in Britain have joined.

The British Conservative Party was allowed to be part of the European People’s Party group without of course committing itself to a federal Europe – they were given a special dispensation, as Britain often is in Europe. But shortly after David Cameron became leader of the Conservative Party in 2005, he very significantly withdrew the British Conservatives from the European People’s Party group.

On the Continent, the European ideal was seen by many, and in particular by the Founding Fathers, as a reaction against nationalism, of which Fascism and Nazism were seen as perverted forms, and from the shock of defeat and occupation, many European leaders drew the lesson that the nation state had failed and that they could become influential only if they combined together. Obviously, the idea occurred most to those whose countries had suffered severe defeats: Germany, Italy, France and the Benelux countries.

But the idea did have some support in Britain, and in particular, for a time it seemed, despite the words I have already quoted, the support of Britain’s War leader, Winston Churchill, now in opposition after the General Election of 1945. A little over a year after the end of the War in Europe, in September 1946, Churchill gave a major speech at Zurich University. He was apparently in a very grumpy mood before the speech, and his son-in-

law, Duncan Sands, who was a very strong pro-European asked him why. Churchill replied that he was due to make a speech comparing the British parliamentary system and the Swiss cantonal system of government, and Sands' objection, "But you know nothing about it." "That is why I am so irritable," the great man replied. Duncan Sands said, "Give up that idea. Why not make a speech on the very question we have been discussing at dinner, the question of the future of Europe?" That is how the speech was born.

Churchill began by stressing the ravages of a Europe still torn by war and the danger that the "Dark Ages" which had been threatened by the Nazis, as he put it, "...in all their cruelty and squalor may still return. When the Nazi power was broken, I asked myself what was the best advice I could give my fellow citizens in our ravaged and exhausted Continent. My counsel to Europe can be given in a single word: unite." There was, he declared, a remedy, which if it were generally and spontaneously adopted, would, as if by a miracle, transform the whole scene and would, in a few years, make all Europe, or the greater part of it, as free and happy as Switzerland is today, and that remedy was to recreate the European family, or as much of it as we can, and provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, in safety and in freedom. He said, "We must build a kind of United States of Europe." I think all that would get him expelled from the Conservative Party today, but still, that is what he said. He then said, "I am now going to say something that will astonish you. The first step in the re-creation of the European family must be a partnership between France and Germany. There can be no revival of Europe without a spiritually great France and a spiritually great Germany." That was a bold thing to say just sixteenth months after the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Churchill, however, did not make clear in his Zurich speech whether or not Britain herself should join the movement for European unity. When he was actually in government in 1951, he did not associate Britain with it, as I will explain in future weeks, and perhaps the truth is that the great man, who was by then getting very old – he was 76 when he came back to power in 1951, perhaps he simply could not make up his mind whether Britain should join or not. Because the truth was that, not having suffered the shock of defeat, Britain drew very different lessons from the War because the War seemed to show not the weakness of nationalism for us and the need for supranational organisation but, rather, it had shown how powerful British patriotism was and how it should be preserved. Churchill had insisted that we defend what he called "our Island", as a fortress which kept us safe from invasion, and the rhetoric of our finest hour and victory in 1945 proved the strength of validity of Britain and her Commonwealth, or, as Churchill always preferred to call it, "the Empire", and so there was no reason why we should encourage a supranational movement.

Ironically, during the earlier part of the War, before the fall of France, we had seemed to be moving towards Europe. In March 1940, Britain and France signed a treaty pledging themselves not to make a separate peace with Hitler, and they declared also that they would maintain after the War "...a community of action in all spheres for so long as may be necessary to effect the reconstruction, with the assistance of other nations, of an international order which will ensure the liberty of peoples, respect for law, and maintenance of peace in Europe."

This declaration led the Times to comment that "Anglo-French unity has already reached a more advanced point than at any period during the last War, and what is more, it is realised in both countries that this point is but the first step towards a closer and more lasting association." A French newspaper commented at that point that "England is now in Europe."

In June 1940, Churchill, who was seeking to forestall a French surrender, offered France an indissoluble union with Britain, in a declaration which was agreed by de Gaulle, who was then in exile in Britain. He said that there would be indissoluble union, with the two countries, "...in their common defence of justice and freedom against subjection to a system which reduced mankind to a life of robots and slaves." But just as this request was going back to France, the French decided to ask for an armistice. Had the proposal come earlier, it might well have been implemented. It was very generous to the French because we, the British, offered to share the costs of the War, which of course were much greater in France than they were in Britain.

This proposal was to be revived by the French Prime Minister Guy Mollet in 1956 after the Suez Crisis, which was a joint Anglo-French enterprise which failed, partly because of American opposition, and the French took the view that this made European unity even more important, whereas we, the British, took the view that it showed we should not fall foul of the United States, so we took different views of that. But the proposal was raised again of Anglo-French unity...

Now, in 1940, after the French surrender, the then French Prime Minister remarked that Churchill's offer might have marked the beginning of a United States of Europe.

You may say, if it was right for Britain at this crisis of the War to take the tremendous risk of the unknown inherent in the merging of sovereignty, surely it was true for a long time that Britain's security was inextricably involved with the Continent and we could only secure ourselves by a total commitment to Europe. But of course, the fall of France and the further progress of the War were to sever the connection between Britain and the Continent, and it is a measure of the reluctance, in 1940, and perhaps also today, of Britain to involve herself in the Continent that the evacuation of Dunkirk is generally treated in Britain not as a defeat but as some sort of victory.

George VI probably reflected the feelings of the British people when he wrote to his mother after the French surrender: "Personally, I feel happier now that we have no allies to be polite to and pamper."

Britain was absent from the Continent from 1940 to 1944. That is one reason why British casualties in the Second World War were so much less than in the First, because the vast bulk of Allied casualties were sustained on the Eastern Front by the Russians. So, the general effect of the War, despite what had appeared in 1939 and 1940, was not to bind Britain close to the Continent but to undermine an incipient Europeanism and confirm the British in their view that their fate was separate from that of the Continent and that they, unlike the shattered nations of the Continent, remained a great power with a reach beyond Europe. So, we did not sign the Treaty of Rome, the founding document of the European Community, in 1957, and when we finally came to join in 1973, we found considerable difficulties.

One of the official negotiators on the British side said about our entry in 1973 that there had been a number of European enthusiasts in public life, who had always imagined that entering the Community would be an easy, pleasant and comfortable process. "They had never bothered to discover how intensely technical and difficult the process was bound to be, and had relied too much on mere idealism and good fellowship to do the trick." That comes from a pro-European negotiator, not someone hostile to it.

Now, we found, upon joining, that we were required to make far greater adjustments than any of the other member states, and the question was whether we could make them, and whether we wanted to make them, and whether it was in our interest to make them.

The first fundamental problem was that our economic and social arrangements were often very different from those of the other member states. Our system of indirect taxation was different, so we had to introduce VAT to replace Purchase Tax, and our system for subsidising agriculture was different because, as I mentioned earlier, Britain, unlike the countries of the Continent, did not have a large agriculture sector. We relied on cheap imports, primarily from the Commonwealth countries, for our food, and the Continent, on the other hand, relied on guaranteed prices, which meant higher prices than you would get in the market, to maintain a large agricultural sector – that is the basis of the Common Agricultural Policy.

But I think even more fundamental is the fact that our constitutional arrangements and our party system and our electoral system are so different from those on the Continent, and that is in part a result of the fact that our constitutional evolution has been so very different from the countries of the Continent. It is worth remembering, if you look 200 years ago, if you go back to 1813, of the original six countries which formed the European Community, only France existed in its present form. Germany and Italy were not united, and Belgium and Holland did not exist in their present form. It is perhaps for that reason that France has been second only to Britain in the defence of national sovereignty in the Community. Germany and Italy were not unified till the second half of the nineteenth century, and the most recent German borders date from 1990, following the collapse of Communism in East Germany and the disappearance of the East German state. Belgium and Holland assumed their present boundaries in 1830. Now, of the more recent member states, such as Poland, who entered the European Union after the fall of Communism, they were not created till after the First World War, and some of them, like Slovakia and Croatia, did not become independent until the 1990s. So, Continental countries found the European Community easier than we did because they did not have a long evolutionary past.

Since 1689, our history has been evolutionary and stable, and our constitutional arrangements, particularly the uncodified or unwritten nature of our constitution, reflect that stability. On the Continent, the key dates of modern political history are 1789, the date of the French Revolution, 1848, the year of the failed Liberal Revolutions, and 1917, the year of the Bolshevik Revolution. These revolutions moulded the party systems of most Continental countries, so that the characteristic Continental structure of party cleavages is very different from that in Britain. But we did not have any revolutions in 1789 or 1848 or 1917, and there were just very faint echoes on this side of the English Channel to those events on the Continent. Our political regime has remained basically unchanged since 1689. At that time, the Glorious Revolution established a parliamentary monarchy and emphasises the sovereignty of Parliament.

Obviously, the European Community, European Union, would in practice, if not in theory, undermine the sovereignty of Parliament because it enacts laws which have a direct effect upon citizens and which Parliament cannot amend or alter. Furthermore, when there is a conflict between Westminster legislation and European legislation, European legislation takes precedence, so, in other words, Westminster, in certain areas of policy, becomes in practice a subordinate legislature. Indeed, the very notion of a European Union, the European Community, implies Parliament cannot remain sovereign because, after all, we might be outvoted by other member states.

It is worth stressing – and I think a lot of people miss this point – that this makes the European Union very different from any other international organisation that we have joined, like, for example, NATO or the United Nations, because the European Community was, from its origins, a law-making body whose laws were directly applicable to Britain, without the intervention of Westminster, and whose laws, when there was a clash with Britain, were superior – in other words, it is a superior law-making body to Westminster, which of course NATO

is not and the United Nations is not, a superior legal order to that of Westminster, and their laws apply whether or not Westminster approves of them or not.

The fundamental feature of our constitutional development, which is a long tradition of continuous and undivided parliamentary sovereignty has no parallel on the Continent, and it is because of this principle of sovereignty that we have no constitution – it is pointless having a constitution if Parliament can do what it likes. Our main political institutions, the House of Commons and the House of Lords, go back to medieval times, and the monarchy goes back to the eighth century.

But, on the Continent, political systems have been consciously constructed quite recently: the French Constitution dates from 1958; the German from 1949; the Italian from 1947. For the Germans, and later for Spain, Portugal and Greece, emerging from dictatorship, and later still for the ex-Communist countries, the European Union was a symbol of democratic respectability, a sign they had been once more accepted into the world of civilised nations, but we did not need such a symbol – we were very lucky. So, it is obviously more natural for Continental politicians to welcome a new political construction because they are familiar with that, often in their own lifetimes. Having created constitutions so recently, they did not find it uncongenial to create new European constitutions.

But we, even when we were an imperial power, tended not to create new constitutions but to operate pragmatically. For example, we never sought to create a federal Empire, and, because of our long tradition of a sovereign Parliament, we have always instinctively resisted federalism, whether a federal Britain or a federal Empire and now a federal Europe – we are instinctively hostile to it I think.

We are alone in Europe in electing Parliament by the first past the post system, and that system, since the War, has mostly produced single party majority Governments. The 2010 Coalition is seen by many, perhaps wrongly, but it is seen as an aberration. But on the Continent, every country except France elects its legislature by some system of proportional representation, which normally produces coalition government, and so European countries find it easier to operate European institutions which are coalition in nature.

The prime role of Parliament in Britain is, broadly, to sustain the Executive, but the European Parliament sustains a dialogue with other Community institutions – the Commission and the Council of Ministers. The House of Commons is fundamentally a debating chamber, dominated by a binary dialogue between Government and Opposition. It debates a series of measures to which the Government is committed and which it must defend, and the procedures of Westminster are geared to informing the electorate of this debate, the issues in dispute, between Government and Opposition, and they imply the existence of two disciplined armies in the House of Commons, articulating two alternative philosophies. So, the activities of the House of Commons are, in a way, in the nature of a continuous election campaign.

But the European Union works quite differently because European legislation is not being proposed by a government or attacked by an opposition. There is not, in a sense, no government of Europe, nor Her Majesty's Opposition. European Union legislation does not conform to the binary pattern of politics which is dominant at Westminster, and there is no party-supported government in Strasbourg or Brussels seeking to promote its legislation or secure support for its policies. The European Parliament is a multi-party Parliament, operating through carefully constructed coalitions, and most frequently a coalition between the two dominant political groups which I mentioned, the Socialists and the Christian Democrats, the European People's Party.

These differences are reflected in the architecture of the two Parliaments. Westminster is rectangular, with the Government facing the opposition; but the European Parliament is horseshoe-shaped, not regular. The Scottish Parliament, elected by proportional representation, is rather like that. The European Parliament is not so much a debating chamber but a working legislature, geared primarily to legislative scrutiny, a legislature of a quite different kind from Westminster, which is geared to consider legislation, broadly, when it reaches a final form with the prestige of the Government behind it. But a legislative proposal put forward by the Commission in Europe, and a decision taken in principle by the Council of Ministers, is expected to be subjected to considerable amendment as it goes through the legislative process in Europe. So, the Parliamentary systems are quite different, with the European Parliament reflecting a typical Continental parliament, like for example the German Parliament, so it is not surprising that we have found it so difficult to accommodate ourselves to the institutional practices of Europe.

There is a further constitutional problem, that, until 1998, when we had devolution, we were a profoundly unitary and centralised state. Of course, the European Community is based on the conception of a territorial division of powers between a European level of government and the level of government of the member states, and this has been difficult for us to understand – much easier for Germany to understand, as a federal country. We have found it difficult to understand how two very different levels of government can be involved in a dialogue. What we think of is two separate parliaments competing with each other. Enoch Powell once said that Westminster and the European Parliament were involved in a duel, in which only one of them can survive, but the Continental perception is of a dialogue between different layers of government.

It is also difficult for us to understand the role of the European Commission, which seems to us a curious hybrid

because it is not elected. I once heard an MP refer to a European Commissioner as an “official” and he bristled, and I think Jacques Delors or Roy Jenkins would have bristled if you had called them an official. But we tend to think, in Britain, people who are not elected are officials, and we have a fairly rigid separation of powers between people who have the right to make political decisions, and they gain that right from being elected, a division between those sort of people and civil servants, who are unelected, who serve on a career basis, but have to be politically neutral. We have a very rigid division between those two types of people, but the Commission has a very different sort of person, the elected official – people, in the past, like Jacques Delors or Roy Jenkins, Presidents of the European Commission, or today, Jose Manuel Barroso.

In the British view, the European Union tends to give authority to institutions and people who are not accountable to the voters. You may ask: who elected Herman Van Rompuy, who elected Barroso, who elected Baroness Ashton? These are all very powerful people in Europe, but they have not been elected, and that is part of what we call the “democratic deficit”, and it has been widened by the introduction of the Euro, which seems logically to imply that banking and fiscal union, harmonisation of growth targets, harmonisation of rates of inflation, unemployment levels, budgets, and taxation, but these matters are the very stuff of politics, the issues that you put before voters at the election. If you cannot hold your domestic government, or a government, accountable for prices, inflation, banking policy, fiscal policy, what can you hold them accountable for? You cannot hold Von Rompuy, Barroso, Baroness Ashton – they are not democratically accountable in the way in which we understand political responsibility and accountability.

Now, it is sometimes suggested that if we had joined the European Community at the beginning, or had joined the European Coal & Steel Community in 1950, which was the precursor of the European Community, then the need for adjustment would have been less and we could have helped shape the rules to suit our own interests rather than those of the Continental powers, that our problems have arisen because it is a club we have joined once the rules are already set in aspic and we cannot easily alter them, but if we had helped shape the rules, then we would have been in a stronger position. That is what pro-Europeans tend to say. There may be some truth in that view, but it is important I think not to exaggerate, to put the other side, because the technical difficulties really we face reflect the fact that we are very different in our constitutional attitude and political practices from the Continent, and these differences are not merely technical but arise out of deep-seated factors which are rooted in history and flow, in the last resort, from the fact that our historical experience has been so profoundly different from that of our Continental neighbours.

You may say, with all this, perhaps our Euro-scepticism was predetermined, that a European commitment did not follow from Britain’s traditional understanding of her international position. It would have involved a radical discontinuity of approach, an imaginative leap, a leap of faith perhaps. Perhaps Edward Heath would have made it – perhaps if he had been in power longer, he could have persuaded the British people to make it. Perhaps Roy Jenkins, if he had been in power longer, could have done it. Perhaps Harold Macmillan, if things had been different, but we do not know and it did not happen.

But our recent history seems to have confirmed the view, for many in Britain, that our experience has been fundamentally different from that of the Continental powers, and so the moves on the Continent towards European unity were seen not so much as a challenge, as perhaps Churchill wanted us to see it, but as a problem, and how British politicians sought to resolve that problem will be the subject of my next lecture.