DOI: 10.20472/IAC.2023.061.020

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RETHINKING THATCHER AND EUROPE

Abstract:

The relationship between the UK and the EU has always been depicted as a difficult one; and the master of British Euroscepticism, the key ingredient in UK's often fraught relationship with the European partners, has always been indicated in Margaret Thatcher. In fact, she has often been accused of a sudden U-turn in her attitude towards the European issue, in particular after 1988, and from an aloof but vigorous participation to a severe opposition. This paper tries to sustain Thatcher was never too incoherent in her attitude towards European integration; indeed, her combative posture was her distinctive character through her whole career, and her oppositive outlook was the consequence of a set of elements, the key reason being her performance as the premier of the United Kingdom and the leader of the Conservative Party. Thatcher was not Eurosceptical in a strict ideological sense, and she never really changed her attitude towards the integration process. Until 1990, she was able to compromise with her European partners. But she always had reservations towards the transformation of the Community in a supranational entity with particular characteristics as those of what would be the Union.

Keywords:

European integration; Thatcher; Euroscepticism; Thatcherism; Economic History; International Relations and Regulations

JEL Classification: O52, N24, N44

Introduction

Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom between 1979 and 1990, has always been indicated as the master of British Euroscepticism; something which seems confirmed by her proverbial "No, no, no!" to the House of Commons on 30 October 1990 upon European Commission President Jacques Delors' expectations on the evolution of the Community:

> The Commission wants to increase its powers. Yes, it is a non-elected body and I do not want the Commission to increase its powers at the expense of the House, so of course we differ. The President of the Commission, Mr. Delors, said at a press conference the other day that he wanted the European Parliament to be the democratic body of the Community, he wanted the Commission to be the Executive and he wanted the Council of Ministers to be the Senate. No. No. No.[1]

One month after this speech, and eleven years after becoming Prime Minister, Thatcher resigned. She was accused of having postponed the agreement of the European Rate Mechanism too much, divided her own party and weakened the influence Britain needed to uphold the national interest in the Community. With her combative attitude, she was isolating Britain from the other European partners, while also her strictest collaborators were declaring their will to participate in the next steps of integration as proposed by the Delors Report and discussed in the European Council of Rome (27-28 October 1990). It was precisely this firm refusal to assent to the new direction the Community had taken the main reason why she was outset by her own Conservative peers in November 1990. But in the same occasion she also said:

> Britain intends to be part of the further political, economic and monetary development of the European Community. […] we are fighting in Europe […] for the interests and concerns of *our* people. But while we fully accept our commitments under the treaties and wish to co-operate more closely with other countries in the European Community, we are determined to retain our fundamental ability to govern ourselves through Parliament.[2]

What it is to be understood is whether it existed a sudden Eurosceptic U-turn in Thatcher's posture towards the Community, which the mainstream narrative sets in the Bruges Speech of 1988. The thesis proposed here is that Thatcher maintained a coherent attitude towards the European integration process, behaving as a British Prime Minister whose political action was aimed at satisfying her national electorate.

[1] THATCHER, M. *The Prime Minister Statement to the House of Commons after the Rome European Council*, 30 October 1990, HC [178/869-92].
[2] *ibid.*

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From what emerges from some of her interventions before becoming Prime Minister, Thatcher had always perceived, since before the accession in 1973 and the referendum of 1975, the Community as an *economic* space where to develop Britain's *economic* potential after the failure of its traditional networks. It can be demonstrated comparing some of the speeches she had been pronouncing since the first British application in 1961:

> [During the 1960s] I saw the EEC as essentially a trading framework – a Common Market – and neither shared nor took very seriously the idealistic rhetoric with which 'Europe' was already being dressed in some quarters.[1]

> A change of scale has come about in world affairs. […] To enter into commercial obligations and treaties is an exercise of sovereignty, not a derogation from it. Under treaties we accept obligations which we ourselves help to formulate. Sovereignty and independence are not ends in themselves. It is no good being independent in isolation if it involves running down our economy and watching other nations outstrip us in both trade and influence.[2]

> What we are going to achieve is something we could not achieve in any other way. […] The main benefit we get from this is a larger market and a higher standard of living. The old Commonwealth is not an alternative to the Common Market. We cannot go on as we are now, we must have expanding markets. […] We must accept the role of being a powerful partner in Europe.[3]

> [O]ur traditional markets are failing. […] We have a tendency to be isolationist, and yet we expect to be listened to in the world. Europe wants Britain in the Community and we are now knocking on an open door with terms we can accept. […] We should have access to Europe and its expanding markets. We have a good deal to bring to the Economic Community. I would rather we were there to affect the decisions. […] France is no less French or Holland less Dutch for joining. […] Churchill's vision of a European alliance to prevent further wars, and the need for expanding trade markets, are the background reasons for our application. It is important that we have access to these expanding markets, and not be on the outside looking in. […] We have a very great deal to contribute to the development of Europe – our experience, our calm, will add a great deal.[4]

> [In 1975] I did genuinely believe that it would be foolish to leave the Community; I thought it provided an economic bond with other Western European countries, which was of strategic significance; and above all I welcomed the larger opportunities for trade which membership gave. I did not, however, see the European issue as a touchstone for everything else.[5]

Britain had entered the Community on 1 January 1973; the event was put at the top of the agenda of Mr. Edward Heath's Conservative government – which Thatcher was part of as Minister for Education – and presented as a great achievement; but the United Kingdom had stood aside from the early beginnings of the European Communities during the 1950s. In this way, it had lost the opportunity to shape the direction and policies of both the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) created in 1952 and the European Economic Community (EEC) born through the Treaties of Rome of 1957, and the membership conditions the UK had accepted were too hard. In 1970 the six member states of the European Communities had adopted the so-called 'Own

[1] THATCHER, *The Path to Power*, her autobiography, p. 136.
[2] THATCHER, *Speech to Finchley Conservatives* (as candidate representative to the House of Commons), 14 August 1961, Thatcher Foundation Archive (TFA), document no. 101105.
[3] THATCHER, *Remarks at Conservative Association meeting,* 10 August 1962, TFA 101156.
[4] THATCHER, *Speech in Finchley,* 7 August 1971, TFA 102136.
[5] THATCHER, *The Path to power*, her autobiography, p. 355.

Resources System', where the revenues the member states due to the System were calculated on the basis of custom duties collected on imports from outside the Community and agricultural resources.

In 1979, when Thatcher took office at No. 10 Downing Street, the Common Agricultural Policy remained the costliest among Community's policies, absorbing 75 per cent of the whole budget.[1] The result was that some of the wealthiest countries of the Community – i.e., France – were the ones getting the biggest share of the Community spending, with the UK as the largest net contributor. Britain had a relatively small and efficient agricultural sector, which received low subsidies from Brussels; and paid out more revenues than anyone else on non-European imports, mostly from the Commonwealth partner. This resulted in Britain making a substantial contribution to the Community's budget, while receiving not much in return. The Accession Treaty of 22 January 1972 had provided for the British contribution to rise from 8.6 per cent of Community resources in 1973 to 18.9 per cent in 1977.[2] In 1979-80 the United Kingdom contributed for 20.5 per cent of Community revenue while enjoying only 12 per cent of its expenditure.[3]

Thatcher, who during the 1975 referendum had campaigned for the UK to remain in the Community, was conscious of the impossibility "for Britain to play a vigorous and influential role in the European Community until the problem of unfair budgetary contribution would be resolved".[4] Thus, at a European level, the first issue she wanted to face was the mechanism of Britain's contribution to the Community, which was eventually solved only during the European Council meeting in Fontainebleau, on 24-25 June 1984. A question that gave her immediately the occasion to speak to her European partners as a British Prime Minister, making references to a national dimension, acting as representing and defending British interest:

> I must be absolutely clear about this. Britain cannot accept the present situation on the Budget. It is demonstrably unjust. It is politically indefensible: I cannot play Sister Bountiful to the Community while my own electorate are being asked to forego improvements in the fields of health, education, welfare, and the rest. The imbalance is not compatible with the spirit of the Community. Its continuation would undermine the sense of solidarity and common obligation which lies at the basis of Community endeavour. We seek a remedy which will restore a broad balance, and which will last as long as, but no longer than, the problem.

Since the settlement of Thatcher's government in May 1979, the budget rebate had been indicated by the whole Cabinet[5] as one of the most urgent issues to be faced. And Prime Minister Thatcher never renounced to make it clear her vision of the Community, which coincided with the definition Prime Minister Heath gave in the occasion of the negotiation for the membership: a community of great and established nations, each with its own personality and traditions.

[1] *The Community Budget,* [SEC (95) 1400].
[2] "Treaty of Accession of Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom", *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L 73, 27 March 1972, Document L:1972:073:TOC.
[3] Daniel STRASSER, *Les Finances de l'Europe,* (Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1984), 636.
[4] THATCHER, *The Downing Street Years*, 24.
[5] PREM 19/53 f155.

> As it develops the Community must continue to reflect the interests and the aspirations of the democratic nation states which make it up. In its sense of common purpose lies its strength; in its variety its richness.[1]

An idea which would return later in other famous speeches, for example in 1988 in Bruges:

> The European Community belongs to *all* its members. It must reflect the traditions and aspirations of *all* its members. […] willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states is the best way to build a successful European Community.[2]

Thus, Prime Minister Thatcher was coherent in her attitude towards integration: despite the concessions she would made in the following years, her idea of a Community of nations where to express British national potential never changed. Her duty was to represent and defend her nation, and Thatcher never avoided the occasion of speaking about the bothersome issue of the European budget. For example, on 12 November 1979, she said, again:

> Despite our world-wide trading interests, our nearest preoccupation is Europe. In Europe we are seeking with our partners to create a Community inspired by mutual obligation and a sense of common purpose. The present British Government is deeply committed to this European ideal. We are less committed to some of its present policies.[3]

In order to confirm her Europeanist attitude, at the Fontainebleau European Council meeting on 25-26 June 1984, where she resolved the issue of Britain's unfair contribution to the European Community, Thatcher and her government circulated a paper, titled *Europe – The future*, a well-organized and very clear bullets list of 27 points, which represented the most genuine vision of Margaret Thatcher on the future development of the European Community so far.

Until 1984, the British government potential in leading European integration was inhibited by the budget rebate issue; now, what Britain called for the EC to be effective in the world, with the paper *Europe – The future*, was the creation of "the genuine common market in goods and services [already] envisaged in the Treaty of Rome" through the "harmonious development of economic activities, a continuous and balanced expansion, an increase in stability, an accelerated raising of the standard of living" the founding members called for in 1957.[4] The necessary actions, which goal was to "build on the potential of the existing treaties and to make the existing institutions work better",[5] ranged from harmonizing standards and preventing their use as barriers to intra-Community trade; to making custom procedures more rapid and better coordinated; to the liberalization of trade in services, including banking, insurance and transportation of goods and people. Some months later she remarked:

> The Community was formed to expand trade not to protect home markets. It was conceived as an outward looking body, not one obsessed with the minutiae of its internal procedures.
>
> […] economic freedom is the foundation for political freedom and that neither are in danger. […] Europe will only be strong and able to play rightful part in the world when it attains the economic freedom which was the vision of the authors of the Treaty of Rome.

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[1] *Winston Churchill Memorial Lecture ("Europe - The Obligations of Liberty"*), by Margaret Thatcher, 18 October 1979, TFA 104149. For a comparison with Heath's definition, see The United Kingdom and the European Communities, p. 8.
[2] TFA 107332 (*The Bruges Speech*).
[3] *Speech at Lord Mayor's Banquet*, by Margaret Thatcher, 12 November 1979, TFA 104167.
[4] *Treaty establishing The European Economic Community*, Part One - Principles, Article 2 (1957). source: the official website of the European Union: EUR-Lex, eur-lex.europa.eu.
[5] WALL, *A Stranger in Europe*, 44.

> […] I do believe that for Nations of the European Community freely to work together and to strengthen their cooperation is just as worthy a purpose. But to submerge their identity and variety would be contrary to the instincts of our peoples and therefore could not bear fruit. It is on the basis of working towards common goals, of using our strength and influence together that you will find Britain a strong advocate for a more united Europe.
>
> We want to see greater unity of the Community market, greater unity of Community action in world affairs, greater unity of purpose and action in tackling unemployment and the other problems of our time and greater unity in the development and application of new technology. That is what I understand by a united Europe.[1]

In promoting the European integration process, Thatcher wanted Europe to fulfil "its potential as the largest single market in the industrialized world".[2] Nonetheless, she always acted as a British Prime Minister defending her country's interests; and this kind of claims was absolutely coherent with her domestic economic policy.

Thatcher's will to liberalise markets and services at a Community level paved the way to what would be the Single European Act (1986), the most important step towards integration after the Treaty of Rome in 1957.

Jacques Delors, as President of the Commission from January 1985, and Lord Cockfield, the European Commissioner responsible for the Single Market appointed by Thatcher "to give real substance to the Treaty of Rome and to revive its liberal, free trade, deregulatory purpose",[3] are rightly credited with the drive to complete the Single Market; but "it became a Community priority only because Margaret Thatcher put it there".[4]

Although she would have preferred to implement the existing Treaty without amendments, during the negotiations of the SEA and the Inter-Governmental Conference called by the Italian presidency, the British Prime Minister explicitly showed her determination to play a constructive and positive part in the integration process, as long as the Single Act put the market liberalisation at the top of European agenda. Thatcher was very keen to negotiate with her colleagues in the Council, being her priority to complete the internal market as a means to restore British economy and to find a role for the Community within a bipolar international order. Endorsing the point of view of the FCO and trusting the reports and briefings which came from Whitehall, Thatcher demonstrated, between 1984 and 1986, a very positive attitude, showing, indeed, willingness to cooperate with the other European partner – although they did not always act well in her respect – and to overlook some 'minor' issues – which she would regret later, for example ignoring the label 'European Union' the other partners started to use after the Solemn Declaration of Stuttgart of March 1983.

> I had one overriding positive goal. This was to create a single Common Market. […] British businesses were among those most likely to benefit from an opening-up of other countries' markets. […] The price which we should have to pay to achieve a Single Market with all its economic benefits, though, was more majority voting in the Community. There was no escape from that, because otherwise particular countries would succumb to domestic pressures and prevent the opening-up of

[1] *Speech at Franco-British Council Dinner*, by Margaret Thatcher, 30 November 1984, Palais des Papes, Avignon, TFA 105804.
[2] *Europe – The Future*.
[3] THATCHER, *The Downing Street Years*, 547.
[4] WALL, *A Stranger in Europe*, 25.

> their markets. It also required more power for the European Commission: but that power must be used in order to create and maintain a Single Market, rather than to advance other objectives.[1]

Thatcher's ideas on what had to be the Community's significance for the nation that had chosen her as Prime Minister was always coherent. She had the ultimate goal of a real single market in mind, and to this goal she pursued in the belief what she was conceding to the continentals, that is the possibility of a – future, prospective – progress towards political integration, was worth what she was gaining for her country: a single market where to express Britain's potential.

On the paper, the SEA was perfectly in line with Thatcher's goals of completing the internal market; "it was the treacherous Europeans who undermined it":

> Some of the declarations in the margins of the Single Act solemnly entered into by Heads of Government in Europe on which anyone could feel entitled to rely have not subsequently been honoured. People have tried to get around of them, the Commission in particular, by using other articles of the Treaty when they were clearly not intended to be used.[2]
>
> The Single Act would be considered a great success by all the European players; what would indeed change, in few years, was the fundamentals between British and Continental visions of what Europe meant:
>
> It would have been better if, as I had wanted originally, there had been no IGC, no new Treaty and just some limited practical agreements.
>
> Looking back, I was wrong in thinking who talked about European and political union meant a good deal less than some people in UK though they meant. But I still believe it was right to sign the Single European Act, because we wanted a Single European Market.[3]

The Single European Act was, to her, a suitable way to further the process of European integration; what changed between 1986 and 1988 is not Thatcher's attitude but the conditions under which – with President Delors driving the other European leaders – the development of the Community changed. In 1988 they were pushing for an *ever closer union* which Thatcher could not accept.

In particular, Delors made his idea about the next steps of integration explicit in his speech at the British Trade Union Congress on 8 September 1988 titled '1992 – The Social Dimension', remarking that "within 10 years, 80 per cent of all decisions on economic and social policy would be made by the European Community, with the commission forming a European government in embryo".[4]

These ideas were absolutely conflicting with Thatcher's, who could not accept what she lived as impositions from somewhere else but Westminster. Even proclaiming Britain's destiny was in Europe, Thatcher questioned the direction Mr. Delors was imposing to the Community, bolstering that kind of welfare state she was dismantling at home and taking decisions as a non-elected body. These are the premises of the famous Bruges Speech given to the College of Europe on 20 September 1988, which was understood as the which was understood as the most obvious sign of Thatcher's Eurosceptic U-turn, while in fact it remarked the same ideas Thatcher had ever had:

[1] THATCHER, *The Downing Street Years*, 553.
[2] Charles Powell interviewed for *The poisoned chalice*, 1996.
[3] THATCHER, *The Downing Street Years*, 555.
[4] DELORS, *1992: The Social Dimension*. Address by President Delors at the Trades Union Congress, Bournemouth, 8 September 1988.

> The Community is not an end in itself. Nor is it an institutional device to be constantly modified according to the dictates of some abstract intellectual concept. Nor must it be ossified by endless regulation.
>
> The European Community is a practical means by which Europe can ensure the future prosperity and security of its people in a world in which there are many other powerful nations and groups of nations.
>
> […] willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states is the best way to build a successful European Community.
>
> To try to suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate would be highly damaging and would jeopardise the objectives we seek to achieve.
>
> We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels.
>
> […] on many great issues the countries of Europe should try to speak with a single voice. […] Europe is stronger when we do so, whether it be in trade, in defence or in our relations with the rest of the world.
>
> But working more closely together does not require power to be centralised in Brussels or decisions to be taken by an appointed bureaucracy.
>
> […] the Treaty of Rome itself was intended as a Charter for Economic Liberty.[1]

The original Treaty of Rome which established the European Economic Community was a 'charter for economic liberty'; and Thatcher felt the President of the Commission was introducing collectivism and corporatism into the continent, again, while Europe had to focus on competitiveness through enterprise and deregulation. That is, exactly the recipe she was applying in Britain, while in her view Mr. Delors was using the concession Thatcher had done – the majority voting to be used for some chapters of the European Act – to impose a super-state in Brussels.

The pragmatism of her early years as Prime Minister gave the way to the conviction that any further integration was no longer compatible with the kind of sovereign state she had in mind. But it was not Thatcher's idea on Europe that changed, as much as the route the Community was taking. A transformation which would drive, in a couple of years, to the Treaty of Maastricht.

The end of the Cold War exacerbated the conflict as it accelerated the integration process and revealed the incompatibility between Thatcher's vision of Europe and the one which was being implemented under the direction of President Delors. The new institutional basis which would transform the Community into Union were endorsed by the other European leaders because this plan was felt as the best solution to cope with the consequences in practice for the European integration process after the reunification of Germany. The German question has always been at the core of every integration proposal; and as it happened in 1950 with the Schuman Plan, after November 1989 the European countries, each one because of different reasons, accepted to devolve – even more – sovereignty to a supranational authority in order to contain a unified Germany.

What Thatcher was, and had always been, devoted to was what she perceived as the interests of the British, who had elected her for two times, would elect her for a third time soon, and she represented as Prime Minister. She strongly believed that it was in Britain's interest, not only on

[1] *Speech to the College of Europe ("The Bruges Speech")* by Margaret Thatcher, 20 September 1988. TFA 107332.

the trading side, to be in the European Community and, in particular, in the Common Market to secure the full working of the Treaty, especially with regard to the internal market, but also to enhance the influence of Europe throughout the world.

What she obtained, and what she was forced to compromise, depended on her capacity to balance ideology and pragmatism in trying to pursue the objectives and to safeguard the interests she considered vital for the country she served.

Conclusion

The relationship between the UK and the EU has always been depicted as a difficult one; and the master of British Euroscepticism, the key ingredient in UK's often fraught relationship with the European partners, has often been indicated in Margaret Thatcher, who was accused of a sudden U-turn in her attitude towards the European issue, in particular after 1988, from an aloof but vigorous participation to a severe opposition.

But Thatcher was never too incoherent in her attitude towards European integration; indeed, her combative posture was her distinctive character through her whole career, and her oppositive outlook was the consequence of a set of elements, the key reason being her performance as the premier of the United Kingdom and the leader of the Conservative Party.

Thatcher was not Eurosceptical in a strict ideological sense, and she never really changed her attitude towards the integration process, as she always had reservations towards the transformation of the Community in a supranational entity with particular characteristics as those of what would be the Union. On the contrary, beyond her 'abrasive' approach to the EEC, Thatcher contributed by large – both directly and indirectly – to the process of self-reform and institutional evolution that the European Community undertook during the 1980s. Few European leaders had an idea as precise and coherent as hers about the European Community, which she clearly explained on many occasions, starting with the paper *Europe – The Future* she sent to her partners at the European Council of Fontainebleau in June 1984, which anticipates in many ways the Single European Act of 1986. And no one more than Margaret Thatcher ever believed in a Community founded on and shaped by a shared economic – not political, not institutional – network. A more comprehensive outlook of her as British Prime Minister would demonstrate her being pragmatic in adapting to circumstances but not incoherent in her overall vision of a European Community made of economic policies.

Until 1990, she was able to compromise with her European partners, with alternative fortune. But Thatcher always had reservations towards the transformation of the Community in a supranational entity which to devolve further national sovereignty. All the concessions she made in the previous decade were due to the goal of liberalizing the Community's market, and she always emphasized her acting as the British Prime Minister. Her attitude towards the integration process became openly oppositive when the fall of the Berlin Wall and the will for German reunification pushed for "an ever closer union" which would mean – in the mind of European leaders, at the time – to transfer the centre of decision somewhere else from Westminster. This was something she could not accept, considered her firm belief in the rule of law and in another idea of Europe, made up of national countries; which she had never hidden nor changed.

> [T]he essence of my vision of Europe in the year 2000 is here. I have not spoken of political or economic or monetary union, or of integration, or of a Federal Europe. They are labels. What matters is the reality: that the countries of our continent should be united by their commitment to democracy, the rule of law and a market economy; that they should remain proud, independent nations within a broad framework of co-operation; that by acting together they should ensure that the influence which our history, our experience and our civilisation have given us ensure that Europe's influence matches

> that of other great world powers; and that we should always act in close partnership with the great United States.[1]

If we define Euroscepticism as an opposition to the process of European integration, or the will to abdicate from it, Thatcher was not Eurosceptic in a strict sense. She was a determined European, rather than a persuaded European, but she never changed her approach towards the European issue.

[1] THATCHER, *Article for Inside the New Europe*, 19 October 1990, TFA 108225.

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