

## **Britain and Europe: a History of Difficult Relations**

### **1. Introduction**

”We must build a kind of United States of Europe. In this way only will hundreds of millions of toilers be able to regain the simple joys and hopes which make life worth living. The structure of the United States of Europe, if well and truly built, will be such as to make the material strength of a single state less important. Small nations will count as much as large ones and gain their honor by their contribution to the common cause.”

Winston Churchill, 1946

In his major speech, given to the academic youth at the Zurich University in 1946, Winston Churchill expanded on his political vision of what it is to create the European Union. Today, more than half a century later, the term Europe still does not equal the EU since it does not comprise all the

states of the European continent. However, for the purpose of this essay both terms will be treated as if they were the same.

The EU is a supranational organisation, in other words more than one country is involved in it and that it has greater authority than any single country within it. European governments that choose to be members of the EU make an important decision to give up some of their national sovereignty and to agree on policies in social, political and economic matters which are of common interest. In other words, member states' national policies and laws are equally bound by the EU institutions, norms and regulations. Some member states seem to be better integrated than others. Although it was the British Conservative Prime Minister Winston Churchill who provided the theoretical basis for the modern European community, ironically Britain has consistently represented a difficult issue in European integration. This state is one of the greatest Eurosceptics since it, more than other states, finds it particularly difficult to link domestic and European policies together. The reason for this can be attributed to Britain's historical, traditional, institutional and strategic background.

## **2. Britain and the European Union**

Every country has a certain idea of its role in the world, which shapes its identity and the way it sees itself in relation to other countries. The historical epoch of the British Empire has significantly influenced the way the British political elite sees the position of the country in Europe. At the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries, the first colonies of the British Empire were established. Later, Britain expanded considerably to

become the greatest world empire in history. It had colonies on every continent and in all the oceans. In the 20th century the empire saw a rapid decline and finally returned Hong Kong to China, and all former colonies became independent. In the first half of the 20th century the British Commonwealth was created. It is a voluntary intergovernmental association mostly composed of the former colonies of the Empire. All of the subordinate territories are now independent states with sovereign governments, but they all more or less remain symbolically loyal to the British Crown. Thus, Britain shaped the history of the world for over three centuries, and it comes as no surprise that many British politicians and a large part of its population still feel somewhat superior to the other European countries. Furthermore, when entering the EU, people of most member states saw it as a positive step towards reaching out to the world and as a way to improve communication with other countries. Smaller states saw it as an advantage, such as Slovenia, while others wanted to improve their unfavourable image from the past, such as Germany. For the former British Empire, on the other hand, belonging to and being constrained by European institutions meant a loss of their world-wide influence, and the focus only on Europe consequently narrowed its opportunities. This can be called a psychological barrier and it results in a considerable difficulty for the relationship between Britain and Europe.

Another complication arises from the fact that Britain did not partake in the founding of the EU. The founding club of states established basic rules that cannot easily be changed, and thus members who join later will very often encounter difficulties to adapt to the rules already in place. In the process of establishing the EU, Britain had a couple of opportunities to

participate, but it decided not to take advantage of them. The first practical step towards creating a federal Europe was made approximately in the period of the 1950s, when negotiations over the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community began. The Labour Government of Clement Attlee was invited to take part but officially declined the offer. Later, when the ECSC was put in place, the six founding countries wanted to extend the common market for coal and steel into a general common market. In 1957 the Treaty of the European Community (also known as the Treaty of Rome) was signed, which led to the creation of the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. This was a very important event in the formation of the modern European Community, but the Conservative Government of Anthony Eden did not recognise its importance and refused to sign the treaty. According to Professor Stephen George, at the beginning the Conservative Government did discuss the possibility of joining with the six founding countries but eventually chose to back out as they saw the Community's plans as too ambitious. (cf. George 1998: 5) In the aftermath of the treaty, the six EEC members flourished economically whereas Britain suffered continuous economic decline. It was only after this most successful period of the Community, that Britain entered the ECC. In the meantime, the six states had actively shaped the community to their advantage, which offered them many more benefits than for the latecomer Britain.

In 1961 the Conservative Government, led by Harold Macmillan, arrived to the conclusion that it was not such a bad idea after all to be a member of the EEC and applied to join. This brings us to the next issue, which is practically a cultural trait- the traditional antagonism with France. Let us take

a very simple illustration. In the English language there is a common expression "pardon my French" which is used when one wishes to theatrically say sorry for using bad language. In this way for the English speakers the word "French" connotes something bad and unpleasant. In 1961, this historical antagonism led the French President Charles de Gaulle to veto the British application to join the EEC. He argued that their strong link to the USA as well as the British Commonwealth could hinder the British in their dedication to the EEC. (cf. Pickard 2005: 320) In 1967 the Labour Government, led by Harold Wilson filed another application but the French rejected it once again. Two years later the new French President Georges Pompidou removed the veto and finally in 1973 the UK, led by the Europe-oriented Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath, joined the EEC.

As soon as the European Communities Act of 1972 was introduced in Britain, after only a small majority voted in favour of it, it became clear that the country's integration would encounter the so-called sovereignty barrier. According to the Communities Act, the European law has supremacy over all domestic sources of law of the individual member countries. However, one of the basic principles of the unwritten constitution of the UK is the Sovereignty of Parliament. The sovereignty of the British Parliament means that Parliament is the supreme power of the state and that it has the legal right to pass statute laws that are the principal form of British law. However, this was and still is greatly affected by its ECC membership since it leads to conflict with the fundamental supremacy principle of the Community. At the end of the 1950s and during the 1960s the economic decline of the UK on the one hand and the economic prosperity of the Six on the other largely influenced British politicians, who radically changed their mind about the closer links with Europe. It was the economic motivation that urged Britain

into applying for membership. The UK does not strive for political integration, it is reluctant to transfer its sovereignty and it opts for the intergovernmental cooperation structure instead. In order to become a member of the EEC, Britain had to accept the Communities Act as a legal basis of its membership. However, the UK continues to define its cooperation with Europe as intergovernmental and not as a constant process of political integration in which supranational institutions take precedence over all domestic governments.

In all European countries nearly all surveys of public opinion demonstrated widespread disillusionment with the European integration. What is particular about Britain is that public discontent and uncertainty are equally shared by the political elite. Ever since there has been a change in opinion and both main parties have been divided over the European issue. This became fully apparent from the very beginning of British integration. Namely, when Britain joined the EEC under Edward Heath's Conservative Government, there was no economic upturn and with the Oil Crisis in 1973, economic progress was obstructed everywhere. At the time the Labour party was opposed to the EEC and they promised to hold a referendum on withdrawal if they came into power. In 1975 the Labour Government, led by Harold Wilson, kept its word and held a referendum. However, the outcome was that the majority voted for staying in and consequently Labour changed its mind. Labour became even more interested in Europe when some social issues were raised by European law. For example, some parts of the British Employment Protection Act of 1978 were declared unfair according to European law because part-time workers received less social protection. Since most part-time workers were women, the Act even amounted to sexual discrimination. (cf. Pickard 2005: 320) On the other hand, the

Conservative Party gradually started turning against the idea of integration, which only accelerated with their new leader from 1975, Margaret Thatcher.

Margaret Thatcher, who became Prime Minister in 1979, openly expressed her very negative attitude towards the EEC. The period of her service was marked by an increasing political isolation of Britain from Europe. She was ardently against complete economic, political and social integration. Her Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Geoffrey Howe, argued that Britain contributed much more to the European budget than the other countries and he thought that something had to be done about it. In response, in 1984 Margaret Thatcher's government negotiated a rebate on the British contribution, and thus received some of its money back. The main reason for this was the fact that a great share of the European budget is spent on the Common Agricultural Policy and since farming does not represent a major sector in the UK economy, Britain felt that it benefited much less than other countries. Also, for Margaret Thatcher, Britain was losing its independence and sovereignty by transferring the power of decision-making to Brussels. In her "Bruges Speech" in 1988 she stated that: "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. (...) [W]orking more closely together does not require power to be centralised in Brussels or decisions to be taken by an appointed bureaucracy." Throughout the 1980s Margaret Thatcher was not ready to let the UK join the European Monetary System and adopt a common social policy because she regarded them as steps towards the formation of a closer political union. For Britain, the united Europe project is seen merely as something made out for economic reasons, a union

supposed to create a common European market, not a political community. Turning back to Thatcher, she was particularly reluctant to adapt to revolutionary changes, such as the collapse of communism in Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall, that took place on the world political scene in 1989 and 1990, and this was the main reason for her downfall. She was replaced by John Major, whose government ratified the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which led to the formation of the EU in 1993. However, John Major opted out of the section of the treaty dealing with social policy, as well as of joining the monetary and economic union. In this way the awkward position of Britain was once again reinforced.

In 1997 the Labour Party, led by Tony Blair, ensured an outright victory with their pro-Europe manifesto. The new Prime Minister was very enthusiastic about the Union and one of the first things he did when he came into power was to sign the Social Chapter. In his election campaign, Tony Blair also announced the referendum on adopting the euro; nevertheless, it did not take place during his service. Generally observing, Labour under both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, achieved a much more favourable image of Britain as an EU member state than it used to have. However, during this period one more issue became apparent in the UK's relationship with the EU- the "special" connection with America. Many European countries see the Union as a kind of counterweight to the USA. However, Britain is not in favour of this notion since it would jeopardise its specific relationship and hamper Britain's foreign policy options. That there is an alliance between the UK and the USA was demonstrated directly after the terrorist attacks in September 2001. Tony Blair immediately announced that Britain will support the USA and stay with them no matter what, and to back

this up, he sent large numbers of British troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. In spite of the widespread unpopularity of these decisions both in Europe and at home, Tony Blair has not changed his opinion that the British interests are best guarded by remaining “shoulder to shoulder” with the American government. (Seldon 2007: 00)

### **3. Conclusion**

To sum up, there is no doubt that the relationship between Britain and the EU is a difficult one. There are numerous reasons which render British membership in the Union problematic. As a former imperial power, the UK finds it particularly difficult to adjust and narrow its political interest only to Europe. Being a latecomer in the Community, Britain had to accommodate itself to the already established policies and rules, some of which directly conflicted with the basic principles upon which the British Constitution is based. Antagonism with France and affiliation with America are additional issues. Furthermore, the fact that the UK joined the Community only for economic reasons at an economically difficult time resulted in popular discontent. However, not only is the population dissatisfied but also this disillusionment and division is mirrored by the political elite. From 1979 until 1997 Conservative Governments contributed to a high level of British isolation in the Community. Blair’s Government demonstrated keen interest for and close links to the USA, which at some points seemed to exceed those with the EU. However, Labour Governments have generally showed much more interest in Europe and British membership. This could be read as a possible sign of better cooperation in the future, but bearing in mind the

British background, it becomes clear that this is going to be an uphill struggle.

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