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Britain and Europe



Centre for European Politics



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**Royal Holloway College, University of London,
12 October 2007 at 16h00 CET**

Check Against Delivery
Sehr bitte prononce fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

It's a pleasure to be here. Indeed an honour to be invited to launch the Centre for European Politics. Well, *officially* launch, because the hard thinking has been going on for almost a year now. I've been billed to talk about Britain and Europe today, and I want to try and reflect the mission statement of the Centre itself by saying something about the role of the EU in world politics, in what some – including me in my recent pamphlet – have called 'the global age'.

But I also want to talk about Britain's role in Europe and the British debate on Europe – and I want, at least for an hour, to set aside my European Commissioner's hat and speak as someone who has been politically active in that debate for his whole adult life. In fact, whose political adulthood, so to say, maps pretty closely Britain's three decades in what is now the EU.

Without hesitation, I endorse what José Manuel Barroso said in Oxford last night: "With your long-held international outlook, I don't believe that the UK's arms can be open to the world while your heart and mind is closed to Europe".

I was an undergraduate, the age of many of you here, during the '75 Referendum on entry into what was then the EEC and it was a key marker in my political development. The pro-European convictions that I picked up then were pretty enduring. Strong enough to survive even the insular Bennite Labour party of the early 1980s.

The British voted two to one in favour of being in Europe in 1975. Almost any polling suggests that they are less sure today. Obviously, between then and now a huge amount has changed. The meaning of being 'in Europe' has changed. And the world of which Europe is a part has of course changed out of all recognition. But that in itself is not enough to explain British ambivalence about Europe.

It can only really be explained by the fact that after 1975, British political conviction on Europe began to be undermined by a debate that we are still having. To outsiders, it looks as if we decided to be in Europe and then started a thirty year debate on whether we really wanted to be.

Europe is one of the few issues in British politics in which a mainstream party label doesn't always give you a guide to someone's views. Britain has been led willingly in Europe from both sides of the political spectrum.

Either it's an elevated issue of principle and reason that transcends the normal play of politics, or a gut instinct that runs deeper than party – or perhaps it is both. At the end of the day, neither the British head nor the British gut have really come to terms with Europe and what Europe is *for*.

Europe turns outwards

My basic argument today is that the only way we can draw the poison out of the European debate in the UK is to build a new agreement on what we want Europe for. So I want to offer some thoughts on what I think Europe is *for*, in the global age.

Europe – the European Union - is entering a new period in its development. It has moved from its continental phase to its global phase. For six decades it has focused on economic integration as a means to reconciliation, reconstruction, reunification, and consolidation – with the Single Market as one its most important expressions.

But we can see now that the forces that drive the modern Single Market – the rapid changes in technology, capital markets, transport and communication – are driving huge changes in the global economy as a whole: what we usually call globalisation.

Suddenly the Single Market seems not the end of Europe's work but the beginning. It is a platform for building strong businesses that can prosper in the global economy: strong in Europe, strong in the world. It is also a way of shaping global regulation. And the European Union and the institutions that manage the single market are the basic framework for acting collectively to shape globalisation and the global political agenda: from climate change and energy policy to the social agenda of the EU.

We in Europe often think in terms of large and small European countries. But viewed through the realities of power and influence in the twenty first century - viewed from Washington, or Beijing or Moscow - there are only varying degrees of small. Opposite a billion Indians, or a billion Chinese, do we have more weight as a nation of sixty million or a team of 500 million? The answer is self-evident. In the 21st century the EU is about pooling our continental power to make us more effective globally.

This is not to say that globalisation means that we need to pass all decision making to the EU – plenty of decision making is in fact being moved to the regional and local level, where it is more responsive to local needs. But I can see no way of influencing the big issues which shape the local decisions other than working together as Europeans because what has a local impact often has a global source.

So, in this century the key rationale for European unity will be not so much in securing internal stability and growth, but in projecting external influence. As I say, in a world of continental powers, the EU is the way we bring together the power of European states to shape globalization and set global agendas.

Often the anti-European case in this country is based on the argument that the alternative to European membership is a sovereign Britain setting its own course. But the real alternative is a nominally sovereign Britain under-equipped to influence the global debates that really matter and detached from its core economic and political hinterland.

The real Europe question for Britain

So to my mind, the real question is not whether we should be in Europe – I don't see any viable alternative. No one has ever managed to convince me that Britain would be better equipped to live with globalization outside the world's biggest single market, outside the world's biggest trade bloc, outside the European alliance to tackle climate change, outside the political alliance that gives us real weight in Moscow or Beijing as well as the chance to multiply our efforts to reduce global poverty or manage global migration.

The real question is how we get the European Union we want and need. The entry of 1 billion new workers into the global workforce in India and China in the last two decades, ageing populations and rapid technological change have intensified the pressure for economic reform in Europe. But the shape and pace of that reform, the scope and nature of Europe's economic policies at home and abroad, these are things on which British engagement can be decisive, and they are up for grabs.

This is a point on which most in Britain can agree – that the EU needs to work better. I have no problem with criticising the EU or the way it works. I have always

been a pro-reform-pro-European. Britain *should* be saying that Europe can't afford to be a barrier against change; it has to be a way of equipping Europeans for it. It *should* be driving economic reform, it *should* be defending a competitive and open single market, it *should* be pushing for the EU to be a global voice on the need for urgent action in the face of dangerous global challenges.

But we must avoid giving the impression that we are only in the EU to change it, or, worse, that it has somehow to earn our support. And it is important that we do not let the argument that the EU could work better, turn into the argument that we are better off without it. As British business often points out - the single market could be better regulated. But that is not an argument against the EU. It is an argument for better EU regulation. Brussels heard that message.

And in fact, this agenda is shared not only by the European Commission, but by most member states. In fact, the reality is that the EU of 27 is a place where Britain can feel at home in a way that it has not for much of the past 30 years. The picture of Europe that the Commission President José Manuel Barroso set out yesterday is one in which the priorities of the EU are also the priorities of Britain. It really is time that perception caught up with reality.

The new treaty

I want to finish by saying a word about institutional reform – it's amazing how quickly eyes glaze over when you say those words. Next week European member states are likely to agree a text for a new draft treaty that will reform some of the EU's institutional structures to function better in the global age and to cope with future enlargement.

It is not a radical reform. It's not a constitution – there is no anthem, no ancient Greek mottos. It is a sensible agenda for the effective working of the EU. And although the EU's pooling of some powers to give Europe greater weight in the world will always be objected to by British diehards, we need to remember that for the little bit of influence over our own actions that we grant others, we get an equivalent measure of influence over theirs. And we get a say in the policy of a political alliance genuinely capable of shaping global change.

I believe that the UK's key demands have been met in this reform treaty negotiation, as, I believe, have those of others. I think it is in all our interests that agreement is reached quickly and smoothly at next week's European Council. We did not need a constitution: but we do need realistic, pragmatic reforms that make Europe more effective and more responsive.

I hope that debate in the UK will be seen in this wider context, and not be conducted simply in terms of age old prejudices. Yes, this is a debate about institutions, but it is also a debate about what we need those institutions for. In Britain we are less interested in European abstractions than in European delivery but we can, I believe, be convinced by the right reforms for the right reasons.

The main point is that the obsession of some with the treaty should not distract from the key issue. Britain needs to know when to take yes for an answer. The EU has changed as we have argued for. The EU's priorities are our priorities. Britain needs to maintain its engagement and continue to make sure that its voice is heard in the wider debate on Europe's future. Effective British sovereignty is not just exercised by saying no. It is exercised in the ability to shape the EU's agenda in a way that makes a difference to British citizens.

Conclusion

There will always be different views on Europe in British politics. That is natural and healthy. But I strongly believe it would not be in the interests of Britain for our politics to return to the sort of poisonous debate over Europe we have had in the past. From a narrow, purely domestic perspective, it would, I believe, be a political mistake. But more importantly than that, a return to the bitter debates of the past would hamper Britain in pursuing its interests within the EU, and through the EU, in the world.

One of the motifs of the Centre for European Politics is the study of 'Europeanisation'. Meaning – if I understand correctly - the emergence of common European approaches to economic and social policy. And the way in which Europe is able – through the influence of its single market and its sheer political weight - to 'Europeanise' global trends and agendas.

Britain's leaders have done a good job of selling globalisation - much better than some in Europe. But they have done less well explaining the role of the EU in helping Britain amplify its voice and defend its interests in a globalised world. We have to recognise that being strong in the world in the 21st century means being strong in the European Union. The EU needs a strong, engaged Britain. And Britain needs a strong EU.