



30 years after Bruges:

# Margaret Thatcher's Vision for Europe Revisited

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On September 20, 1988, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher presented her vision for the future of Europe. On the 30th anniversary of Bruges, it is time to take a look back.

It is not often that political speeches will be remembered years, if not decades, after. Those that do among the thousands upon thousands that take place year in, year out, must have struck a nerve and advanced debates, all in a historically important moment – and they must stand the test of time. On September 20, 1988, one of these speeches took place.



Picture: Marion S.Trikosko (1977), Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005696424/>)

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When the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher stepped in front of the crowd at the College of Europe in Bruges, she herself did not think she would change the debate on the European Community, as the European Union was called back then, forever. “Not even I would have predicted the furore the Bruges speech unleashed,” she would later write in her memoirs *The Downing Street Years*.

Still, Thatcher had decided that the time was right to proclaim her view on what the future of Europe should be. During her second term in 10 Downing Street she saw “an inclination towards bureaucratic rather than market solutions to economic problems” and an “overt federalist and protectionist agenda” starting to dominate. “I decided that the time had come to strike out against what I saw as the erosion of democracy by centralization and bureaucracy, and to set out an alternative view of Europe’s future.”

While the speech is today often portrayed as the beginning of the end of the UK’s membership, the death knell for which was eventually struck in 2016, it did not call the European Community into question. Thatcher herself called it “far from ‘anti-European.’” In a subsequent statement in the House of Commons in 1990 she stated that “Britain intends to be part of the further political, economic and monetary development of the European Community.” Bruges was rather a stark warning against Brussels. It was an attempt to save the European project.

On the thirtieth anniversary of the speech, which we are currently celebrating, it makes sense to look back at the European vision put forth by one of the most important political leaders of the twentieth century. Indeed, Bruges has stood the test of time, and we can still learn important lessons from it. Once again today, we are in the midst of a major debate on the future of Europe. In 1988, Margaret Thatcher and her colleagues in Europe found themselves in a similar situation as we do, as she noted in a speech to Bank Julius Baer:

“The member states of the European Community will shortly take crucial decisions about the direction of the Community’s future economic and political development. And upon the wisdom or otherwise of those decisions much will rest. They will have implications, not just for those now within the Community or even those planning to join it: they will affect the nature of the new world order.”

## **The European Heritage**

The European heritage plays a significant role in Margaret Thatcher’s vision for Europe. She tries to teach us that we can be proud of our history, and were we are coming from. “Too often, the history of Europe is described as a series of interminable wars and quarrels,” she notes in the Bruges speech. It is true: wars played too big of a role in the past. “Only miles from” Bruges, “lie the bodies of 120,000 British soldiers who died in the First World War.” Indeed,

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“we have fought and we have died for Europe’s freedom,” and “had it not been for that willingness to fight and to die, Europe would have been united long before now – but not in liberty, not in justice.”

There was a reason to fight. Europe is a continent in which the ideals of individual liberty, of liberal democracy, prevailed long before anywhere else in the world. It is the continent which brought forth many of the greatest innovations, artistic pieces, literary works, and intellectuals the world has ever seen. These European values later spread around the globe, most notably across the Atlantic, where America continued the European story. This is why Thatcher actually, in the Julius Baer speech, includes North America to Europe, “in the sense that she shares a common heritage of civilised values and a love of liberty.”

What we need to realize, however, is that the European narrative is thousands of years long, not sixty (or back in Thatcher’s days, thirty years). “Europe is not the creation of the Treaty of Rome,” she said in Bruges. “Nor is the European idea the property of any group or institution.” Or to put it differently: the EU and Europe are not always one and the same.

For Thatcher, Europe is not only the EU-28 (or soon-to-be 27). It includes Switzerland, Norway, and Iceland. It included – and this was particularly significant back in her days – Eastern Europe, where “people who once enjoyed a full share of European culture, freedom and identity have been cut off from their roots.” Despite the Iron Curtain, “we shall always look on Warsaw, Prague and Budapest as great European cities.”

The European Union meanwhile is a tool which we may use to promote the values we defended so often in the twentieth century. “The Community is not an end in itself.” Instead, it 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.”

At a time where Europe and the EU are most of the time used synonymously, it is important to keep this simple truth in mind: not everyone who criticizes the EU is automatically anti-European. As the Prime Minister said at Julius Baer: “Europe is much larger than the Community.”

## **Britain as Part of Europe**

A country which for Thatcher has played an instrumental part in the European heritage is, without much surprise, Great Britain. While it might seem obvious that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom would think this, it still has major implications for today’s Brexit debate. For Margaret Thatcher, Britain has been and should always be close to its European neighbours. But so should Europe, specifically the European Union, honour the defining role Britain has played for the development of European values and ideas.

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***We British have in a very special way contributed to Europe.***

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In her Bruges speech, this special relationship between the British islands and mainland Europe was continuously brought up. “We British are as much heirs to the legacy of European culture as any other nation,” Thatcher noted. “Our links to the rest of Europe, the continent of Europe, have been the dominant factor in our history.”

She goes into British, and thus inevitably, European history in much detail, highlighting that the British “ancestors – Celts, Saxons, Danes – came from the Continent.” She mentions the significance British advancements like the Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution, and the defence of European liberty at-large, have had on the European story. “Over the centuries we have fought to prevent Europe from falling under the dominance of a single power.”

At the same time, Britain has to pay due to the Continent as well. “We know that without the European legacy of political ideas we could not have achieved as much as we did. From classical and mediaeval thought we have borrowed that concept of the rule of law which marks out a civilised society from barbarism.”

Thus, the British-European partnership has always been mutually beneficial. This even extends to the arts: “visit the great churches and cathedrals of Britain, read our literature and listen to our language: all bear witness to the cultural riches which we have drawn from Europe and other Europeans from us.”

It is indeed a long story of cooperation, and one, Thatcher thought just three decades ago, which was stronger than ever before: “it is the record of nearly two thousand years of British involvement in Europe, cooperation with Europe and contribution to Europe, contribution which today is as valid and as strong as ever.”

While this positive attitude would be belittled today, it still remains that the relationship between Britain and the rest of Europe has been extraordinary over decades and centuries, if not millennia. In the midst of political infighting and opportunism, this might be easy to forget. Thatcher would have surely remembered everyone involved that it is of the utmost importance to keep this historically crucial relationship and common understanding intact, regardless of whether Britain is in- or outside of the European Union.

## **Promoting Free Enterprise**

One of the grave dangers Margaret Thatcher saw as Prime Minister was the increasing centralization and regulatory efforts by Brussels. Europe should remain a champion of free enterprise, one that enables entrepreneurs rather than stepping in their way, and one which does not count on a centralized state to anchor the economy, but rather that the economy anchors itself. This was of the utmost importance in a globalized world in which both companies and individuals could merely leave to other places. “Europe has to be ready to

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***Nor must Europe be ossified by endless regulation.***

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compete commercially and industrially in a world in which success goes to the countries which encourage individual initiative and enterprise, rather than those which attempt to diminish it," she said in Bruges.

For Thatcher, her argument wasn't bold or extraordinary. Rather, it was about staying true to the intentions of the EU's founding. "The Treaty of Rome itself was intended as a Charter for Economic Liberty," she argued. Sadly, however, Europe quickly diverted from this: "but that it is not how it has always been read, still less applied."

Instead of arguing for an "ever closer union," Brussels should get back to the its founding principles: "Our aim should *not* be more and more detailed regulation from the centre: it should be to deregulate and to remove the constraints on trade." This translates into "action to *free* markets, action to *widen* choice, action to *reduce* government intervention."

Here, Thatcher attacks all sorts of EU policies. The Common Agricultural Policy should be further cut, budgetary discipline is crucial, and to argue that the EU should have any hand in labour market regulations or welfare policies is completely rejected by the Prime Minister. In her memoirs she writes that it is "quite inappropriate for rules and regulations about working practices or welfare benefits to be set at Community level."

What is all the more shocking for her is that Brussels is moving in this direction despite history – and one mega-state in the east, having proved that centralized decision-making doesn't work. To go back to her Bruges speech: "it is ironic that just when those countries such as the Soviet Union, which have tried to run everything from the centre, are learning that success depends on dispersing power and decisions away from the centre, there are some in the Community who seem to want to move in the opposite direction."

Instead, the "lesson of the economic history of Europe in the 70's and 80's is that central planning and detailed control *do not* work and that personal endeavour and initiative *do*. That a State-controlled economy is a recipe for low growth and that free enterprise within a framework of law brings better results."

## Global Europe

One of the main reasons for the British exit of the European Union is the vision of a *Global Britain*, that is, a Britain which is not isolating itself from the rest of the world, but rather embraces not only Europe, but all continents. In an August 2018 *YouGov* poll, Brits actually ranked the opportunity "to make its own trade deals with countries outside the EU" as the second-highest priority in the continuing Brexit negotiations, right after "allowing British companies to trade with the EU without tariffs or restrictions."

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***Europe should not be protectionist.***

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Margaret Thatcher would have surely shared this sentiment, and saw dangers in the trade policy of Brussels, which slowly became rather restrictive to the outside world. “Europe never would have prospered and never will prosper as a narrow-minded, inward-looking club,” she warned in her Bruges speech.

Once again, Thatcher reiterated this would only mean staying true to Europe’s principles. The EU from its inception was designed as a free trade institution not only inside of Europe, but also globally. In the House of Commons she said, “the reason for founding the treaty of Rome was not only to bring down barriers within the six countries which joined it at the time, but to be an example to the rest of the world to bring down barriers without as well, so that we should genuinely have much freer trade and a much freer flow of trade.”

In her memoirs, she made clear that this would not only increase wealth, but also have significant political consequences: free trade is “a force for peace, freedom and political decentralization: peace, because economic links between nations reinforce mutual understanding with mutual interest; freedom, because trade between individuals bypasses the apparatus of the state and disperses power to customers not planners; political decentralization, because the size of the political unit is not dictated by the size of the market and vice versa.”

It was thus unsurprising that she argued for ever more free trade between different parts of the world. Europe should take the lead in this endeavour, as she explained in her speech to Julius Baer: “I would like to see a Free Trade Area embracing the whole Atlantic Community, which would include the United States, Canada and Mexico on the one hand and the European Community – enlarged far to the East and including the EFTA countries – on the other.”

Brussels’ approach of forcing all EU member states under the same trade policy, not allowing them to pursue their own free trade agreements, while lagging behind on its own trade policy with the rest of the world – all of which continues to this day – was forcefully attacked by Thatcher in Bruges: “It would be a betrayal if, while breaking down constraints on trade within Europe, the Community were to erect greater external protection. We must ensure that our approach to world trade is consistent with the liberalisation we preach at home.”

## **The Transatlantic Partnership**

It would be nicely put to say that the transatlantic alliance between the United States and Europe has cooled down in the last months. A trade war has broken out, and while the relationship between the two sides of the Atlantic has improved again recently, it is still as frosty as it has rarely, if ever, been in the last few decades.

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***Nor should we forget that European values have helped to make the United States of America into the valiant defender of freedom which she has become.***

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For Margaret Thatcher, this would have certainly been quite tragic. For her, this special relationship has been significant. As we have seen before, she even went as far as counting North America as European due to its heritage. In her speech to Bank Julius Baer, she emphasized “the need to look westwards across the Atlantic to strengthen the relationship with the United States.”

Often enough, this went through NATO: “we must be very careful not to weaken NATO.” But the defence alliance was not the only way for the Prime Minister to continue this relationship. She was in favour of a free trade area with North America for instance. Nonetheless, it was often still NATO as the core instrument in her vision in which both sides of the ocean would cooperate. In Bruges, she made clear that “Europe must continue to maintain a sure defence through NATO.”

In today’s climate of trade wars, retaliation to retaliation, provocation against provocation, tough word after tough word, all while new dangers arise right on the Eastern border of the EU, it is important to keep this in mind. America and Europe have had a special relationship for a long time. It is in a sense a natural fit, since the core values are shared with one another. And it would be all the worse if this relationship would be squandered in just a few months’ time.

## Against Eurotopia

Much can be derived from the writings and speeches of Margaret Thatcher, and as we have seen, much of it can still be used to this day. It has stood the test of time. But if there is any argument which the Prime Minister hit home continuously, it was her stark opposition towards a centralized federal state, ruled by the Brussels bureaucracy, while eliminating national sovereignty. “I am totally against a federal Europe,” she once said in the House of Commons.

For one, the entire project of establishing a United Europe would be quite utopian, something, as she said in Bruges, we should not “let ourselves be distracted by.” The reason for this is that such a “utopia never comes, because we know we should not like it if it did.”

Indeed, the quest for a single European entity would be self-defeating: “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.” Indeed, the beauty of Europe – unity in diversity, would be relinquished on the way to one European identity. After all, “the European Community is *one* manifestation of that European identity, but it is not the only one.” Instead, “Europe will be stronger precisely because it has France as France, Spain as Spain, Britain as Britain, each with its own customs, traditions and identity. It would be folly to try to fit them into some sort of identikit European personality.”

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***We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them reimposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels.***

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On the way to this “European end-state,” it is also likely that the support of the people would eventually be lost completely, since this approach would also mean “that national distinctions and loyalties would have to be submerged because people will not respect – and ultimately would not obey – authority to which they felt no allegiance,” as she warned in her speech to Julius Baer. One of the fundamental aspects of European governance, indeed, as Thatcher called it in Bruges, “my first guiding principle,” would be lost: “willing and active cooperation between independent sovereign states.”

Instead, the EU should stay a supranational organization which is based on voluntary cooperation between sovereign nation states. This does not exclude more integration automatically: “working more closely together does not require power to be centralised in Brussels or decisions to be taken by an appointed bureaucracy.”

This vision for the future of Europe, which Margaret Thatcher put forward thirty years ago, would in the end even strengthen voluntary cooperation and peace in Europe: “Let Europe be a family of nations, understanding each other better, appreciating each other more, doing more together but relishing our national identity no less than our common European endeavour.”

Margaret Thatcher maybe felt alone with this opinion when she pronounced it at the College of Europe in Bruges. It was still crucially important, however, that she spelled it out. Today, with the next debate on which way the European Union is heading, we should keep in mind what Lady Thatcher said.

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*“There was no option but to stake out a radically different position from the direction in which most of the Community seemed intent on going, to **raise the flag of national sovereignty, free trade and free enterprise – and fight.** Isolated I might be in the European Community – but taking the wider perspective, the **federalists were the real isolationists, clinging grimly to a half-Europe when Europe as a whole was being liberated; toying with protectionism when truly global markets were emerging; obsessed with schemes of centralization when the greatest attempt at centralization – the Soviet Union – was on the point of collapse. If there was ever an idea whose time had come and gone it was surely that of the artificial mega-state.**”*

**Margaret Thatcher**



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