

Opinion **Brexit**

Why Thatcher's Bruges speech was not a first step towards Brexit

Today's Tory Leavers misread their heroine's intentions

DAVID ALLEN GREEN



Margaret Thatcher in 1988: 'Britain does not dream of some cosy, isolated existence on the fringes of the European Community. Our destiny is in Europe' © PA

David Allen Green SEPTEMBER 25, 2018

Last week's drama at the EU summit in Salzburg coincided with the 30th anniversary of the [Bruges speech](#) given by Margaret Thatcher, the then UK prime minister, at the College of Europe.

That address has been described by some, including by her former policy director [David Willetts](#), as starting the UK on the path to [Brexit](#).

As a politics student and “Young Conservative” (remember them?) at the time, I recollect the speech being made. It did indeed send a signal of sorts. But it was not a rejection of what was then the European Community. There is one passage in the speech which will disabuse any cosy Brexiter gloss on what Thatcher said: “And let me be quite clear. Britain does not dream of some cosy, isolated existence on the fringes of the European Community. Our destiny is in Europe, as part of the community.”

The message was a call to battle, rather than a bugle sounding retreat. And this accorded with the fact that the speech took place only days after [Jacques Delors](#), president of the European Commission, had made an emphatic case for the “social dimension” of the European project at the 1988 Trades Union Congress. Reading the Delors and Thatcher speeches together is fascinating and revealing.

But there are a couple of further contexts for the Bruges speech.

To the extent that many Tories thought much about Europe at all in the 1980s, it was more about the Warsaw Pact than the European Economic Community. But from 1984 onwards, when Thatcher announced that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was a man she “could do business with”, the cold war was becoming less intense. The Berlin Wall was yet to come down, of course, but the Tory preoccupation with the defence of the west was beginning to shift. At the time, many Conservative activists cared more about the (now largely forgotten) Western European Union than the Treaty of Rome’s “ever closer union”.

For two fateful years, 2015 to 2017, the Conservatives did have an overall majority. And they unleashed first an in/out referendum and then a botched Brexit.

The lack of an “enemy” abroad was matched by the lack of an “enemy within” — after the defeat of the miners and the success of trade union legislation in weakening workers’ bargaining power.

Conservatives were euphoric that Thatcherism had overcome socialism at home and communism abroad.

There was a void of sorts, and into this void came the push for further European integration.

Although Thatcher’s original speech was ultimately pro-European, “Bruges” quickly found itself adopted as a shorthand badge of hostility to Europe, and a “Bruges Group” was founded in early 1990.

By July of that year the view of the European adventure as some sort of embryonic superstate was so entrenched that the Spectator magazine could run a [cover](#) depicting West German chancellor Helmut Kohl as Adolf Hitler to illustrate an interview with the cabinet minister Nicholas Ridley (the article led to his resignation).

Three months after the Spectator’s cover came The Sun newspaper’s [“Up Yours Delors”](#) front page. Conservative conferences in the 1990s (which I attended) became engrossed with Brussels as the new foe to be vanquished.

Another now forgotten part of the context of the Bruges speech was the “1992” campaign about the (supposed) completion of the single market launched by Thatcher in 1988. Many Tories accepted the single market, but thought that it was enough. So when there was a big new push for further integration, which in turn led to the Maastricht treaty, it seemed to many a step too far.

Of course, in 1989-90, the Conservatives had much to be proud of where Europe was concerned. This was the party which, under Edward Heath, had taken the UK into the EEC in 1973. And as I have previously pointed out, the single market itself was an achievement of Thatcher and Lord Cockfield (the latter being, to my mind, after Thatcher the most significant Tory politician of the

1980s). In essence, British Conservatives had forced economic liberalism on continental Europe.

But in 1989-90 the Tory mood changed. And, tellingly, Thatcher's successor as prime minister, John Major, chose not to make any positive case for Maastricht or the EU generally.

None of this has since served the party or the country well. Some Tory MPs made the European issue more important than party unity. This defiance emerged during the passage of the Maastricht debate and has never gone away. It subsequently hardened into tensions and contradictions which could never be resolved.

Since the early 1990s, Conservatives have been having a collective nervous breakdown over the EU. For most of this time, it did not have any great consequence because they did not have a majority. Mr Major lost his working majority in 1996 and lost power altogether in 1997. In 2010 the Conservatives only held office as part of a coalition with the pro-European Liberal Democrats. Last year the Tories again lost their majority, and are now governing as a minority government with support from the Democratic Unionist party.

But for two fateful years, 2015 to 2017, the Conservatives did have an overall majority. And they unleashed first an in/out referendum and then a botched Brexit. They may well have now brought the UK down with them.

None of this happened because of the Bruges speech, in which Thatcher set the Conservatives the challenge of fashioning the future of Europe. It came about because many in her party disregarded the Bruges speech and decided to retreat from the EU instead.

The road to Brexit began not with the Bruges speech, but with its rejection.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2018. All rights reserved.

Latest on Brexit

How easy or hard was it to use FT.com today?

[Leave feedback](#)