Chapter 1

United Kingdom: A Member that Never Found its Role in Europe

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Our story begins in the unlikely place of the Welsh coastal town of Llandudno. It was here that the 1948 Conservative Conference was held, a conference at which the then leader of the opposition – Winston Churchill – depicted the country's future as a balancing act between three circles: the Empire, the English-speaking world and Europe (Churchill, 1948). The bold ambitions of the speech was to argue the need to combine the three, to bind them together, but its lasting legacy was in the form of this effective illustration of Britain's post-war dilemma. As Britain's economy had suffered terribly by the war and the term 'imperialism' had become unsavoury to most of the international community, Britain found itself facing a fundamental question. Where would it find its future international role? This chapter uses the concept of a global 'role' to lend some new perspective to the history of Britain's membership in the European Communities (EC) and later the European Union (EU). The chapter argues that Britain's inability to settle for a role in Europe provides a new framing for the persistence of British Euroscepticism.

It is not uncommon to see the outcome of the UK's European Union Membership Referendum 2016 explained as the result of number of contemporary issues, for example: English nationalism (Henderson et. al., 2016), rising xenophobia (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017) or Globalisation's unbalanced wealth distribution (Clarke et. al., 2016). This is, as far as it pertains to explain the voting behaviours of the electorate, only proper, as the referendum seems to have been determined largely on contemporary issues. However, as has been brought up many times before, we have to go further back in history if we want to explain why the referendum was held at all (Green, 2017; Curtice, 2016; Kenny, 2016). This chapter looks at the history of British Euroscepticism through the framework of Britain's search for a post-imperial role. A search that, it will be suggested, seems to have resumed.

A Role to Be and a Role to Act

It was in the winter of 1962 that former US Foreign Secretary Dean Acheson spoke his insightful words on the British predicament: 'Great Britain has lost an Empire and has not yet found a role' (Acheson, 1962). Whatever the exact intended meaning of this phrase, I would argue that a 'role' in this geopolitical sense entails two aspects of affinity between the country's actions and the context for those actions.

The first aspect is in the sense of the country's own fortune: a context that matches the needs of the country itself. As the British settled on a unified imperial vision in the early 18th century, it was very much with these aspects in mind: imperial expansion allowed Britain to satisfy some of its key economic needs and provided both markets and resources that would prove a huge boon to domestic industry (Pagden, 1998). This is also an aspect that Churchill's circles had in common: they were pursued partly because of their profitability to British interests. A role is in this sense a function that matches the country's needs: allowing it to grow and prosper.

The Second aspect is in the sense of the country's contribution to the common good: a context where the country's actions comes to the benefit of most. One could argue that this aspect became central to the legitimation of maintaining the British Empire during the late 19th century. As its profitability as a business venture declined, officials began arguing for Britain's duty to civilize the world. A role is in this sense a function that matches the country's strengths: allowing it to help the world become a better place. This aspect, I would argue, has played an important role at times in the circle of the English-speaking people, but has been almost completely absent in the discussions on Britain's commitment to Europe.

It is, then, the combination of these two aspects that allows a certain role to be perceived as both sustainable and worthwhile. A role that fulfils the second but not the first aspect will eventually drain the country of its resources (as the Empire did) and a role that fulfils the first but not the second is quickly abandoned when something better comes along. The long-lasting comfort that the British derived from the Empire (and to some extent still does) stemmed from the fact that these aspects for a long time married beautifully in its endeavour.

Through these two aspects of a global role, this chapter will look at three different premierships during Britain's EC, and later EU, membership and argue that no one of those truly accepted that Europe could offer a role in the second aspect to Britain. Firstly, there is the first Prime Minister elected into EC membership, Harold Wilson, who called Britain's first referendum on Europe. Secondly, comes Margret Thatcher, whose active participation probably helped define Britain's image in Europe circles more than any other PM. Lastly, there is Tony Blair, the most instinctively and explicitly pro-EU Prime Minister in the country's history. This chapter shows that while both Thatcher and Blair where immensely invested in the question of Europe—and Blair even enthusiastic about it—none of these three could truly get themselves to commit to Europe as the context where Britain's strengths could flourish.

Britain's accession to the EU

Before we engage in the issue of Prime Minister Wilson and Europe, let us quickly recap how Britain ended up with a membership in the EC. Britain seems to have been unable to apply itself to European unity before the vacuum after the Empire had made room for Britain to pursuit the other two circles wholeheartedly. It is of course impossible to pin down the 'fall' of the British Empire to a certain date and depending on their definition different scholars manage to draw completely different conclusions on when its definitive death is to have occurred. There are, however, three distinct events after World War II that it is very hard to argue did not (at least!) spell the beginning of a rather short end for British imperial ambitions. Those are the creation of the Commonwealth of Nations in 1949, The Suez Crisis in 1956 and 'The Winds of Change' speech from 1960. The last of these marked the moment when Prime Minister at the time, Harold Macmillan, announced Britain's intention not to resist independence from most of its territories – a speech held only sixteen months before Britain's first application for EC membership.

Thus, Britain 'missed' the chance to be part of the original six that formed the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), and it was not until a few years after its establishment, in 1951, that the UK began

see the attraction of the economic benefits that the cooperation seemed to entail. In fact, during both the 1950s and the 1960s Britain's economic growth was significantly lower than those of the 'original six', something that kept Britain interested in membership even as its first two applications were rejected. Hence, it is important to keep in mind that when Britain finally joined the EC in 1972, it was with the expectation of a bright economic future.

Harold Wilson, Interested but not Invested
Harold Wilson was elected Prime Minister only two years after Britain's membership, at a point when he was already torn on what to do about it all. As leader of the opposition 1963–1964, he had been against the Tory's attempts to join the Communities, but as Prime Minister 1964–1970, he had been for – and had even sent Britain's second application himself. However, after he lost the election to Edward Heath, he had used his second period as opposition leader (1970–1974) to revert to the Eurosceptic position. This dance back and forth was telling of two things. *Firstly*, how torn Wilson's Labour Party was on the question of Europe. Eerily similar to the Tories of today, the party was completely split between a Europhilic and a Eurosceptic wing, each unwilling to compromise with the other. *Secondly*, to Wilson, Europe had always been a secondary issue: his job was to protect the party. In a famous episode, his Foreign Secretary – James Callaghan – asked one of the more Europe friendly party members if he really cared about Europe. When the answer was that the member really did Callaghan simply responded: 'very well', followed by 'But just remember. I really care about the Labour Party' (cited in Young, 1998: 279).

After quite some hesitation Wilson settled on that the only way to save his party was to de-politicize the issue and put it 'to the people'. Wilson argued that British membership was good but that the terms of accession was bad, and that after he had renegotiated them the people would decide if they wanted to be 'in' or 'out'– again, the similarities to present day and Cameron's rhetoric are simply striking. Whatever Wilson's intentions or tactic, the message was clear, both to European officials and to the British people: Wilson was not in Europe for Europe's sake.

This was reflected further in Wilson's campaign, which centred itself on the economic benefits of membership. Wilson (as well as his opponents) almost exclusively referred to 'the Common Market' and the need for Britain to compete with the rest of Europe without handicapping itself. Non-economic issues were consciously avoided in Labour rhetoric, and pending concessions of sovereignty more or less completely ignored (Young, 1998). The yes campaign championed an economic membership, not a political one.

So after the referendum result, when Wilson proclaimed that the majority now gave Labour the mandate to 'join wholeheartedly' with Europe, what did he really mean? The party was joining a Europe whose trust he had betrayed only months before when had broken with recently negotiated conditions for Domestic political gains. The party had indeed ensured a mandate for the economic aspects of a membership but had seemed hesitant to secure one for the political aspects – arguably the more important for the strength of the Communities. But above all, Wilson had made sure to make clear where his loyalty lied. He was joining with Europe for Britain's sake, and he would be ready to abandon it for the same.

In this sense, Wilson is an archetypical example of a Prime Minister looking to Europe as well suited for Britain's needs but not its strengths. Britain's economic future was dependent on its continental neighbours but its mission lied elsewhere. It was in other matters that Wilson saw Britain flourishing and it was in other matters where he found his engagement. What is important to remember is that what he had sold to his people was that they could do the same. Not even thirty months into the British membership, it had been established as one of convenience rather than commitment.

Margret Thatcher, Invested but not Enthusiastic
Due to her tenacity in the later years of her premiership, Margret Thatcher is often misremembered as one of Britain's sternest Eurosceptics. In fact, she had been in favour already of MacMillan's first application for membership in 1961 and in her autobiography, she laments the fact that Britain, in neglecting participation in ECSC, 'may have missed the best European bus that ever came along' (Thatcher, 1995: 127). As it had been with Harold Wilson, Thatcher's scepticism

was a question of what a tour on this European bus ought to entail. From the onset, it was evident that Thatcher, unlike her Labour predecessors, was invested in Europe – but in what Europe?

Thatcher came to office in 1979, and her first major interaction with EC concerned net contributions. In hindsight, the European system for financial distribution could indeed be considered both nebulous and unfair (Spence, 2012), where a series of unintuitive formulas led to Britain's pre-calculated net contributions being far higher than other comparable countries (most aggravatingly France). However, in European circles this was considered as a secondary issue since the members were expected to willingly contribute to the collective efforts of the Communities. To complain about one's *juste retour* (just return) was seen as both petty and a sign of misguided selfishness (Young, 1998: 312-313). Thatcher's response was the simple, effective and extremely confrontational slogan 'Our money' (a sentiment that would be repeated on a certain red bus 36 years later). What ensued was years of negotiation that further cemented the perception of Britain's convenient membership in Europe – a country looking rather at what it gained that what it could give.

However, while this had been the limit of Wilson's engagement in Europe, Thatcher was undoubtedly invested beyond the realm of convenience. She is, in fact, one of the British PMs who have contributed most to European integration due to her work with what would result in the Single European Act (SEA). It was in this endeavour that Thatcher revealed her vision for Europe (something that Wilson had lacked): a single market that allowed the free exchange of goods and services between its people. While this was a high – and perhaps even radical – ambition, one would be hard-pressed to argue that it was enthusiastic about Europe. The fact that her vision was limited to purely economic aspects made an eventual clash with European officials inevitable and what finally ended up in SEA (when it was signed in 1986) was much more than Thatcher had ever bargained for. Hence, it is interesting to look at what prevented her from going beyond the limits of economic cooperation.

There are, of course, a slew of ideological parameters that inform a certain view, but the most interesting to the issue at hand is what Thatcher perceived as the discrepancy between the political ideology

of the European project and her own. This has been a recurrent theme in the British debate on Europe – not least currently – and centres on the assumption that the European project fundamentally stems from a radically non-British understanding of the ideal state. As such, the political aspects of the project must be resisted, not on the basis of keeping the distance to fellow Europeans, but in order not to compromise Britain's own constitution. In Thatcher's own words to the College of Europe: 'We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level' (cited in Senden, 2004: 9). Regarding the SEA, Thatcher persistently argued that the Single Market was a goal in itself and thus should be pursued outside the jurisdiction of European institutions (Geddes, 2013). Thatcher's resistance to European integration stemmed more from her reluctance to commit the British people to European rule, than a reluctance towards Europeans *per se*.

To understand how these fears intermingled, Political Scientist Paul Sharp (1997) employs his concept of 'ideological nationalism'. Thatcher's nationalism was ideological, Sharp argues, as it was not based in the belief of some common cultural traits shared by the individuals of the nation, but rather in the ideological legacy of the nation and its leaders. To Thatcher, it was tempered liberalism and parliament democracy that made her proud to be British, and it was in administering this heritance from her predecessors that she found her duty (Sharp, 1997). In this sense she elucidated a notion that in a more implicit form is widespread in British society. A Euroscepticism not primarily based in suspicion about the other European countries, but a resistance to commit Britain to a political system that is perceived as fundamentally non-British. Similarly, Rosamond and Wincott (2006) argue that much of Britain's historic relationship with the European project must be understood as a struggle to reconcile the government's strategic vision for its Foreign policy and domestic 'specifities', such as a certain understanding of the societal role of institutions. Hence, Thatcher fought for a British role in Europe because it needed it economically, but could not go so far as to envision Britain's strengths being best utilized in such an un-British political context. In 1988, in a speech to the College of Europe, she argued that Europe could not, as Americans did, be

proud primarily as Europeans, but rather must derive their strength from the French being proud of France, the British of Britain and so on (Sharp, 1997). There, one finds the limit of Thatcher's ambitions for European unity.

Tony Blair, Enthusiastic but not Dedicated
Blair has been described as the British Prime Minister most 'instinctively' European. He was too young to be moulded by the grandiose self-image with which Britain escaped the Second World War, he had worked as a bartender in Paris during a year abroad and as PM he was actively looking to strengthen British international ties and strengthen its global position. However, to be enthusiastic about the opportunities that Europe offered is one thing and dedicating oneself (and indeed one's country) to the project of Europe – and the cause of that project – is another.

First off, it is worth mentioning that while Blair had always been in favour of British membership, this was not a conviction more important to him than party politics. At times when the Labour party swayed farther from Europe, he had allowed himself to tone down his opinions in order not to upset party unity (Rentoul, 1996). Secondly, he was not completely untouched by the 'ideological nationalism' that was previously described to Thatcher. In the weeks running up to his first election, he famously proclaimed that 'I will have no truck with a European super state. If there are moves to create that dragon I will slay it' (Blair, 1997). During his premiership, Blair would return regularly to this European super state as the limit of his Europeanism. Lastly, there is an argument to be made that the success of the Blair government's Europe policy was mainly due to the issue's low saliency at the time (Geddes, 2013). Blair's priorities as PM lied in critical issues as the Iraq War and his beloved 'education, education, education' – and it was the fact that the public agreed with this priority that paved the way for his popularity. None of these contentions are decisive in their own right, but together they speak to a fuller picture that tempers the sometimes exaggerated Europhilia ascribed to the Labour leader.

Another rather subtle clue to the temperance of Blair's European devotion is the way he seemed to talk *to* Europe more often than *with* Europe. Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan once described

Thatcher's way of addressing the highest officials of Europe as the same manner she would approach someone 'mentally deficient' (cited in Sharp, 1997: 156) and while Blair never did anything as bad as that, he seemed unable to completely rid himself of the infamous British superiority. The most telling example is in one of his first interactions with the EU as Prime Minister. After his unexpected landslide victory in the 1997 election, Blair toured Europe to spread the 'New Labour' gospel. The audacity of such a young man (44 years of age) to tell European labour parties what the path forward was did not escape the established socialists on the continent. His intentions were not primarily to strengthen the socialists' ties in Europe or to contribute to a stronger platform in the European Parliament, but rather to put on display a progressive and innovative British government. Historian Philip Stephens comments that while Blair succeeded in making Britain's case in Europe, he 'failed to make Europe's case in Britain' (2001: 67). This was, of course, partly due to domestic resistance – but while Blair worked consistently for a strong British presence in Europe, he seemed much less convinced of the intrinsic value of an increased European presence in Britain.

The most well-known example of his lack of conviction was Blair's approach to the Euro. During his second year at number 10 Blair chaired the European Council (a position which before the Lisbon treaty rotated among the member states), allowing him to play an important part in the work on a single European currency that was going on at the time. This in combination with his ardent, pro-European rhetoric and the fact that he argued that Britain should join this currency 'when the time was right' must have made Britain's adoption of the Euro seem almost inevitable to his contemporaries. The time, however, would never prove quite right. Blair himself argued that this was due to the fact that Labour's five economic tests never were met, and that he would have been very willing to take Britain into the Eurozone otherwise. Political scientists Rosamond and Wincott (2006), on the other hand, argue that these 'tests' never were designed as such and that their intended function had always been as 'technocratic benchmarks' – solving an issue in a depoliticised manner that would have been rather

painful to solve politically (very similar to the tests put to Theresa May by Labour in 2018).

Hence, there were certain practical limitations to Blair's Europeanism that were not obvious if one looked at his more theoretical enthusiasm for the European project. It is in this sense that journalist and writer Hugo Young characterises Blair as 'an umpire, not a player' in Europe (Young, 1998: 495). Stephens denotes Blair an 'unsentimental European', engaging with Europe (as he did with the US) as a means to maximise Britain's global reach and presence (Stephens, 2001: 67-69). Blair did indeed believe that membership in the EU did play to Britain's strengths in allowing the country to exert its influence further – changing the world for the better. Europe was, however, only one of many potential 'channels' that Blair saw for British influence, something that made it ultimately replaceable if/when other means for British aspirations seemed more promising. His speeches often reflected this 'functionalist' view of the EU: 'Europe is a Europe of free, independent sovereign nations who choose to pool that sovereignty in pursuit of their own interests and the common good, achieving more together than we can achieve alone' (cited in Geddes, 2013: 94). Blair's union was strategic endeavour stripped of the aspects of identity or shared heritage – reduced to a calculated choice.

So even as Blair advocated in favour of Europe as satisfying for Britain's needs and amplifying of her strengths – a place where both Britain's fortune and contribution were maximised – he never dedicated Britain to the 'will' of Europe. I this sense, Blair did find a role for Europe in Britain but hesitated to commit to a role for Britain in Europe. A Britain subsumed to the European project, acting in Europe's interest, was not part of his vision. As with Wilson and Thatcher, Blair consistently acted to keep the relation to Europe on British terms.

Why it all matters
In February 2019, when Shadow Defence Secretary Gloria de Piero guested on journalist Nick Robinson's podcast, Robinson put to her the suggestion that what her constituents wanted to change with Brexit had nothing to do with the EU: 'Look, the closure of the pits was not to do with the EU. The decline in real wages was not to do with the EU. These are long term economic trends, not over a couple of years, but

decades.' To that, de Piero answered 'Absolutely, absolutely. [But] I believe in the power of national governments as well, and being in the EU didn't stop those things happening either … so it can't be that brilliant' (Robinson, 2019). This chapter has aimed to show that this indifference, with which de Piero rejects the EU for failing in something it could never have been expected to do, is not the expression of something new in Britain. Rather, if one looks at the nature of Britain's historic commitment to Europe, one realises that through Wilson, Thatcher and Blair, no Prime Minister has been prepared to subsume British interests to European. Each of them seemed ready at all times to abandon the European project if something better came along. None of these Prime Ministers ever settled on Europe as the home of Britain's global role.

Lastly, that leaves us with the question of what a finalised Brexit would entail. History suggests that Britain now faces the same issue as Churchill and his circles, albeit within a fundamentally different context. So if indeed the membership in the European project was an attempt to find Britain's next role – and if they actually are leaving – what is next for Britain? And perhaps more concretely, with a new set of minds in Her Majesty's Government after July 24th 2019, where do they see this process ending up? How far does the Johnsons, the Cummings and the Rees-Moggs really believe that Britain has come since the days of Churchill? Only time will tell.

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