Britain and Europe: An Unforgettable Past and an Unavoidable Future

PHILIP STEPHENS

I CANNOT think of a greater honour than to be asked to give the inaugural lecture in what I am sure will be an enduring series.[1] If I am honest, it is a daunting task. I'm nervous—scared really. That is partly because I cannot recall addressing such a distinguished audience, many of whom certainly know more than I about the subject of this lecture. But it is mainly because I feel that I am standing for an evening in Hugo's shoes—and that, for any journalist, is a humbling experience.

The trade in which I make my living is not one these days which can claim a high reputation. Political journalism in particular is too often shoddy and partisan. Polemic has become an excuse for intellectual laziness, assertion a substitute for fact and analysis.

More than any other, Hugo stood out against this trend to remind us that journalism can indeed be honourable. He was a great writer and a brilliant historian. We all knew him for his integrity, for his determination to see and comment on the world of politics in a style devoid of prejudice and rich in understanding.

He could be—and often was—biting about the conduct of our political masters. But this was passion rooted in knowledge and understanding, and criticism at once trenchant and illuminating. Truly honest journalism, unrivalled insight and beautiful prose—it does not come any better.

The *Guardian* is a great paper—and I say that not to flatter my hosts—but we miss Hugo's brilliance on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Re-reading some of Hugo's columns over the summer (and if anyone here has not read it, they must buy the collection published as *Supping with the Devils*) I was reminded again of two other things. First of his range—he wrote brilliantly not only on the great power struggles and ideological clashes of high politics here and on the world stage, but on public policy, on the law and justice, on individual freedoms and the nature of the state, on the Catholic Church—and, believe it or not—on baseball.

Hugo also pulled off a trick the rest of us can only envy—he was an insider–outsider columnist: an insider confided in by those in power because he drew the respect of politicians of all persuasions; an outsider because he kept his emotional distance from them, and thus his freedom to paint the world as he saw it. In his own words:

> The columnist should try for scoops of fact, but may more readily discover scoops of interpretation. That's what I mean about the primacy of reporting. I sometimes take a strong line about a controversial subject. The reporting comes through a distinctive prism. But I think that what I'm mostly doing, more often and more usefully than sounding off, is to convey some more or less important truths about present moods and future probabilities as seen by the actors in the political game. For the most part I have been less interested in influencing events and the ministers who make them than in enlightening readers.

Hugo was being characteristically modest, but his approach explains why his coverage of politicians who might have seemed distant from his own instincts was as illuminating as that of those

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 Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

with whom you might have assumed he had a more natural sympathy.

Thus more than any other contemporary writer he understood at the time the significance of Margaret Thatcher. Though unsympathetic to her politics, he recognised her resolve and saw more clearly than many of her admirers how she was changing the rules of the game. While criticising many of her policies, he wrote admiringly of her force of character and moral fibre:

> No other leader in our time, I guess, will be so easily willing to resist the desire to please.

Respect for truth and diligent reporting, though, was not a substitute for passion. To read Hugo's pieces on civil liberties and the role of the state is to understand how knowledge is the friend rather than the enemy of strong opinion. As he wrote:

> If the separation of journalism from politics doesn't mean journalists constantly challenging the extension of arbitrary authority what's the point of not being a politician?

Europe, and Britain's place in it, became Hugo's great passion. When he started writing *This Blessed Plot*, he was, in his own description, a 'Euro-agnostic'. By the time he completed the book he had come to see it as the defining issue of British politics. Thus he declared:

> Europe turns out to be the one great question that draws me to towards a systematic and committed allegiance.

His research and his conversations with the actors in the great drama of our postwar relationship with the rest of Europe led him to conclude that:

> In no other part of our national life have politicians failed to confront the realities of the modern world as in Britain's relationship with Europe.

Britain and Europe

So I have taken the title of this lecture from the opening lines of his brilliant history of that relationship. *This Blessed Plot* begins with a sentence that says it all:

> This is the story of 50 years in which Britain struggled to reconcile the past she could not forget with the future she could not avoid.

Those words were written in the spring of 1998. Despite the early promise of Tony Blair's European policy, little has changed since. For France and Germany, the institutions of Europe represent a uniquely successful attempt to exorcise the past. For its part, Britain lives in the shadow of its history.

The struggle to reconcile national identity with strategic interests is as acute as it has ever been. For all that Mr Blair's government has done something in recent years to make Britain's case in Europe, it has failed to make Europe's case in Britain.

- We stand aloof from the euro—and, as time passes, there is little to distinguish Gordon Brown's policy of 'prepare and decide' from John Major's 'wait and see'.
- Every opinion poll says that, on current trends, the promised referendum on the constitutional treaty is likely to be lost, with all that would imply for our future engagement in the European Union.
- The transatlantic alliance has been badly fractured by the Iraq war and, as a consequence, Britain has lost its chosen role as a pivotal power between the USA and Europe.

From the outset of his premiership, Mr Blair embraced the foreign policy formulated by Harold Macmillan in the wake of the humiliation of Suez. The leitmotif of Macmillan's strategy was that Britain had to combine a special relationship with Washington with active engagement with the major powers in Europe. De

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Gaulle initially thwarted that ambition. But, until the Iraq war, Mr Blair took to heart Macmillan's admonition that Britain must above all else avoid choosing between the USA and Europe. Iraq forced him to make that choice.

So Hugo's narrative—of the imperial delusions of the early postwar years, of the pinched nationalism that later defined our reluctant engagement with the European Union and of the tensions between an instinctive Atlanticism and a necessary Europeanism—remains a story without an ending.

Much of what I have to say is drawn from his writing—for which, in that favourite phrase of today's politicians, I make no apology. Hugo wrote in terms far more eloquent that mine most of what I have always thought about Europe.

The past we cannot forget

There are lots of reasons why, in a recent description of Chris Patten, Britain has never actually 'joined Europe'. History, geography and culture all play their part in British exceptionalism.

The xenophobia we see now in the tabloid, and in some of the broadsheet, press has roots deeper than the nationalities of some of our newspaper proprietors. Most of us were brought up on a nineteenth century version of British—or more properly English—history which was calculated from the outset to define us as different.

The thousand years of history so beloved of Margaret Thatcher and the Eurosceptics are central to a myth created by the Victorians as an explanation of the historical inevitability of the British empire. This version of the past casts England as a nation always cut off from the European continent; sees parliamentarianism and democracy as a uniquely English invention; and deliberately ignores the central role of England's continental neighbours—as well, incidentally, of Scotland and Wales—in shaping the present.

Never mind, as the historian Norman Davies has written in *The Isles*, that for part of this mythical millennium we were ruled by the French; that until the Reformation England's identity was drawn directly from the continent; that French remained the language of professional life until the beginning of the seventeenth century; or that other European states also had their diets, assemblies and parliaments. The Victorians preferred not to let facts interfere with their chosen narrative.

Today's Eurosceptics likewise. As a novice political editor I attended the celebrations in Paris for the bicentenary of the French Revolution. Margaret Thatcher marked this grand occasion by giving an interview to *Le Monde*. It was a year after she had delivered the Bruges speech. Britain, she graciously told her French hosts, had not needed a bloody revolution to appreciate the virtues of democracy. British parliamentarianism long pre-dated 1789. So French history held no lessons for the English.

I seem to recall that François Mitterrand extracted revenge. At the glittering Elysée Palace event to mark the occasion, Mrs Thatcher had to kick her heels outside the banqueting hall as the President of the Republic first greeted a succession of rather lesser known political leaders from France's former colonies. I was also reminded the other day of the prime minister's bicentennial gift for the president; Mrs Thatcher took to Paris a copy of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. I doubt if she intended, or M. Mitterrand saw, the joke.

The history of the past fifty years weighs just as heavily on the present. Coming to terms with what is now known as the European Union demanded that Britain also come to terms with the retreat from past glory. Political leaders have shunned the challenge.

From that defensive mindset all else has followed: the initial belief that Britain

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could stand aside from Franco-German rapprochement; a fatal hesitation in understanding that we could not avoid the consequences of decisions taken on the continent; and, when we eventually joined, an approach which has displayed at once our acute insecurity and our self-conscious sense of superiority.

After 1945 Britain saw itself as a victor and, alongside the United States and the Soviet Union, a world power—and acted accordingly.

Dean Acheson is often quoted for his famous remark about Britain's search for a post-imperial role. But another perceptive US secretary of state anticipated the agonies even before the fall of Berlin in 1945. A year earlier, Edward Stettinius wrote to President Roosevelt. When seeking to understand the British, the President might consider, Stettinius said,

> The emotional difficulty which anyone, particularly an Englishman, has in of adjusting himself to a secondary role after always having accepted a leading role as a national right.

Plus ça change. France and Germany saw the creation of the Iron and Steel Community as vital, in Jean Monnet's words, to 'exorcise the past'. Britain was determined to cling on to its history. Rab Butler's dismissal of the 1955 Messina conference as mere 'archaeological excavations' was matched by Hugh Gaitskell's equal scorn for the idea that Britain's fate might rest with anyone but its own leaders.

The United States, of course, was pressing the case for European unity as a bulwark against communism. But the Europe Winston Churchill wanted to unite began at Calais. As he told the cabinet in 1951:

> I should resist any American pressure to treat Britain on an equal footing as the European states, none of whom have the advantages of the channel and who were consequently conquered.

Conquered. It's a word that still reverberates through a media which sees Europe in terms of victors and vanquished. Pick up Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* or Lord Rothermere's *Daily Mail*: 'We won the war' is the perennial subtext of most of what is written about our relationship with France or Germany, Italy or Spain.

Our political culture does not help. Anyone who has spent time watching our politicians brawling across the House of Commons dispatch box will know what I mean. At Westminster, politics is combat—preferably mortal. There are winners and losers; compromise represents dishonourable defeat. Ministers take the same instincts to Brussels. Our European partners are comfortable with the politics of give-and-take. Watch Gordon Brown in the House of Commons—and then try to imagine the Chancellor striking bargains in Brussels.

Alongside superiority lies insecurity. The psychology is that of the victim—the nation is ever under attack from Brussels. As Harold Wilson once put it, there will be no 'Euroloaf' or 'Eurobeer' on the English side of the Channel. Every prime minister since has made similar pledges to defend the supposed emblems of Englishness from the foreign hordes.

To be fair, there have been occasional moments of candour in this story of reluctant engagement. For all that, in later life, Margaret Thatcher would declare that the British had joined a common market and been tricked into a nascent European superstate, that was not the case she made in a speech to the House of Commons during the 1975 referendum campaign.

> The paramount case for being 'in' is the political case for peace and security. . . . The Community opens windows on the world for us that since the war have been closing.

She changed her mind. Many years later—during that earlier great struggle between Downing Street neighbours—I had the temerity to suggest to Mrs

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Thatcher that one day she would relent and allow the chancellor to take the pound into the European exchange rate mechanism. She grabbed me, literally, by the lapels:

> You don't understand. I will never let the Belgians decide the value of my pound. Never.

My pound. She had forgotten that its value had long slipped the reins of Downing Street and was now in the hands of currency traders and speculators, some of them no doubt Belgian.

The politicians are not alone to blame. Much of what might be called the Whitehall establishment was long a bastion of the Euroscepticism that came with Britain's innate sense of its own superiority. In 1949 Sir Henry Tizard, the chief scientific adviser at the Ministry of Defence, challenged the *hauteur* of his colleagues and political masters.

> We are a great nation. But if we continue to behave like a great power we shall soon cease to be a great nation.

Sir Henry's, though, was a lone voice. It would not be in today's Foreign Office. But it is still quite hard to find in the rest of Whitehall any real sense that Europe is an opportunity rather than a threat. In France, European policy is an extension of domestic policy. In Britain it often seems at very best a necessary interference.

No more so than in the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence. We can understand why. For several decades after the Second World War, the Treasury relied on Washington for financial support and the MOD for its defence technology. Dependency has bred myopia.

A few years ago I listened to the late Roy Jenkins relate his experience as a fiercely pro-European Chancellor of the Exchequer. Back in early 1970, Jenkins recounted, he had decided to use his opening speech in a set-piece economic debate in the House of Commons to extol the virtues of the European Community. His officials were ashen-faced at the suggestion. 'What's wrong?', inquired the Chancellor. 'Nothing, sir', came the reply.

Then the admission: 'It's just that we are not sure whether there is anyone in the Treasury who could write such a speech.'

The senior Treasury official sitting next to me that evening as Jenkins spoke, leaned over and whispered: 'We've changed', he offered reassuringly. Then, once again, a caveat. 'Changed a bit.'

A bit.

During the mid-1990s, when I was researching a book about the entanglement with Europe of the politics of the pound, I asked a senior Treasury official why the government hadn't collaborated more closely with its European partners during the turbulent period before sterling's ignominious ejection from the exchange rate mechanism. Why hadn't senior Treasury officials at least talked to the Bundesbank and the Banque de France as the crisis had unfolded during the weeks before Black Wednesday? His reply: 'We were never much good with foreigners.'

Looking around this room I can see many distinguished officials who defy that description. But you too are exceptions.

The present

For me, though, the big question is why even those governments which have recognised that Britain cannot escape its European destiny—including, as I have said, the present one— always seem over time to retreat from their initial resolve. Think of John Major's 'Heart of Europe' speech back in 1991, or Tony Blair's frequent promises to end once and for all the ambivalence and ambiguities that haunt our dealings with other European nations. Why is it that the French can be comfortable with being French *and* European while we still see a choice between

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the two? For as long as we define Britishness in opposition to Europeanism, we are doomed.

I don't doubt the good intentions of the Prime Minister. He is more comfortable in his European skin than any of his predecessors since Edward Heath. He also has a huge majority in the House of Commons. So why have good intentions once again given way to political expediency?

Iraq provides part of the explanation. But even before Mr Blair chose to stand alongside George W. Bush there was ample evidence of the familiar backsliding.

One reason—and here I am more sympathetic to pro-European politicians—is that there has rarely been a bipartisan consensus in Britain. In most other member states, the Union is woven into the political fabric. But if we look back on 30 years of Britain's membership there has been only one brief period—for two or three years after the referendum in 1975—when both of the two largest parties have broadly agreed on Europe.

By 1983 the Labour party which had advocated a Yes vote in 1975 was calling for complete withdrawal from the Community. And by the time Neil Kinnock—with a little help from Jacques Delors—had persuaded his party that Europe was not a capitalist ramp, Margaret Thatcher had set the Conservatives on to their present trajectory. Mr Major's good intentions did not survive the Maastricht Treaty.

I listened in despair as Michael Howard give a speech at the Conservative Party conference as hostile to the European Union as any I have heard.

The great irony is that the Conservatives' journey along the road of Euroscepticism has coincided with a profound shift in the nature of the European Union. The Monnet vision has dimmed.

Looking back we can see that the Maastricht Treaty represented the high water mark of federalist ambition. There has been nothing since comparable to the Single European Act negotiated by Margaret Thatcher.

Enlargement to a union of 25 has changed irreversibly the political geography of the Union. The Franco-German alliance is no longer sufficient to drive greater integration. And for all the faux alarmism of its opponents, the constitutional treaty codifies and entrenches the balance between the *acquis communitaire* and the intergovernmentalism promoted by Britain.

Yet for as long as the European Union remains a political battleground at Westminster, the Europhobic press and that part of our political establishment and public opinion still trapped in the past has a powerful lever against pro-European governments such as that of Mr Blair. Mr Murdoch's influence on the present government—and it is painfully large—depends on the absence of bipartisan consensus.

This though provides only part of the explanation of our reluctant Europeanism. Pro-Europeans need to admit a bigger failure, one that they will have to confront head on if the referendum on the constitutional treaty is to be won. The failure is to describe and explain Europe as it is—to admit that membership of this particular club does involve a diminution of what has been classically understood as national sovereignty and to persuade people that Britain is more prosperous and secure as a consequence. To borrow a phrase, the price is worth paying.

From the very beginning those who march under a European flag have been less than honest about the nature of the bargain struck with our European neighbours and of the implications for national sovereignty. Thus the 1971 White Paper on entry declared:

> There is no question of any erosion of essential national sovereignty; what is proposed is a sharing and enlargement of individual national sovereignties in the general interest.

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A sophist, or for that matter a Jesuit, could defend that particular linguistic construction. But to my mind it dodges a central reality. It represents the failure of nerve which lies at the very core of Britain's reluctant Europeanism.

'Sovereignty' is the truly neuralgic word in this debate.

It carries the implication—never properly challenged by pro-Europeans—that Britain does have a clear choice: it can opt for complete freedom of action outside the European Union or surrender its independence to Brussels. Sovereignty, in this mindset, is indivisible. Once passed to Brussels, it is lost to Britain. The debate about our relationship is thus held on ground chosen by Eurosceptics—the Union, they say, is a zero–sum game; the only question is whether Britain emerges a winner or loser from the all-night bargaining sessions in Brussels. And more often than not, the sceptics will always claim, it is a loser.

Never mind that this argument has long defied the realities of the modern world. That for a medium-sized nation on the edge of Europe, the option of independent action is a mirage. As Michael Heseltine once put it:

> A man alone in the desert is sovereign. He is also powerless.

The same is true of governments. To consider almost any of the prime responsibilities of government—to provide security and freedom for the citizen, an economic framework in which people can prosper and a safety net for the disadvantaged—is to understand the interdependence that comes with globalisation.

Think of the direct impact on Britain of the war in the Balkans, of war and famine in Somalia, of the backing for terrorism of the Taliban in Afghanistan. I keep hearing politicians of all parties insist that Britain will never cede immigration controls to Europe. But we all know, in a nation that has 90 million visitors every year, that control is illusory. It is no accident that the present government finally began to get a grip on the flow of asylum seekers into Britain only when France agreed to close the Sangatte camp outside Calais.

To be fair, I have heard Mr Blair make this point about sovereignty—sometimes eloquently so. Thus in 2001 he told the European Research Institute in Birmingham:

> I see sovereignty not merely as the ability of a single country to say No, but as the power to maximise our national strength and capacity in business, trade, foreign policy, defence and the fight against crime. Sovereignty has to be deployed for national advantage. When we isolated ourselves in the past, we squandered our sovereignty—leaving us sole masters of a shrinking sphere of influence.

My quarrel with the government lies in the distance between such analysis and day-to-day practice. Ministers all too often behave otherwise. Consider the monthly meetings of the Ecofin council of finance ministers. Before each such gathering the Treasury plants in the national press some story or other about how the Chancellor is travelling to Brussels to tell his colleagues what's what, to veto this or that new directive, or to explain why Britain's economic policy is infinitely superior to that of other European governments.

The temptation is to dismiss such behaviour as just silly—the Treasury at its puerile worst. But, month by month, it returns the argument about the EU to the Eurosceptics' chosen ground, feeding the delusion that Brussels is a plot against our national interest.

So too does the language of 'red lines' used by the government in the negotiations on the constitutional treaty. It is self-evident that every EU government set in advance its own demands and limits in the negotiations. France, for example, has long rejected the European superstate of the sceptics' nightmares. Yet Britain alone feels obliged to frame such bargaining in

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terms of lines beyond which it will never retreat instead of ground on which it would like to advance. Most of the European press described the outcome of the negotiations on the treaty as a triumph for the British vision of a Europe of nation-states. But the government's own choice of language had already determined that the outcome would be seen at home as at best a limited defeat.

This perception of Europe as a battleground seeps into the media. The other day the BBC announced a review of its European coverage. It intends to focus particularly on whether it gives due airtime to the Eurosceptics. I have no objection to such an analysis. But measuring how many minutes John Redwood gets to refute Kenneth Clarke seems to me to miss the point.

The problem with the BBC's coverage—and, to be fair, that of much of the rest of the media—is that it too reports Europe in terms of them and us, of winning and losing. Rarely does the reporting acknowledge the deeper truth—that we cannot alone control our destiny and that, as Europeans, we can all benefit from shared decision-making.

It seems to me that unless and until Britain's pro-Europeans take the sovereignty issue head on—until they explain that Britain cannot shape its own destiny alone and that the sovereignty so beloved of the *Sun* is a dangerous delusion—it will never be able to properly make the case for European engagement. That means too admitting that the EU is far from perfect—that sometimes the compromises are painful. The point is that, overall, the balance sheet is unequivocally positive.

The future we cannot avoid

The future, as Hugo said, is unavoidable.

The 25 members of the European Union have put their signature to a new treaty of Rome. This time Britain is there. But hardly with enthusiasm. When we look around the world everything tells us that we need more Europe rather than less if Britain's national interests are to be advanced. It has always struck me as ironic that the global economic liberalism that Conservatives have espoused since the 1980s has greatly strengthened the case for the political cooperation they abhor.

No one can imagine after the events of 11 September 2001 that we are masters of our own security in the face of the threat from al-Qaeda terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; few can believe that we can control immigration and asylum flows without the cooperation of our European partners; nor tackle cross-border crime without more coordination between police and judicial authorities across the continent.

Climate change reminds us that the environment has no respect for national borders. We need the European Union to promote further liberalisation of world trade to the mutual advantage of poor and rich nations. Alone, Britain would never be heard in the Doha round of trade negotiations; the Union is listened to attentively.

As Peter Mandelson has recently said, the emergence of China and India as great economic powers demands more rather than less coherence in Europe if the continent's interests are to be protected.

Consider too the competition for energy as demand increases for the world's fossil fuel supplies. Those resources are concentrated in the Gulf, Russia and West Africa and our relationship with those regions will be critical for our future energy security. Britain—or for that matter any other single European country—cannot manage those relationships alone. Interdependence has long been a fact of life. It will become more rather than less so in the coming decades.

The painful paradox facing Mr Blair is that he started out in 10 Downing Street determined to rebuild Britain's relations

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with Europe and has ended up as a prime minister more committed to a special relationship with Washington than any but Margaret Thatcher.

A vital lesson of the Iraq war should be that we need Europe in order to have a balanced relationship with Washington—an alliance, as Mr Blair has said, based on partnership rather than subservience. I do not doubt that Mr Bush has genuinely appreciated Mr Blair's support. And I have heard senior American officials say that we British have tended to underestimate the influence the Prime Minister has exercised in the White House. But we should not delude ourselves that the American approach to the relationship with the UK is anything but ruthlessly utilitarian. US foreign policy has never left room for sentimentalism.

And looking at Mr Bush's handling of the most pressing security issues of our times—the rising insurgency in Iraq, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, Iran's nuclear ambitions among them— I would be surprised if Mr Blair would claim much of the credit for present US policy.

I do not count myself among those who believe that we in Britain have to make an existential choice between the United States and Europe—that to be full participating members of the European Union demands that we make enemies of our friends in Washington.

Rather I agree with the Prime Minister that Britain's economic and security interests lie in an Atlanticist European Union. And looking around the European Union of 25 we can see plenty of others who share that basic ambition—Germany and Italy as well as the former communist states of central and eastern Europe. I also share some Mr Blair's doubts about Jacques Chirac's multipolar world. Is French obsequiousness in Beijing so obviously preferable to British deference in Washington? The transatlantic community of values is sometimes exaggerated, but I fail to see how a Europe detached from America could feel more secure.

For all that, our reflexes need to be as European as they are American—Britain cannot continue to define its ambitions in Europe in terms of what is acceptable in Washington. Gerhard Schröder is right when he says the traffic on Mr Blair's bridge is too often one way. The government takes America's views to the capitals of Europe. It should more often take Europe's views to Washington.

Another paradox. The future of Britain's place in Europe is enmeshed in the outcome of the US presidential election on 2 November. The conventional wisdom was that a victory for George Bush would be politically the most comfortable for Mr Blair. In fact, the Prime Minister needed John Kerry to win. A Democratic White House would have given Mr Blair an opportunity to rebalance Britain's twin relationships with Europe and the United States. The transatlantic alliance cannot now be resurrected in its postwar form. The collapse of communism dissolved the glue long provided by the Soviet threat. Europe is no longer at the centre of America's geopolitical interests; and the American guarantee is no longer the sine qua non of European security. But a Kerry presidency would have provided the opportunity for, if not the certainty of, a new relationship between the United States and Europe. Britain's strategic interests still lie firmly in the re-establishment of a cohesive alliance, in the rebuilding at both ends of Mr Blair's bridge across the Atlantic.

That in turn also requires that the government wins the referendum on the proposed constitutional treaty. So can the British people be convinced? Here, I am at once pessimistic and optimistic.

Pessimistic because, like everyone else, I read the opinion polls. And because, for all the fanfare of the Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons last April, I see no evidence that the government is mobilising the Yes vote. The word

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from Downing Street is that nothing serious is to be said about the referendum until after the general election—Mr Murdoch's malevolent influence again. Mr Blair promises then to work his persuasive magic. He might have learned by now that the magic has faded. Even, as I suspect it will be, if the referendum is delayed until mid-2006, the campaign to win it must start now. Instead, the government leaves its pro-European case to speeches delivered by Dennis MacShane on the occasional wet night in Dudley.

Yet I am optimistic because in spite of the message of the opinion polls, I suspect that the British electorate has more common sense on this issue that we give it credit for. Look beyond the saloon bar xenophobia of UKIP and most people do not find it that difficult to reconcile their Britishness with the idea that we are part of a larger construct. England's national football team is managed by a Swede, its most successful premiership club by a Frenchman. Where are the demonstrations on the streets against German ownership of Rolls Royce or a Spanish takeover of one of our biggest banks?

If the referendum is framed, as it must be, in terms of a choice between continued active involvement in the EU and isolation on the margins of an organisation that nonetheless shapes our future, most voters may well conclude, as they did in 1975, that their heads should rule their hearts. The message that the Yes camp must convey—and it has the virtue of being the honest one—is that the status quo option in the referendum is to ratify the treaty.

The British do not want to be isolated. Only recently William Hague recalled that during the 2001 election campaign he had invited the voters to follow him in saving Britain from the European dragon. In Mr Hague's own candid admission: 'No-one came'.

That says to me that British pragmatism is alive and well, and that, for all that some would like to think that our island status gives us a unique freedom of action, we know that the reality is otherwise.

Lord Palmerston famously remarked that Britain did not have allies, only interests. The facts of the modern world are such that interests can only be pursued through alliances.

As Hugo so eloquently reminded us, we may be unable to forget the past, but nor can we avoid the future.

Acknowledgement

I would like to say thank you to Lucy Young for inviting me to give this lecture, and to Alan Rusbridger, Peter Preston, and the *Guardian* and Chatham House for organising the event. I am deeply grateful to be part of this tribute to Hugo's life work.

Note

1 This article is the text of the inaugural Hugo Young Memorial Lecture delivered at Chatham House, London, on 20 October 2004.

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