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## ► To cite this version:

Laurent Warlouzet. Britain at the Centre of European Co-operation (1948–2016). *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2018, 56 (4), pp.955-970. <10.1111/jcms.12701>. <hal-04673169>

**HAL Id: hal-04673169**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04673169v1>**

Submitted on 19 Aug 2024

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# Brexit: Britain at the Centre of Europe (1948-2016)

Laurent WARLOUZET

Author's version of: Laurent Warlouzet, « Britain at the Centre of European Co-operation (1948–2016) », in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56, 4, 2018, pp. 955-970. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12701

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## Keywords:

Brexit, United Kingdom, European Union, History, Free-trade.

## Abstract:

This article will revisit the vision of a Britain based on two supposedly eternal features: the promotion of free-trade values and a reticence towards European integration. By examining the history of Britain's relationship with the organization of the European continent, it will demonstrate that since the inception of the European organization in 1948, London has constantly exerted considerable influence on the organization of the European continent. In this regard, Brexit is just another step in a proactive British policy of influencing European cooperation. Most instances of isolationism were self-induced, not the result of any sinister Franco-German plot. In addition, this article will also demonstrate that the UK government has not consistently put forth a free-trade European policy. UK economic policy has traditionally been based on multiple legacies, including some protectionist tendencies.

## Acknowledgment:

This research was conducted while the author was postdoctoral fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) thanks to an EU IEF-Marie Curie Grant entitled 'CrisisEurope', which subsequently led to the publication of the book *Governing Europe in a Globalizing World*. The author also acknowledges the support of the Fondation pour les sciences sociales (under the umbrella of the Fondation de France). The author sincerely thanks the anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions.

## **Britain at the Centre of European cooperation (1948-2016)**

### **1. Introduction**

In her speech outlining the UK government strategy to cope with Brexit on 8 January 2017, Theresa May promoted the notion of a 'Global Britain'. Liberated from the bonds of a parochial EU, Great Britain would now be able to conclude free-trade agreements with the other nations of the world. This vision draws on a rich and extensive scholarship which has emphasized how Britain has traditionally been an active promoter of international free-trade dating back to the repeal of the Corn laws in 1846, and particularly during the debates over European cooperation (Whitman, 2016, 511; Young, 2000, 184). This vision also alludes to Britain as an 'awkward partner', frequently isolated within European institutions that appeared to be steered primarily by French and German officials. For example, a note on a 1984 meeting on Europe gathering senior Whitehall officials concluded that the 'Community had traditionally been dominated by France and Germany'.<sup>1</sup>

This article will place this narrative in perspective by using both new archival documents, and the recent historical literature on this topic. First, it will show that since the inception of the first organization of European cooperation in 1948, the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), London has consistently exerted significant influence on the organization of the European continent. The British government has indeed often been 'awkward' within European institutions, but not at the price of irrelevance. It is necessary to revisit the 'missing the boat' approach, according to which Britain had but a passive role in a European integration process dominated by a Franco-German leadership, since it did not take part in the Communities from their start in 1951, but only in 1973. This narrative was especially influential in a relatively dated historical literature but it still survives today (see a survey in Daddow, 2004).

Second, this article will demonstrate that the UK government has not always maintained a free-trade orientation in its European policy. Oliver Daddow has recently underlined that the UK government policy towards Europe has been influenced by the 'outsider tradition' (Daddow, 2015, 72). It dwells on factors such as insularity, a specific political experience with an old and stable parliamentary monarchy, and formerly the largest empire in the world. The promotion of international free-trade has played a large role in this narrative. This commitment is underlined in most academic studies, even though they do not mention it as the main factor driving Britain's European policy (Crowson, 2010, 62 ; George, 1998, 39 ; Milward, 2002, 307 ; Whitman, 2016, 511; Young, 2000, 184 and 195). While this feature is broadly true, it has not been a permanent one. When examining the actual trade policy that has been implemented by the UK, one finds many instances during which British policy was actually more protectionist than those of many continental European countries, in particular in Germany and even France.

As a result, the chronology of the British relationship with European cooperation will be revisited, in particular with regard to two seminal moments. The protectionist tendencies of the British policy before 1979 will be highlighted and contrasted with the official British position supporting international free-trade. Subsequently, the Thatcher years - predominantly from 1979 to 1986 - will be revisited to demonstrate that the Conservative British Prime Minister actively promoted a positive vision of European cooperation with some success.

This article takes an institutional and an economic angle, and in doing so will complement other contributions that are focused on ideas and perceptions in public opinion or among the elite (see in particular: Bevir, Daddow and Schnapper, 2015). It examines the decision-making process over the long term via an historical methodology, that is to say a reliance on primary sources, in particular archival collections of the British government. While not perfect (the records of many informal conversations are missing), archival records provide invaluable information on the decision-making process beyond memoirs or newspaper articles. This study relies on the work of

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<sup>1</sup> TNA (The British National Archives in Kew), CAB 193/424, note P. Martin, 14 June 1984, meeting of permanent secretaries on the EC.

many scholars who have extensively burrowed into archives on British policy toward Europe up to the early 1970s. In addition, it provides new archival evidence for the period ranging from 1973 to 1986, and links those historical trends to contemporary debates.

The article will deal first with the British attempts to organize alternatives to Community Europe between 1948 and 1973, when it joined the EEC. It will then demonstrate that Britain, despite being an ‘awkward partner’, remained at the centre of Europe. A final part of the article will address the Thatcherite period and its legacy in the lead-up to Brexit.

## **2. Organizing Alternatives to Community Europe (1948-73)**

After the Second World War, many Western Europeans and Northern Americans alike wanted to foster European integration in order to promote a peaceful and efficient reconstruction of the Continent. Britain accepted intergovernmental organizations that promoted trade liberalization such as the Organization for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), which was established in 1948, and the Council of Europe in 1949. More generally, London did commit itself to the European defence cooperation by stationing a large army in Western Germany. It also played an instrumental role in the creation of the Western European Union (WEU) in 1954, an intergovernmental organization which replaced the defunct European Defence Community (EDC), a federal venture defeated in the French Parliament in 1954 (Deighton, 1998; Daddow, 2015, 75-6).

At the same time, London refused to take part in organizations, which involved significant abdication of sovereignty from the member-states to supranational institutions. It shied away from the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) of 1951, and from the EEC of 1957. These communities were all based on the creation of institutions, such as the European Commission, with genuine supranational powers. They had the ability to make decisions without the assent of all governments and to implement them, at least for certain technical issues. Refusing those innovations appeared to be logical for a Britain pondering its postwar situation. Unlike the so-called ‘Six’ (the founding members of the ECSC/EEC: France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries), Britain had been neither defeated nor invaded. Its political system had not changed and it had been a nuclear power since 1952. It had decisively shaped the post-1945 ‘European order’ in the Yalta and Potsdam conference as one of the three great powers (Soutou, 2000, 341-2). In contrast, France and Germany shared a bloody history that spanned three conflicts in 70 years, each with a dramatically rising death toll, not to mention countless changes in their political regimes. The Benelux countries had been invaded many times by their neighbours, and Italy’s young history as a unitary state had been tainted by a nationalistic experiment in fascism. There was a sense that a new organization of inter-European relations had to be found on the Continent. The Cold War and US pressure provided the decisive impetus to convince the Six to act by creating the ECSC.

Britain was not the victim of a Franco-German plot to create a Community Europe. It consciously chose to not take part in it, because it did not mesh with its perceived economic and strategic interest (Kaiser, 1996; Milward, 2002). In fact, the Communities represented but one form of European cooperation among other organizations, such as the OEEC or the Council of Europe which had been created before, and of which Britain was a founding member. The ECSC originated with the Schuman declaration of 9 May 1950, which was open to all European states. It is true that prior to his speech the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman told only the West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer about his proposal. He did not inform the British: but then neither did he notify the leaders of the other Western European states affected by this project. Moreover, even if the Schuman Declaration alluded to the aim of establishing a ‘federation’, and even if the Treaty of Paris creating the ECSC attributed large powers to the High Authority, the delegation of sovereignty remained in fact limited. Then, when the negotiations leading to the Rome Treaty began in the autumn of 1955, the United Kingdom was invited to the expert talks. Britain took part in the discussion over several months, and then chose to unilaterally withdraw from negotiations

that it considered pointless and doomed to failure (Kaiser, 1996, 40). Nevertheless, the discussion continued at Six, and eventually led to the Treaty of Rome creating the EEC in 1957.

London did not stay idle while this new European organization was being established. British governments changed their attitude, from being a 'benevolent supporter' to that of a 'saboteur', when the Eden government tried to discredit the Common Market in the eyes of the US (in particular at the GATT), and then to a 'rival' with the promotion of the Free Trade Area (FTA) by the Eden and then Macmillan governments from 1956 onwards (Daddow, 2015, 73-5). The FTA was a project to create a loose zone of commercial cooperation in which goods could circulate freely among all OEEC member states. It was to be managed by intergovernmental institutions. Agriculture was excluded from the project, because Britain wanted to keep its preferential agreements within the Commonwealth. The FTA was presented as an attempt to complement the Common Market: the Six would have built a small semi-federal Europe while the seventeen countries of Western Europe (including the Six) would be part of a larger intergovernmental free-trade area which would replace the OEEC. Since the FTA was considered to be another step in a successful European economic cooperation undertaken under the auspices of the OEEC, all Western European governments were committed to the negotiations over its Treaty, which was launched in late 1956. However, internal archives reveal that British officials clearly established the FTA project to thwart the Common Market, by courting political figures such as West German Minister of Economics Ludwig Erhard, who might have been sceptical about the Common Market (Ellison, 2000, 201; Kaiser, 1996, 49-61; Milward, 2002, 247-8). German archives also confirmed that Erhard tried unsuccessfully to prioritize the FTA negotiations over the Common Market (Löffler, 2002, 563). The British did not succeed in bringing their FTA project to a successful conclusion. The standard narrative cast the responsibility on the French leader Charles de Gaulle, who had returned to power in June 1958 as Head of government (*président du Conseil*), and had rejected the FTA in November 1958, preferring a smaller EEC within which France would be more influential (George, 1998, 27; Gillingham, 2003, 51; Young, 2000, 60). Recent research done in British archives indicated that this failure was due to London's attitude. The British government was divided over the FTA project, and it therefore devised a project tailored to suit solely British interests. In contrast, the Treaty of Rome creating the EEC resulted from the Spaak report of 1956, which was already a first compromise among the Six and not a project originating from one single state. Moreover, a detailed examination showed that it was the British negotiator, Reginald Maudling, who suspended the negotiations, and not the French (Ellison, 2000, 212; Lynch, 2000, 131; Milward, 2002, 290-1). De Gaulle capitalized on this move to quietly terminate all discussions over the FTA, while Macmillan was delivering empty threats on the British commitment to keep an army on the Rhine (Warloutzet, 2011, 431-2).

After their own failure in the FTA issue, in 1960 the British supported the creation of a free trade organization among seven non-EEC countries called the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). The EFTA project was originally launched by the Scandinavian (in particular by business organizations: Rollings, 2007, 123-6) and the British played an instrumental role in its development. London then twice attempted to join the EEC, only to be once again rebuffed by Charles de Gaulle, who had become French President in the meantime. In this instance as well, the British government should not be regarded as merely a passive actor facing a recalcitrant French president. As Piers Ludlow has shown in a detailed multi-archival examination of the first British attempt to join the EEC (1961-3), the British largely derailed their own application by imposing too many prerequisites. London sought to renegotiate everything, in particular the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), whose institutional framework had been set up after lengthy negotiations in January 1962. The European Commission and many governments were already duly exasperated with the Macmillan government's attitude when de Gaulle wielded his veto in January 1963. In contrast, during the second attempt, Prime Minister Harold Wilson was shrewder. Not only did he request no prerequisites, he even promoted a proactive vision of European cooperation with his vague but positive project of creating a European 'technological community'.

As a result, when de Gaulle unilaterally rejected the British application for a second time in late 1967, this had more detrimental consequences for France, now substantially isolated (Ludlow, 2006, 141-4 and 155). In retaliation, France's partners in the Community repeatedly blocked many EEC discussions about projects promoted by Paris. De Gaulle himself was unnerved. In 1969, he contemplated new ways of associating the UK with the European cooperation effort. Talking with Christopher Soames, Winston Churchill's son-in-law (then British ambassador in France), de Gaulle mentioned the possibility of concluding with the UK an 'European economic agreement' on trade, which could eventually have replaced the Common Market (Sanderson, 2011).<sup>2</sup> Eventually, he resigned in April 1969 but this conversation proved that the UK was irreplaceable in all debates over European cooperation. The second application was also a failure but it allowed London to return to centre stage.

A second addition to the standard narrative must be stressed: the UK policy was not more geared towards international free trade than that of its main continental European partners. In terms of economic policy, British officials implemented a relatively dirigist economic policy from the 1940s to the 1970s, in contrast with West Germany for example (Fioretos, 2011). The British macro-economic record during those decades was less impressive than among continental European countries (which arguably came from a lower basis in 1945 as they had suffered from greater destructions). The UK experienced several balance of payments crises and parts of its industrial sectors were becoming less and less competitive on the world market. This explained the British reluctance to open its market to unrestricted free trade during this period.

This wariness was visible in the Free Trade Area project. The FTA was fiercely criticized by many officials outside the UK for its limited commitment to free trade in two respects. First, the FTA only entailed a mechanical reduction of internal tariffs for industrial goods. Without any harmonization of external tariffs (like in the EEC case), this left ample room for the risk of diversion of trade. It would also leave London free to maintain high tariffs towards non-FTA countries. Second, the FTA did not encompass agriculture, whereas all other governments were interested in special agreements in this field (Kaiser, 1996, 93-4). In those days, the trade of agricultural products was subject to heavy duties, quotas and bilateral agreements. In fact, London's aim was to be at the centre of two preferential zones: the free trade area for European industrial goods, and the Commonwealth for agricultural products, hardly a recipe for international free trade!

A second episode was the so-called 'surcharge crisis' within EFTA (Kaiser and Schot, 2014, 282). In 1964-5, Britain imposed an extra tax on imports after encountering balance of payments problems. This triggered huge problems with its partners from the EFTA. When they met Macmillan on 9 November 1964, the Danish Prime Minister Jens Otto Krag and the Swedish ambassador Gunnar Lange requested a withdrawal of the unilateral British measures, or at least an exemption for EFTA members, otherwise the future of the organization was at stake.<sup>3</sup> But British officials refused to grant any specific concessions to EFTA members because they would have been forced to offer the same treatment to Commonwealth countries, hence jeopardizing the whole approach of diminishing imports to ease the balance of payments deficit.

Far from being a shining beacon of free trade, Britain was actually more protectionist than was the EEC, even though many officials in those days were convinced of the contrary. Indeed, during the parliamentary debate over EEC membership in 1971, many members of Parliament from both sides accused the EEC of being a protectionist club, facing a free trade Britain (Ludlow, 2015). In point of fact, in 1967, at the end of the GATT Kennedy Round, the average UK tariff for non-agricultural goods stood at 7.2 per cent compared with 4.9 per cent for the EEC according to Henry Overman and Alan Winters (Overman and Winters, 2006). Arguably, it is rather tricky to compare the level of custom duties, as weighted averages need to be calculated in order to take into account the

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<sup>2</sup> Archives of the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Michel Debré Fund, CM9, note on the meeting De Gaulle-Soames of 4 February 1969.

<sup>3</sup> TNA, PREM13/1240, record of a conversation at 10 Downing street, 9 November 1964; note from the Board of Trade, 10 March 1965.

relative importance of each product. To overcome this difficulty, a GATT report from 1971 used 4 different average tariffs. In all of the 4 cases, the UK average tariff (as well as the US) was consistently higher than the EEC one (GATT, 1971, 11). It is true that the UK was a champion of free trade in the agricultural sector, toeing the line of the Cobdenite liberal tradition which dated from the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, but this was not true for industrial goods. As a result, when it entered the Economic Community in 1973, the UK had to lower its external tariffs to align itself with the lower EEC average.

### 3. An active ‘awkward partner’

Once in the EEC, it is incontestable that Britain acted as an ‘awkward partner’. This expression is usually associated with the title of Stephen George’s book of reference on Britain in the European Community (George 1998), but it actually stems from a comment made in 1980 by a British diplomat lamenting the limited influence of his government on the EEC in an internal note.<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, the so-called ‘valedictory report’ of Donald Maitland, the UK permanent representative leaving his position in 1979, vigorously contrasted the British and French negotiating styles within EEC institutions, despite the fact that both countries shared a common inclination for intergovernmentalism:

‘ [The French] pay little regard to the wishes of their partners and even less to their feelings. [...] For some reasons I have never had satisfactory explained the other member States seem in some way to be mesmerized by the French [...] Like the French we could also more often leave it to others to defend our interests, thereby conserving ammunition for the big battles [...] It does nothing to still the remaining doubts about our commitment to the Community that, when a new proposition comes to be discussed, we are so often the first to administer the cold douche’.<sup>5</sup>

According to Maitland, despite the fact that both the French and the British governments shared a common inclination for intergovernmentalism, the first were more efficient as they were less openly critical of Community proposals. They were also better at presenting their national interests in a European fashion.

The United Kingdom was not the only country asserting its national interest, but it was the one which made the least effort at diplomacy. No other country held a referendum on the membership of the Community, as Britain did as soon as 1975, or blocked most European Councils by requesting a major reform of the main rules of the club, as Thatcher did with the so-called BBQ - the ‘British Budgetary Question’ - from 1980 to 1984. Similarly, euroscepticism was represented among mainstream parties, first with Labour and then with the Conservatives, from the very start of the membership. While public opinion in many EEC countries was majoritarily either pro-European or indifferent, critics of European excess were already widespread in the late 1970s. The Foreign Office even argued in 1978 that a campaign designed to denounce the ‘Myths about the EEC’ was necessary.<sup>6</sup> It explained that the European Commission tried neither to halt doorstep milk and paper deliveries in Britain, nor did it impose the metric system in the United Kingdom. Concerning the latter, the agreement was in fact made in 1965 in the framework of the General Conference of Weights and Measures (founded in 1875), and not by the EEC.

Those features translated into an awkward diplomatic pose, which culminated in Thatcher’s abrasive and high-handed tactics. Certainly, all British Prime Ministers would have raised the budgetary problems, such was the level of Britain’s net payments compared to much richer countries (such as the Netherlands which were a net beneficiary), but she did so with an adversarial style that alienated her EEC partners (Ludlow 2016, 215). As a result, the shrill British voice was

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<sup>4</sup> TNA, FCO98/948, note Cooper, 4 August 1980.

<sup>5</sup> TNA, FCO30/4112, Sir Donald Maitland Valedictory Despatch, 31 October 1979.

<sup>6</sup> TNA, FCO30/3820, note ‘Myths about the EEC’, Franklin, 21 February 1978.

sometimes ignored. In 1982, the minister of agriculture Peter Walker wielded his veto to block agricultural prices but he was outvoted, as he did not respect the informal rules required to invoke a veto. In June 1984, Thatcher obtained the famous ‘rebate’ on the budget but, according to Stephen George, she could have extracted a better deal a couple of months earlier had she not been so aggressive (George, 1998, 156-8). In 1985, at the Milan Council, her attempt to block the convening of an intergovernmental conference to negotiate a new Treaty was overridden by a majority vote. This even was quite exceptional as the decision by the then President of the European Council, the Italian Bettino Craxi, to hold a vote was unprecedented. Overall, this demonstrates how problematic this ‘awkwardness’ was. It was not simply a matter of making a bad impression, but of undermining British influence in Brussels in the process.

This being said, Britain was an active awkward partner. In other words, despite spectacular and unproductive bouts of self-isolation, the UK has had a major influence on the course of EEC/EU since 1973 for at least four reasons. To begin with, it is wrong to consider that Britain was on the fringe of an EEC/EU dominated by a Franco-German couple. In reality, the latter was neither permanent nor powerful. Between 1974 and 1981, the French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and the German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt embodied the strength of the Franco-German duo, based on a strong bond between the two leaders who shared a mutual intellectual esteem and an inclination to lecture their counterparts on macro-economics. However, accounts of the European Councils reveal that both leaders frequently clashed on their economic analysis of the crisis until the arrival of Raymond Barre, an austere professor of economics, at the head of the French government in 1976 (Mourlon-Druol, 2012, 239-40).<sup>7</sup> At that point, Schmidt and Giscard d’Estaing managed to build together, with the support of the British President of the Commission, Roy Jenkins, the European Monetary System (EMS) (Ludlow, 2016, 113-140). French President François Mitterrand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl formed another strong couple between 1982 and 1995. However, even though their records of conversation are littered with reference to the shared Franco-German history, and even with jokes, they are also characterized by constant bickering over trade, the budget and the CAP.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it was precisely because French and German economic interests differed so widely that the Franco-German couple was so strong: a compromise struck between the two had every chance of seducing a number of other countries. After 1995, the Franco-German couple existed on a lower level of intensity.

Second, Britain managed to stay at the centre of the EEC despite regular French attempts to exclude it. As soon as March 1981, according to German archives, Giscard d’Estaing asked Schmidt whether it was not a mistake to have allowed the British in, and whether it would not have been better to conclude a simple free trade zone with this troublesome ally.<sup>9</sup> Schmidt admitted that the British posed a particular problem, but he refused to envision such an idea. The centre-right Giscard d’Estaing was then replaced by the socialist Mitterrand in May 1981, but the tone remained the same. In 1982 and in 1984, the French socialist leaders (notably François Mitterrand and his foreign affairs ministers Claude Cheysson and then Roland Dumas) repeatedly tried to convince the Germans to promote the creation of a new European community without the British if they maintained their uncompromising stance on the budgetary issue (George, 1998, 150; Moravcsik, 1998, 351).<sup>10</sup> Bonn remained, however, steady in its defence of the unity of the Community.

Third, the British secured many exceptions from the outset. The 1975 referendum allowed the British to obtain limited adjustments to soothe voters. More significant was the fact that the UK was the only EEC country not taking part in the European monetary system that was set up in 1979

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<sup>7</sup> AAPD (AAPD stands for Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, the published document of German diplomatic archives), 1977/111, note 010, 7 May 1977.

<sup>8</sup> AAPD, 1982/254, note on a meeting Kohl-Mitterrand, 4 October 1982; AAPD, 1984/29, note on a meeting Kohl-Mitterrand, 2 February 1984

<sup>9</sup> AAPD, 1981/71, note Elder von Braunmühl, 16 March 1981; AAPD, 1981/75, note Zeller, 17 March 1981.

<sup>10</sup> AAPD, 1982/99, note on a Schmidt-Mitterrand meeting, 30 March 1982; AAPD, 1984/137, note on a Genscher-Dumas meeting, 15 May 1984.



(Mourlon-Druol, 2012). From 1984 onwards, it received a special rebate in the budget, and it has never taken part in the Schengen agreement, which dates back to 1985. In the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, London secured exemptions concerning the European monetary union and the social Charter, even if British Prime Minister Tony Blair eventually accepted the latter. Later on, Prime Minister David Cameron secured exemptions during the debates over the reinforcement of Eurozone institutions, and specific concessions in February 2016 following his pledge made during the 2015 general election to renegotiate Britain's EU membership and to hold a referendum on it.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the UK has actively taken part in the shaping of Europe, and was not isolated among other European member-states. Scandinavian countries have often shared the British wariness about supranationalism, European idealism and over-regulation from Brussels, which might undermine their parliamentary democracy (Kaiser, 2001; Chopin-Lequesne, 2016, 537-8). Britain also joined forces with other countries depending on the issue. In 1973, Britain allied with Italy and Ireland to obtain the creation of the regional policy, a redistributive policy designed to alleviate the economic burden of the most deprived areas, which was eventually created in 1975 (George, 1998, 56-68). During the GATT Tokyo Round negotiations, which lasted from 1973 to 1979, Britain sided in the protectionist camp with France and Italy. It opposed Germany, which promoted lower trade barriers (Coppolaro, 2016). Certainly, the picture changed with the advent of the free-markeeter Thatcher - but Britain remained at the heart of the European game.

#### **4. Thatcher's mark on Europe**

Despite her image as the embodiment of British Euroscepticism, Margaret Thatcher can be considered as a genuine supporter of a British-inspired EEC during most of her premiership.

Certainly, Thatcher was not a European idealist. In September 1981, when she ordered a thorough review of UK trade policy, she considered the EEC as but one trade institution among others, alongside the GATT and bilateral trade agreements.<sup>11</sup> There was no particular interest in the European community. The review of British trade policy led to the identification of many detrimental foreign non-trade barriers, that is to say obstacles to trade different from custom duties and quotas:

German industry also benefits from the most effective 'non-tariff barrier' in Europe, DIN standards.<sup>12</sup> Thus the French for example have made several hundred applications in the past few years for particular French standards to be recognized as equivalent to DIN, but so far not even one has been approved [...] The US government, while formally eschewing specific support to companies for export projects, nonetheless is a past master at using political clout and the leverage of civil/military aid, to establish a presence for US exporters for major projects.<sup>13</sup>

Thatcher manifested a keen interest in fighting those non-tariff barriers. She requested specific proposals against Japan and against German normative obstacles.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, British officials were worried by the sudden outburst of protectionism of the French socialist government in 1982.<sup>15</sup>

The British government also considered the EEC as useful in solving the problem of internal non-tariff barriers. The Commission had closely monitored, and sometimes condemned, the most blatant expression of protectionism of the French government in 1982. (Warlouzet, 2017, 184-5) The other major non-tariff barriers identified by British officials, namely German standards, could not be dealt with through the GATT, whose procedures were cumbersome. Here again, the EEC

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<sup>11</sup> TNA, PREM19/928, note Biffen, 23 December 1981; Warlouzet, 2017, 184.

<sup>12</sup> DIN is the Deutsches Institut für Normung, the German institute for standardization.

<sup>13</sup> TNA, PREM19/928, letter to Scholar, 15 December 1981.

<sup>14</sup> TNA, PREM19/928, letter to Rhodes, 11 January 1982; letter to Kerry, 9 February 1982; PREM9/1023, note Rhodes to Scholar, 26 October 1982

<sup>15</sup> TNA, PREM19/1023, note, Trade, 2 décembre 1982.

could be useful, especially given that the theme of the completion of the Common Market by the removal of non-tariff barriers became a priority for the Commission from 1982 onwards, before being rebranded the 'Single Market' programme by Delors in 1985.

Regarding international free trade, even under Thatcher, London maintained a pragmatic attitude with regard to the defence of its national industry. For example, in June 1982 the US government imposed anti-dumping rights on EEC steel in order to offset state subsidies.<sup>16</sup> Antidumping rights ranged from 1 per cent for steel originating in Germany, where state aid to companies was low, to 40 per cent for the British Steel Corporation (BSC), which was the most heavily subsidized. Despite her neoliberal credentials, Thatcher supported the Commission's decision to react strongly against the US complaint. Whitehall was keen to play the EEC card on this issue because it reinforced British influence internationally.<sup>17</sup> In point of fact, the German government sided with the British over this issue out of concern for EEC solidarity.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the US was presented with a united front greatly enhanced British bargaining power. The same attitude was visible in another important international trade issue: textiles. Most EEC textile products benefited from some degree of protection against imports from low-cost countries within the multi-fibre agreements. The first agreement was concluded in 1974 and it was renewed regularly. In 1982, during the negotiations over its renewal, a predictable opposition pitted free trade Germany against protectionist France, but what was notable was that Thatcher shared the French reluctance without adopting its aggressive language.<sup>19</sup> Eventually, the British government accepted the EEC compromise, again since it enhanced its global bargaining power. Even if Thatcher's rhetoric was neoliberal, she still maintained the UK's relatively protectionist stance concerning declining manufacturing industries.

With the resolution of the budgetary issue in June 1984, Thatcher began promoting a more proactive vision of Europe. A few months before the budget deal was sealed, she tasked Whitehall to work on a memorandum defending a positive British vision of Europe. According to one of her advisors, she did 'not want to leave the French making the running'. In other words, the British Prime Minister was irritated by the grand schemes of the French President François Mitterrand, who could count on solid German support. Thatcher wanted to identify areas where it was in the British interest to increase European cooperation. The memorandum was drafted in the Spring of 1984 (Wall, 2008, 41; Moravcsik, 1998, 360). Scepticism was widespread in Whitehall. An official from the ministry of agriculture observed incredulously: 'I am not clear exactly what use the paper will be put to'.<sup>20</sup> At the Treasury, another official commented: 'The paper seeks to match the kind of unrealistic rhetoric about the future of the Community on which Kohl is currently campaigning in the European elections. I must confess that this is not to my taste'.<sup>21</sup> It took Thatcher's personal involvement to convince Whitehall's officials to contribute to it.<sup>22</sup>

Entitled 'Europe. The Future', the memorandum was completed in June 1984 (UK government, 1984). It supported, among other things, the Single Market programme and the liberalization of transport, banking and insurance. Strikingly, it ended on a clear pro-European message:

Periodic expressions of pessimism about the future of the Community have never turned out to be justified. Europe needs to advance its internal development. The progress that has

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<sup>16</sup> TNA, PREM19/750, brief, trade relations with US and Japan, 23 March 1982 ; PREM19/752, note of 23 June 1982; Warloutzet, 2017, 87-9.

<sup>17</sup> TNA, PREM19/1024, steering brief, 22 November 1982; brief 'Community relations with other Industrialised Countries', 26 November 1982.

<sup>18</sup> Archives of the German ministry of Foreign Affairs, B2/249, note for the meeting Genscher-Pym on 19 October 1982 ; note BMWi, 11 October 1982.

<sup>19</sup> Archives of the German ministry of Foreign Affairs, ZW/124.417, note Boll, 29 October 1981 ; AAPD1982/198, note Steinkühler, 1 July 1982.

<sup>20</sup> TNA (FOIA request), MWB.021/1, note Attridge to Williamson, 23 May 1984.

<sup>21</sup> TNA (FOIA request), MWB.021/1, note Unwin to Bullard, 24 May 1984.

<sup>22</sup> TNA (FOIA request), MWB.021/1, note Bone to Coles, 1st June 1984 ; note from the Private Secretary to Thatcher, 4 June 1984.

been made towards ‘an ever-closer union of the people of Europe’ of which the Treaty of Rome speaks in its first paragraph is unlikely to be reversed.

This contrasts with the current British EU position, which insists that London had never accepted the paragraph about an ‘ever-closer union’. This discrepancy is however, not illogical as the memorandum was completely forgotten. In fact, the British government did not want to publicize this document, because it did not want to appear as too pro-European prior to the elections. As British Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe wrote: ‘it could have caused embarrassment in the last week of the European elections campaign’.<sup>23</sup> In the end, according to a Whitehall official: ‘the paper appears to have fallen rather flat, perhaps for two reasons: lack of a receptive audience and ineffective distribution’.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, many German officials, as well as William Wallace, a major British expert on Europe, complained of having experienced difficulties in getting a copy of it.<sup>25</sup> All of this explain why another expert, Peter Ludlow, estimated that the reaction of many officials in Brussels was ‘contemptuous’ or ‘sceptical’.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, the memorandum found its way to the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, which published it (UK government, 1984).

In 1985, Thatcher promoted the drafting of a second memorandum. Released in March 1985, it defended a neoliberal vision of Europe (Warloutzet, 2017, 196-7). It supported the Single Market and the free movement of services. It promoted an agenda of ‘deregulation’ by requesting a review of existing and future EEC legislation to trim it in order to reduce ‘the burden imposed on businesses’.

This evolution explained why Thatcher eventually supported the conclusion of the Single Act in January 1986. At its core was the creation of a Single Market resulting from the harmonization of non-tariff barriers (with exemptions in several areas) through the adoption of directives by qualified majority voting. The Single Act certainly left a mixed legacy for Britain, which had to concede the adoption of qualified majority voting. But Thatcher was only the most vocal opponent of this move among many sceptics. The enigmatic French President Mitterrand never clearly enunciated his support for qualified majority voting prior to the Milan Council of 1985. During a Franco-German meeting, he insisted - on the contrary - that it was necessary to keep the veto, all the while limiting its use.<sup>27</sup> Even the German government, a much more prominent supporter of qualified majority voting, did wield its veto in the Council in March 1985, in order to request higher agricultural prices. This attitude might certainly have assuaged any British fears about accepting qualified majority voting.

After the Single Act, the British Presidency of the second semester 1986 prioritized the completion of the internal market, as well as the so-called ‘deregulation’ agenda. Thatcher personally insisted on both points in internal documents.<sup>28</sup> The British Prime Minister even went further by supporting an EEC initiative for high-technology through the Single Market programme. During the London European Council of December 1986, she put forward the theme of harmonizing the standard for the so-called ‘digital cellular telecommunications networks’.<sup>29</sup> Experts were working on standards for the future mobile phone networks, and it was important for Thatcher, as well as for many European companies, to promote a European standard, distinct from the US one, lest US companies acquire a competitive edge. In the end, an agreement was struck in 1987 with the support of

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<sup>23</sup> TNA (FOIA request), MWB.021/1, note Fairweather to Renwick, 14 June 1984.

<sup>24</sup> TNA (FOIA request), MWB.021/1, Christopher (Western European Department) to Neville-Jones (Planning Staff), 23 July 1984.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. and: note Le Breton (information Department) to Barrington, 13 August 1984.

<sup>26</sup> TNA (FOIA request), MWB.021/1, note from Peter Ludlow to Miss Neville-Jones, 18 July 1984.

<sup>27</sup> AAPD, 1985/136, note on a meeting Genscher- Mitterrand, 24 mai 1985 ; AAPD/1985/137, note on a meeting Kohl-Mitterrand, 28 mai 1985.

<sup>28</sup> TNA, PREM19/1751, note Williamson to Charles Powell, intro to the brief, 27 November 1986; letter from Howe to Thatcher with a personal comment from Thatcher, 6 October 1986.

<sup>29</sup> TNA, PREM19/2152, letter from Pattie (minister of State for Industry) to Thatcher, 12 November 1986; note from the Department of Trade, 7 September 1987

London. It embodied Thatcher's vision of Europe, which was based on companies and on the market, rather than on a dirigist approach. She asserted European industrial interests before the US, while not being openly hostile to it.

Lastly, British influence over the course of the EEC/EU during the Thatcher years was not confined to 10 Downing Street. British Commissioners, too, were instrumental in promoting a UK vision of Europe. They did not slavishly follow their national government, as the example of two Conservative Commissioners appointed by Thatcher demonstrated. Arthur Cockfield famously inspired the Single Market programme and insisted on an extensive use of qualified majority voting. He then implemented the programme with a fierce supranational thrust, which irritated the British Prime Minister. As a result, the more loyal Leon Brittan replaced him in 1988. But the new commissioner for competition put pressure on the British government to accept a major devolution of power to the Commission with the merger regulation eventually adopted in 1989 despite London's reluctance (Warloutzet, 2016, 735-7).

Thatcher later became more critical of European integration. The British Prime Minister was not prepared to support her neoliberal agenda at the cost of a major delegation of authority to Brussels, which eventually materialized in the following years (Fontana/Parsons, 2015). Facing an increasingly assertive Delors Commission, she then adopted a more critical position against European integration.

Here again, archival materials contain insightful information on this Eurosceptic evolution. It was certainly a reaction against the development of the European Communities, but it was also part of a domestic agenda, as it was popular to be seen as tough against Europe. It has already been demonstrated above how the pro-European memorandum of 1984 was eventually shelved for this reason. In 1986, a note from Charles Powell, Thatcher's Private Secretary, elaborated on this strategy:

So far you have appeared very successful as a strong fighter for a fair British budgetary contribution, not afraid to take on the whole Community and win. That has served Britain very well and you very well.

But that particular issue is now solved [...]. We need either to find a new issue for a major battle in the Community or change your tactics and present EC matters in a lower key altogether. [...] There seem to me good reasons for continuing the tactic of 'Community-bashing' both because it is necessary in its own right to get some sense into the institution and because you will be a much more convincing exponent of it than the Opposition and will therefore cut the ground from under their feet.

It needs a good issue. The obvious one is reform of the CAP to reduce surpluses. Realistically there is not much chance of achieving thorough-going reform before the date of an election. But what is important is to be seen to be working at it.<sup>30</sup>

It appears that Thatcher read the document (as a handwritten 'MT' suggests) and underlined certain passages, including a passage about the 'good reasons for continuing the tactic' of criticizing the Community. 'Community-bashing' was a conscious strategy.

This document demonstrates how domestic and international issues were intermingled. For some officials, being tough appeared a successful strategy both at home and in Brussels. Thatcher hesitated on this approach, as the two memoranda of 1984 and 1985 - as well as the British Presidency of 1986 - demonstrates, but it was her stolidly critical stance that has ultimately remained associated with her in our collective memory, with the Bruges speech of 1988, and most of all during her bitter downfall in 1990. Indeed, the Bruges speech of 1988 led to the creation of a major eurosceptic group, even though the speech itself contains many positive references to the need for enhanced European cooperation (Daddow 2015, 79). The British Prime Minister began her speech by asserting that: 'Britain does not dream of some cosy, isolated existence on the fringes

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<sup>30</sup> TNA, PREM19/1751, note from Charles Powell (Private Secretary), to Thatcher, 3 January 1986.

of the European Community. Our destiny is in Europe, as part of the Community. That is not to say that our future lies only in Europe. But nor does that of France or Spain or indeed any other member'. She then promoted her own vision of the European Communities, founded on light regulation (by contrast with the vast process of harmonization unleashed by the Single Market program), the reform of the CAP, free-market reforms, and a renewed commitment to the Atlantic alliance. But it was her lambasting of the Brussels 'bureaucracy', supported by an indirect comparison of the Commission's centralization tendency to the Soviet Union, that proved to be its most enduring theme.

After Thatcher, British influence over the course of the EU remained important. Certainly, Britain had to cope with reinforcing EU institutions, but London has always been able to secure exemptions. Moreover, the thatcherite British neoliberal heritage continued to heavily influence debates in Brussels, even if it was not the sole influence; many different views of economic and social policies were promoted (Jabko, 2006; Warlouzet, 2017, 225-232). In the early 2000s, London secured a relatively quick enlargement to Central and Eastern European countries and an immediate freedom of movements for workers, whereas other countries had used the opportunity to impose transitory restrictions. Lastly, when Tony Blair embarked on the Iraq war in 2003, he secured the support of the majority of the EU states, and not only in the so-called 'new Europe', an expression coined by Donald Rumsfeld. Heads of government in several Western European countries, such as Silvio Berlusconi's Italy, José Manuel Barroso's Portugal and Fogh Rasmussen's Denmark, to name but a few, also sided with Blair.

If the UK became increasingly isolated over the ensuing years, it was largely of its own initiative. Brown and Cameron demonstrated a lower interest for the EU than did Blair (Whitman, 2016; Schnapper 2015). The UK confirmed and extended its exemptions when the Eurozone institutions were reinforced. It was not a novelty, as the British exemptions existed since 1978. It was not specific to the UK either. Most non-Eurozone countries also insisted on securing mechanisms ensuring that Eurozone countries could not influence the course of European economic integration on their own. Even Germany clung to its perennial policy of refusing a two-speed Europe, a perspective regularly advocated by the French. However, under the pressure of growing Euroscepticism at home, Cameron chose a strategy of isolation. Quantitative research on voting patterns in the Council suggests that UK has become increasingly isolated since 2009 (Hagemann, Hix, 2015). Major instances in this vein include the threat to veto the future fiscal compact in 2011, and David Cameron's solitary opposition to the accession of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the Commission in 2014. In both cases, London did not succeed in blocking the decision-making process, much like the failed British veto of 1982 and 1985 mentioned above. This attitude succeeded only in irritating several partners of the UK during EU negotiations. Many senior diplomats from different countries have had the sentiment that 'the UK has isolated itself' recently by not abiding by the informal rules of the Council, which are based in particular on a 'culture of compromise' (Rasmussen, 2016, 718). The choice to hold a referendum on continued membership and the subsequent 'Leave' vote on 23 June 2016 confirmed this trend.

## **5. Conclusion**

The examination of British policy regarding European cooperation through archives of the decision-making process, rather than the analysis of discourse and ideas, is crucial to put into perspective two visions traditionally associated with Great Britain. The first is that the UK had been frequently isolated since 1950 by a European integration process that was steered by France and Germany. While this idea is appropriate to describe certain events, notably the unilateral rejection of British membership to the EEC in the 1960s, it is unrepresentative of most of the period. The UK had taken part in the creation of the first European ventures (OEEC, Council of Europe). It had been offered the opportunity to take part in the inception of the European Communities, the ECSC and the EEC, but it had declined to do so. Once in the EEC, Britain negotiated specific

exemptions as far back as 1978 and it thwarted all attempts at creating a second-tier Europe. In the 1980s, Thatcher developed a positive project for European integration, which was visible in the two memoranda of 1984 and 1985, and with the British presidency of 1986. However, she preferred to sharply criticize the EEC to please her domestic audience. Such a policy of scape-goating was also common elsewhere in Europe, but some British leaders based most of their policy on this approach, in particular Thatcher, thus fuelling a long-term British 'awkwardness' within EEC/EU institutions.

Most instances of isolation were incurred by self-inflicted wounds. They were not the result of any dark Franco-German plot. This was true with the failure of the Free Trade Area negotiations in late 1958, as well as with several episodes of Cameron's EU policy, in particular its final one: Brexit. However, those periods of isolation were generally relatively ephemeral, as the UK had not ceded its status of world power. Continental European countries could not ignore Britain for very long. Even de Gaulle reflected on new ways to associate Britain in 1969.

The second idea to put into perspective is the belief that the UK has always been a staunch promoter of international free trade. While this idea has certainly been true since the advent of Thatcher in 1979, it was not the case before. UK tariffs were higher than on the Continent and London belonged to the protectionist camp of the EEC during the Labour governments of the 1970s. Even when Thatcher implemented her neoliberal policies in the 1980s, she still benefited from European solidarity for the protection of British steel and textile industries in the early 1980s. The free-trade agenda remained in place throughout the 1990s and the 2000s. All in all, British policy towards European cooperation has been pragmatic and relatively successful, with the exception of specific periods during which London has calculated that it could play its own game without taking into account any of its European partners.

With Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the challenge of living up to the free-trade tradition and influencing the organization of European cooperation is more daunting than ever.

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