

# The collapse of British foreign policy

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British foreign policy has tried to punch above its weight for the past half-century, while balancing between different sets of international allegiances. For Winston Churchill, Britain could compensate for its loss of empire by playing a role in 'three circles': the British Commonwealth and Empire, as it still was, the transatlantic Anglo-Saxon partnership, and the links with our continental European neighbours. Later, as the Commonwealth connection shifted from apparent asset to apparent burden in the course of the 1970s, when the problems of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe loomed over British governments and the caucus of African governments within the Commonwealth replaced deference to Britain with demands on Britain, the preferred image shifted from three circles to two stepping-off points, the United States and western Europe, with Britain acting as the 'bridge' between them.

This long-term balancing act has required British prime ministers and foreign secretaries to be highly acrobatic, dashing from capital to capital, promoting summits, UN resolutions, multilateral compromises. Harold Macmillan was the first prime minister to make constant travel a feature of Britain's claim to exceptional international influence; the satirical revue *Beyond the Fringe* wonderfully caricatured his 1959 election broadcast, in which he gestured at a large globe to show how far and how often he had travelled to promote international order. Tony Blair has done more: Peter Riddell calculates that in the eight weeks after 11 September 2001 Blair covered more than 40,000 miles, on 31 flights, with 54 meetings with foreign leaders.<sup>1</sup> And in support of this continued world role British troops have been more actively deployed abroad than those of any other European power—including France since the withdrawal from Algeria in 1962.

It has been difficult for successive prime ministers to maintain the balance they claimed to be essential to the maintenance of Britain's influence and prestige. Harold Macmillan proclaimed that the 'wind of change' was blowing

<sup>1</sup> Peter Riddell, *Hug them close: Blair, Clinton, Bush and the 'special relationship'*, rev. edn (London: Politico's, 2004), p. 156.

within the Commonwealth, and attempted to take Britain closer to what he called 'the Common Market'; but the Pentagon's cancellation of Skybolt tripped him up, and he fell out of the European circle as he reached to hold on to the American. Harold Wilson maintained his balance astonishingly well in his first term as prime minister, declining to commit British troops to the mistaken US war in Vietnam without upsetting Washington too much, and renewing Britain's application to join the EEC. But in his second term, like James Callaghan after him, he was pulled back from closer cooperation within the European Community that Britain had joined by the divisions within his own party.

It is now virtually forgotten that in 1979 continental governments welcomed Britain's inexperienced new prime minister, as a political leader who approached European cooperation without ideological preconceptions. However, she was not long in acquiring such fixed views, partly because of the patronizing attitudes that Chancellor Schmidt and President Giscard d'Estaing adopted towards her, and partly because of their stubborn defence of the indefensible arrangements for the Community budget. Her balance tipped further towards the West as her personal relationship with President Reagan deepened—only to bring her down when the first President Bush declared that Germany was America's preferred 'strategic partner' in Europe, and when her overt antagonism to German reunification antagonized her own Cabinet. Since then we have been through two further cycles of new prime ministers coming into office declaring their intention to put Britain 'at the heart of Europe' and ending up by leaving it at the margins: first with John Major, and now with Tony Blair.

The current prime minister, like Margaret Thatcher, has succeeded in putting Britain in the hearts of the American public, with his powerful articulation of the goals of western policy to American audiences. But this has not brought him the influence over US foreign policy for which he hoped. Like Mrs Thatcher, and in sharp contrast with John Major, he has significantly influenced the policy agenda of the European Union, notably in launching the British–French 'St Malo initiative' on European defence in 1998 and the 'Lisbon Agenda' on economic reform in 2001. Like her again, however, the style in which he (and his Chancellor) have presented their proposals to their partners, his hesitation in explaining to his party and electorate the objectives and implications of Britain's European initiatives, and the dead weight of an increasingly sceptical media and public have made it harder to achieve the government's stated goals.

In 1997 it looked as if both ends of the bridge had collapsed. John Major's government had little credibility with the Clinton administration in Washington; other European governments had delayed the end-game of the negotiations for the Treaty of Amsterdam until after the British election, in the confident hope that the Conservatives would lose. On winning the election, New Labour reasserted the 'guiding light' principles of British foreign policy, as Tony Blair

described them to his audience at the Lord Mayor's Banquet on 10 November 1997. British foreign policy, he argued, should aim to be

strong in Europe and strong with the US. There is no choice between the two. Stronger with one means stronger with the other. Our aim should be to deepen our relationship with the US at all levels. We are the bridge between the US and Europe. Let us use it.

My contention is that the bridge has again collapsed, and that it cannot now be rebuilt. It cannot be rebuilt because the assumptions underlying the claim that Britain could wield exceptional influence in Washington were already weak, and have now been shown to be without foundation. Long-term trends, in world politics since the end of the Cold War and within American domestic politics, have left British governments without either levers of influence over US administrations or appeals to shared values that resonate with the US electorate. With Blair, as with Macmillan and Thatcher before him, the cultivation of a special relationship with Washington has weakened rather than strengthened the parallel pursuit of close relations with our continental neighbours—partly because the priority given to Washington has detracted from prime ministerial attention to multilateral European politics, and partly because Britain's European partners resist the idea that their links with Washington should be channelled through London.

After two years in office, in his speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet on 22 November 1999, the prime minister chose a different image to describe Britain's claim to occupy a special position in world politics.

Nearly 40 years ago Dean Acheson's barb—that Britain had lost an Empire but not yet found a role—struck home ... I believe that search can now end. We have a new role ... not as a superpower but as a pivotal power, as a power that is at the crux of the alliances and international politics which shape the world and its future.<sup>2</sup>

That is, in effect, a restatement of Churchill's 'three circles' doctrine, without the lost British Commonwealth and Empire. It conjures up an image of British ministers and diplomats explaining European international politics to American leaders, and interpreting American foreign policy to European governments: Britain leading in Europe because of its close relationship with Washington, and influential in western multilateral consultations because of its active foreign policy towards the rest of the world. Like Churchill's imagery, it is intended to support a claim to international leadership well beyond what Britain's limited military and economic resources alone would support. It is at once a claim for leadership in European international politics, over governments which lack an effective voice in Washington or an active foreign policy of their own, and a claim to be a 'pivot' between Europe and North America. But it

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Garton Ash comments on this image that 'although Tony Blair might like to describe Britain's role as "pivotal", Europe's real pivot is Germany': *Free world: why a crisis of the West reveals the opportunity of our time* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), p. 73.

has always been an illusion that France, or Germany, or other major European states would accept this claim for a privileged British position—in which, to extend Harold Macmillan's wartime analogy, the British act as Greeks to the imperial/American Romans, while the continental Europeans are the other subject peoples on whose behalf they speak.

Meanwhile, the domestic base for foreign policy has grown more difficult. The absence of any attempt by the Labour government to persuade its public that Britain's commitment to the European Union is in the national interest has allowed the Eurosceptic press to entrench a sullen resistance to closer European integration, which threatens to make it impossible to win a referendum on the constitutional treaty, let alone one on joining the single currency. Yet at the same time the Iraq war and its aftermath, and the aggressive and anti-European nationalism of the Bush administration, have made British voters more sceptical about further subordination of British foreign policy to US-led objectives.

Personal relations have now become a major factor in international politics, with frequent multilateral summits—NATO, G8, three-monthly European Councils—and bilateral meetings in between. Irwin Stelzer calculates that the prime minister's visit to Washington in November 2004, immediately after President Bush's re-election, was their twenty-second meeting in four years.<sup>3</sup> President Chirac's visit to London the following week, as part of the celebrations of the centenary of the Entente Cordiale, must have brought the number of their encounters over eight years as heads of state and government respectively towards 60, including four or more European Councils each year and a long succession of bilateral exchanges both successful and stormy. As prime minister, Tony Blair has invested his personal and political capital most heavily in relations with Washington, first with President Clinton and then with President Bush; both the care with which he cultivated a personal relationship with President Bush, and the speed with which he achieved his objective, were remarkable.<sup>4</sup>

There are, however, unavoidable choices to be made in investing political capital, abroad and at home. Closeness to the US president has carried costs, in less attentiveness to the changing coalitions of power within an enlarging EU. For the EU's new member states, anxious to demonstrate their commitment to NATO as well as to European multilateral institutions, the priority that the British government has given to the Atlantic relationship has been acceptable—though attitudes may change as they become socialized into the intensive multilateralism through which European politics now operates. For most other members of the EU-15, however, British foreign policy still displays the

<sup>3</sup> Irwin Stelzer, 'An alliance of two', *Weekly Standard* 10: 10, 22 Nov. 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Riddell, *Hug them close*; Philip Stephens, *Tony Blair: the making of a world leader* (New York: Viking, 2004), ch. 11; Anthony Seldon, *Blair* (London: Free Press/Simon & Schuster, 2004), ch. 38. Seldon notes (p. 608) that the personal message of congratulations that the British prime minister sent to Bush as soon as the Florida recount was resolved declared that 'I know that together we will strengthen the special relationship.'

familiar ambivalence, still hesitates to accept that influence in Washington depends on the ability to build effective coalitions within Europe. The images of bridge and pivot, like that of the three circles before them, have partly been about the avoidance of full commitment to European cooperation, picturing Britain as between Europe and the United States.

## **The end of Atlanticism**

The concept of an Atlantic community based on shared values, and on shared resistance to a common threat, grew out of the Second World War and the subsequent division of Europe. It was always something of an illusion that Britain was uniquely placed within this community, with the exception of the geographical reality that as an offshore island it represented a base from which US aircraft and troops could be despatched to resecure western Europe. The German–American relationship was just as central during the Cold War, and the Italian–American relationship had deep, albeit sometimes hidden, roots. Britain nevertheless established, and struggled to maintain, a privileged position within NATO, underpinned by the continued deployment of British ships and troops around the world, and by special nuclear and intelligence ties to the United States.

Fifteen years after the Cold War ended, neither NATO as an organization, nor Europe as a region, is central to US security. The Bush administration would like to use NATO as a source of reinforcement for US operations elsewhere, as in Afghanistan and Iraq; but the absence of consultation over foreign policy or strategy—the atrophy of NATO as a political alliance involving serious political consultation—can only make consent more difficult to win. Coalitions of the willing must follow the direction given by their leader; and the costs to Britain of maintaining its position as the most willing, in most American military operations, can only rise. NATO remains valuable as a framework for cooperation among the forces of its member states, and for integrating former socialist states and their armed forces into a multilateral framework for regional security—and, perhaps, for handling an uncertain and still partly hostile Russia. But we should recognize its limits.

Several of the most severe crises in NATO's history have been over differences in handling the Middle East: in 1956, 1967, 1973, 1979–81 and again in 2002–3. That makes it peculiarly difficult to maintain the alliance under an American leadership which sees the 'Greater Middle East' as its primary theatre of operations. At the most general level, of course, European governments agree with Washington that the new wave of Islamic terrorism presents a common threat. Yet understandings of that threat, and of the appropriate range of responses to it, now differ widely. The gap in understanding is widest on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, on which the Bush administration—and the bulk of the American public—have accepted the continuing expansion of Israeli settlements, and do not see a long-term threat to Israel (or to the

character and quality of Israel as a democratic society) in the costs of occupation and military domination. But differences on the underlying causes of terrorism, on how to promote reform within Arab regimes, on relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, run deep. West European states, with 12–14 million Muslims among their populations, for whom the Arab and Muslim world begins some 15 kilometres from Gibraltar, or a ferry-ride from Brindisi and Syracuse, have legitimate differences of interest—as well as of perception—from the United States.<sup>5</sup> It is sad that the estimated 5–6 million Muslims within the United States (with their origins in south-east and southern Asia as well as the Middle East) have not yet exercised their weight in the American domestic debate.

### *No fence to sit on*

The struggle against terrorism from within the Muslim world, and the parallel struggle to promote modernization within Arab societies without provoking revolution, are likely to remain dominant themes in global politics for the foreseeable future. This dual struggle is not one in which America and Europe will find it easy to stand shoulder to shoulder. The religious intensity with which American politicians and media talk of ‘Islamofascism’ and their identification of a single global terrorist threat are not shared in Europe. Divergences in attitudes to oil consumption and energy conservation, and to the relevance of these issues to policy towards the Middle East, pull Europeans and Americans further apart. The transatlantic gap in understanding and analysis within the expert policy communities, and in the reporting and interpretation of events in the media, has become very wide.<sup>6</sup>

This is not an issue on which British political leaders can sit in the middle, for their public, and their interests, are firmly on the European side. Our prime minister hoped that his public support for the Bush administration’s approach to Iraq would gain an American commitment to push forward with the ‘Road Map’, the path to a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. He also hoped that it would gain Britain influence over the reconstruction of post-conflict Iraq and the management of relations with that country’s neighbours,

<sup>5</sup> Shireen Hunter, ed., *Islam: Europe’s second religion. The new social, cultural, and political landscape* (Westport, CT: Praeger/Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2002), provides a dispassionate survey of the implications of Europe’s settled Muslim population for domestic politics and foreign policy. It estimates France’s Muslim population in 2001 as 4–5 million, Germany’s as 3 million and Britain’s as 1.5 million, along with 730,000 in the Netherlands, 500,000 in Italy, 370,000 in Greece, 330,000 in Spain, 300,000 in Belgium, 250,000 in Sweden, 250,000 in Austria, 125,000 in Denmark and smaller communities in other states. Their countries of origin are highly diverse, from Morocco to Indonesia, with distinctive communities in different European states. The majority of Muslims in Germany are of Turkish origin; the French community is predominantly Moroccan and Algerian, while most British Muslims come from the Indian subcontinent. Nearly a third (110,000) of Greece’s Muslim minority are descended from converts and immigrants from the Ottoman era. Rapid population increase across north and sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world, combined with slow economic development, continues to drive legal and illegal immigrants into Europe; the most rapid increase over the past two to three years is reported to have been in Spain.

<sup>6</sup> On the gap in expert analysis, see Fred Halliday, ‘9/11 and Middle Eastern studies’, *International Affairs* 80: 5, Oct. 2004, pp. 953–62.

and would ensure that these processes were handled within the framework of the UN. In both these hopes, lacking coordination of British diplomacy with our European partners, he was disappointed. He promised the 2002 Labour Party conference that there would be real movement on the Middle East peace process by the end of the year; in 2004 he again promised the conference that this would be a major priority ‘after November’—once the US elections were over. When President Bush came to Belfast immediately after the Iraqi war in April 2003, he ‘promised no less than eight times at the press conference a “vital” role for the UN’ in the reconstruction of Iraq.<sup>7</sup> But on his return to Washington the views of his own administration, and the influence of domestic American lobbies over Middle East policy, prevailed, and the commitment vanished.

Blair has failed, too, to shift American policy towards multilateral cooperation in general, and towards working through the UN in particular. This is not surprising; the sheer weight of American military power, and the absence of any coherent diplomatic counterweight, make the costs and delays of multilateral cooperation much more evident to Washington policy-makers than the benefits. Closer cooperation with other European states—who collectively contribute, with Britain, some 40 per cent of the UN’s budget overall, and nearly 50 per cent of its peacekeeping budget—and with the major states of south and east Asia in strengthening international institutions and supporting the rule of international law is the only way Britain can hope to persuade any US administration that multilateral cooperation serves its interests. Both neo-conservatives and realists in Washington have made clear their respect for power, and their dislike for multilateral diplomacy and for the formal rules of international law; close personal relations with the White House, unsupported by a balancing coalition of states, could not hope to outweigh their influence.

British hopes of acting as a durable bridge between institutionalized Europe and the United States necessarily rest on continuing American acceptance that closer cooperation among European states is in America’s interest. That was, indeed, the settled assumption of every US administration from Truman to Clinton. President Kennedy’s ‘grand design’ of 1961–3 looked for the creation of an Atlantic partnership, for which ‘the first order of business is for our European friends to go forward in forming the more perfect union which will someday make this partnership possible’.<sup>8</sup> President George Bush Senior, and his Secretary of State James Baker, reaffirmed their commitment to an enlarged partnership with a ‘Europe whole and free’ as they negotiated the reunification of Germany and the redefinition of NATO’s role in a post-Cold War world. That commitment no longer holds in Washington: American scepticism about

<sup>7</sup> Seldon, *Blair*, p. 621.

<sup>8</sup> Address at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, 4 July 1962. He went on: ‘I will say here and now, on this Day of Independence, that the United States will be ready for a Declaration of Interdependence, that we will be prepared to discuss with a united Europe the ways and means of forming . . . a mutually beneficial partnership between the new union now emerging in Europe and the old American Union founded here 175 years ago.’

multilateral institutions has not spared the EU. American conservatives now see closer cooperation among European states in foreign policy and defence as a threat to the United States' strategic interests, and seek to persuade Britain to disengage from such a continental commitment.<sup>9</sup> Irwin Stelzer quotes 'a high administration official' in the days after the 2004 presidential election calling for 'a policy towards Britain that will tip it in our direction when Blair is finally forced to choose between the Europe in which he so dearly wants to play a—no, "the"—leading part, and the special relationship with America. Naturally, we hope he chooses America. But choose some day he must.'<sup>10</sup>

### *Shared values, divergent values*

The Atlantic community rested as much on what John Ruggie has called 'embedded liberalism' as on the Soviet threat. President Roosevelt, in his January 1941 message to Congress, listed 'four essential human freedoms' as the basis for a more peaceful and stable global order: these included 'freedom from want', as well as freedom of speech and of worship, and freedom from fear ('which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction in armaments'). The Atlantic Charter, which Roosevelt and Churchill agreed as an effective statement of war aims in August 1941, included in its eight 'common principles ... the fullest collaboration between all nations in the economic field with the object of securing, for all, improved labor standards, economic advancement and social security'. That Rooseveltian commitment to full employment and social welfare, which reached its apogee in the 'Great Society' programme of Lyndon Johnson, has been under sustained attack for the past 20 years within the United States. Advocates of minimal government, of 'the market state', have set out, with partial success, to destroy the Rooseveltian concept of an active state, concerned with social welfare, thereby creating an economy and society very different from what it is possible for European societies to become.<sup>11</sup> 'The neocon bottom line', much influenced by Charles Murray and others, is at best to return the welfare state 'to its Victorian roots by concentrating resources on the deserving poor'.<sup>12</sup>

Among British economists and political leaders it is a long-established assumption that America represents the future, and continental Europe the past. Under the present government, as under its predecessors, ministers—from

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Studemann, 'US Conservatives anxious over European treaty', *Financial Times*, 6 Nov. 2004, quoting staff members of the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the New Atlantic Initiative.

<sup>10</sup> Stelzer, 'An alliance of two'. Irwin Stelzer has himself been closely involved in the informal diplomacy of US–UK relations, as an adviser to Rupert Murdoch, an associate of several American conservative think-tanks and publications, and a frequent visitor both to the British prime minister and the chancellor of the exchequer.

<sup>11</sup> The term 'market state', meaning states that protect their citizens' safety but leave their prosperity to an increasingly global market economy, is developed by Philip Bobbitt in *The shield of Achilles: war, peace and the course of history* (London: Allen Lane, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Irwin Stelzer, 'Neoconservatives and their critics: an introduction', in Stelzer, ed., *Neoconservatism* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), p. 20.

prime minister and chancellor of the exchequer down—have travelled across the Atlantic to learn, and across the Channel to preach. Yet Britain cannot become like America, whether our political leaders want us to or not. We live in a crowded island, most of us in cities, where land is expensive and in short supply and from where it is impossible for the middle classes to move out. America's high labour mobility, the suspicion of government that comes from self-governing communities a thousand miles and more from Washington, the hollowing out of America's cities: none of these are options for us, any more than they are options for the similarly tightly packed Dutch or Germans. We need active government; we depend on a higher degree of social peace among urban communities; we need good public transport. For all British discontent with French and German resistance to accept the Lisbon Agenda for economic reform, the balance of British policy will remain on the European side of this widening transatlantic divide.

It is one of the many oddities of New Labour in government that ministers have moved on from the rhetoric of the 'third way' to one in which they propound the American view of continental Europe as sclerotic, and of the United States as the land of enterprise, without remarking on the inequities and structural inefficiencies of the American model: the high costs, and highly unequal outcomes, of the American health-care system, the lower life expectancy and higher infant mortality, the gulf between the extremes of wealth and poverty, the far higher rates of urban disorder and imprisonment. If they see Britain as a 'bridge' between the American and continental European socio-economic models, they reserve their criticism for the European end, and their praise for the American, with the result that they are easy to portray in the continental press as pushing for an American free market in Europe. One may question whether this is the wisest way to achieve the government's stated objective of building a coalition for economic reform within the EU.

## **The end of the European project?**

It would be easier to reconstruct the foundations of British foreign policy if the EU provided firmer alternative ground. But we have also to recognize the underlying weaknesses of the EU: the loss of a sense of shared direction, the unresolved tensions between new members and old, northern states and southern, and the decline in both the legitimacy and efficiency of the Brussels institutions. The Constitutional Convention suffered from the underlying lack of consensus on whether there still is a 'European project', and what that project might now be; the text it has produced reflects the latent disagreements.

Britain shares the responsibility for these accumulated weaknesses. With the creditable exception of the 1998 initiative on European Defence, and its contribution to the launch of the Lisbon Agenda (for economic and employment reform) in 2001, the Blair government has done little to attempt to reshape the European agenda. There were initial attempts to rebuild closer partnerships

with Paris and Berlin, and intermittent attempts to create limited coalitions with other governments. But prime ministerial priorities more often lay on the other side of the Atlantic; and the concentration of European policy-making authority in No. 10, combined with the rapid succession of Foreign Office ministers for Europe, has left British policy without a clear rationale which could be grasped either by foreign governments or by the domestic audience. In the EU, Britain often punches well *below* its weight, for lack of sustained political engagement at the highest level.

Coherent direction within a 25-member Union requires both strong and trusted institutions in Brussels, and collective leadership by the governments of the largest states. Sadly, the Commission has lost respect in most national capitals over the past ten years. It suffers simultaneously, a senior official from one continental government recently remarked, from institutional arrogance and endemic inefficiency—though, to be fair, the quality of some of its directorates-general has been consistently higher than that of others. We may hope that the new College of Commissioners will show more discrimination in promoting new policies, and more rigour in raising standards of administration, in spite of its burden of 25 under-employed commissioners looking for new initiatives to make their mark.

Confusion in Berlin, and deep suspicion in Paris, have compounded Britain's difficulties in building European partnerships. President Chirac appears to have seen Tony Blair from the outset as a rival, rather than a potential partner; personal relations have at times been famously bad, with complaints from Paris that Blair did not treat Europe's most experienced statesman with sufficient respect. The French domestic debate on Europe has become as confused as the British. Globalization, and the Lisbon Agenda, are seen as threats to France; the press debates whether 'les Anglo-Saxons' (by which they mean the Netherlands and the Nordic member states as well as the United Kingdom and Ireland) have captured the EU, and whether the European project—as defined by the French—is therefore dead. There are calls for the creation of a core group of those members most committed to European integration, without admitting that France is itself among the worst in implementing EU legislation, now also flouting the rules of the Growth and Stability Pact. Officials on both sides of the Channel recognize that there are underlying common interests, most of all in foreign policy and defence, and attempt to maintain good relations; but the gulf between the two domestic debates, and the poor rapport between political leaders, place substantial obstacles in the way of closer cooperation.

The German government is slowly pushing through a painful process of employment and welfare reforms, while struggling to narrow the deep divide between its former western and former eastern *Länder*. My sense is that British ministers have preached too readily to German politicians, without understanding the different context and style of German politics, and in the process have lost the chance to build an effective partnership. In the early years of the

New Labour government there were active exchanges between Labour and the SPD, in the context of the 'third way' debate and on European issues; but these have weakened in Labour's second term. German debates on domestic reform and on foreign policy, however, are also confused and contradictory. Fears of competition from the new eastern EU members have, for example, led to demands that they must raise their corporate taxes, and that western Europe should deny the new members the regional funds it provided for the Mediterranean states when they joined the European Community.

For the present, then, there is little basis for a consensus among major states about priorities for European cooperation, either within the EU or outside it. The re-emergence in 2002–3 of a Franco-German partnership was built upon resistance to change: to reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, to further pursuit of the Lisbon Agenda, to greater generosity towards the new members. The courting of President Putin by Chirac and Schröder, most recently in their joint visit to Sochi at the end of August 2004, displays either a deeply cynical throwback to 1960s Gaullism or as frivolous an approach to common foreign policy as that of Mr Berlusconi. If a future British prime minister wants to rebuild the European framework for British foreign policy, it will require sustained effort and active persuasion to generate support for shared interests, directed towards governments that themselves lack a sense of strategic direction: as sustained and persuasive an effort as our current prime minister has devoted, in vain, to deepening Britain's relations with America.

### **Weakness on the home front**

Thirty years ago, Enoch Powell extended his mistrust of continental European entanglements to mistrust of the United States, as a country dominated by domestic lobbies and unconcerned with the United Kingdom's legitimate interests. Much of the British public, and much of our media, now seem to have reached the same point. Whether or not there was a Faustian pact between Blair's No. 10 and the Murdoch press, as has been rumoured, that News International papers would support the government in return for an absence of enthusiasm from ministers about Britain's European commitments, it is undeniable that the government has made no effort to counter the rabid Euroscepticism of the right-wing press, or to inform the electorate of the advantages of European integration. Britain in Europe, the organization intended to make the case for Britain to join the euro, has been held back in magisterial inactivity by No. 10, year after year. Several months after the announcement that we are to have a referendum on the constitutional treaty, no senior minister has yet (as of December 2004) spoken in public about why it might merit support. At both ends of its own Atlantic bridge, the government is now hemmed in by the mistrust of its press and public. We are drifting towards a situation in which a Labour government that set out declaring that it would 'end the isolation of the past twenty years and be a leading partner in Europe'

may lose the referendum on the constitutional treaty, provoking another crisis in Britain's relations with the continent.

Margaret Thatcher once attempted to address the question of redefining Britain's identity, setting up an inquiry to consider the teaching of history in schools and its contribution to a sense of shared national identity. She was defeated by the discovery that different versions of history were taught in English and Scottish schools, under separate curriculum authorities, by the suggestion from the inquiry team that we needed a version of British history which—as their chairman put it—would 'explain to every child in an English school how they came to be British' (thus needing to touch on the Opium Wars, the slave trade and the conquest of India), and by the conclusion of the working group that it was impossible to explain the complicated history of the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland without placing them in their European context.<sup>13</sup> The result was that any connection between history teaching and the question of Britain's identity has been left to one side. All that my children, and most of their contemporaries, learned of twentieth-century history in school was the Russian Revolution and the Nazi period in Germany: not a sympathetic foundation for understanding how Britain relates to its continental neighbours. This lack of knowledge of, or empathy for, the history of Europe and of Britain's complex role within it extends across much of the British political elite; Timothy Garton Ash observes, from a close reading of Blair's speeches, that the prime minister seems far more confident and informed in his references to American history than to European.<sup>14</sup>

The government is hemmed in, too, by a general reluctance—shared by the Conservative Party and the right-wing press—to support substantially higher spending on foreign policy and defence. The commitment to 'deepen our relationship with the US at all levels' carries significant costs: in terms of defence equipment and troop deployments, of diplomatic and intelligence personnel and activities. Britain's armed forces are now very tightly stretched; it is difficult to see how the upgrading of equipment necessary both to maintain compatibility with American operations and to operate alongside other European forces can be afforded. There are hard choices to be made, and higher costs to shoulder if the government wishes to keep its footing in terms of defence cooperation at both ends of its transatlantic bridge.

## How do we rebuild?

The first step is to acknowledge that the 'special relationship' is dead. Britain's relations with the United States have particular strengths in limited areas, but we delude ourselves if we imagine that British leaders—without the support of

<sup>13</sup> Personal conversation with the working group chairman, Michael Saunders Watson. See also *National Curriculum, History Working Group: final report* (London: HMSO for Department of Education and Science, April 1990); William Wallace, 'Foreign policy and national identity in the United Kingdom', *International Affairs* 67: 1, Jan. 1991, pp. 65–80.

<sup>14</sup> Garton Ash, *Free world*, pp. 47–9. He calls this Blair's 'emotional Anglospherism'.

other governments—can shape American policy. Many other states have special relations with Washington: Israel, Australia, Mexico, Italy, Poland, even Saudi Arabia. We are not as special as successive prime ministers, swayed—like other foreign visitors—by the glamour of visits to the White House and weekends at Camp David, have wanted to believe. Competition with other European states for influence in Washington is counterproductive; America's allies have to work together if they are to exert any leverage on that introverted domestic debate.

The second step is to invest in rebuilding multilateral relations with our major European partners, and in shaping the agenda of the European Union. As I have suggested above, this will be no easy task. We face suspicion and incoherence in Paris, domestic distractions in Berlin, frivolity in Rome, and believers in the old European project in Brussels. It will require a collective effort by the government as a whole, with the Foreign Office and the Treasury as fully engaged as No. 10. It will also require ministers to move beyond a defensive approach to a constructive search for solutions where British interests are shared with others: for an overall redistributive budget package, for example, rather than a defence of Mrs Thatcher's rebate of 20 years ago.

Britain's record in practice is already much better than we are given credit for; the embittered rhetoric of our nationalist press, and the reluctance of British ministers to draw domestic attention to our European engagement, hide our excellent record in implementing EU legislation, and our leadership in defence cooperation. We will have to set out more clearly our own priorities for the future development of the EU: that it should step back from the sort of detailed regulation of domestic policies which within the United States are left by Washington to the states, and should pay more attention to macroeconomic policy and to external relations in the widest sense. And we will have to engage actively in promoting debate within other European capitals, in some of which we will find a much warmer response for this agenda than in others. British ministers will find a readier welcome for their proposals if they present them in terms of a common agenda, rather than as British demands from a recalcitrant continent; and if they use the rhetoric of partnership, rather than talking of Britain 'leading' in Europe.<sup>15</sup> The entrenched style and tone of two-party politics, unfortunately, is not easily adaptable to multilateral negotiation; it favours an assumption of superiority, and a dismissal of alternative perspectives, which does little to build mutual trust.

The third step is to invest in persuading the British public that European integration is in Britain's interests, and that cooperation with other European governments is the necessary foundation for British influence over global

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Brown's speech to the CBI annual conference on 9 Nov. 2004 presented the familiar British image of the EU as a 'trade bloc looking inwards on itself', contrasted with 'a Britain that leads Europe to an open, flexible and global future': a dichotomy that Margaret Thatcher was propounding 20 years ago. It suggests a deep misunderstanding of the export-oriented German economy, in particular, and slides over the remarkable achievements of the economies of Ireland, Finland, Spain and Portugal in recent years.

political developments. That means talking about Britain's European history and identity, as well as challenging the anti-European message put out by large sections of the British press. Winston Churchill devoted himself after the Second World War to reshaping the popular understanding of British history as the story of *The English-speaking peoples*, in support of the special relationship he wished to claim with Anglo-Saxon America and the white Commonwealth.<sup>16</sup> It is high time that the weight of the government information machine, the efforts of the departments for Education and Work and Pensions, and the speeches and writings of political leaders attempted to redress the balance. Gordon Brown, in his little-noticed British Council annual lecture this year, recognized the problem:

I believe it has been a lack of confidence about what Britain stands for that has made it difficult for us to feel confident about our relationship with, and our potential role in, Europe ... the debate over Europe is, at root, about how the British national interest is defined and what we should stand for as a country ... I believe that we would be stronger as a country if there was, through new literature, new institutes, new seminars, new cross-party debate about our Britishness and what it means.<sup>17</sup>

We may hope that the government may soon begin to invest time and resources in promoting such a debate. To do so, however, would require it to take a more robust attitude to the written media, with their deep attachment to the story of Britain alone against the continental threat, their preoccupation with the Second World War and their recycling of stereotypes from that era.

Edward Heath, the only prime minister since Harold Macmillan to have made Europe a greater priority than America, briefly attempted to promote closer links with the continent, and better understanding of the continent, through exhibitions, exchanges, funds for conferences—all cut back soon after a divided Labour government returned to power. That sort of effort is needed again. Two centuries of hostility between France and Germany have been overcome through long-term investment in youth exchanges, institutes, seminars and regular consultations between governments at all levels. British governments over the years have discreetly developed extensive exchanges between officials in major government departments and their continental counterparts, on a scale that should horrify the Eurosceptic press; but they have held back from celebrating this as a symbol of Britain's openness to European cooperation.

Franco-German relations were transformed further through the manipulation of symbols and images: the joint military parade in Reims, the president and

<sup>16</sup> Garton Ash, *Free world*, p. 36, argues that 'all British foreign policy since 1940 has been footnotes to Churchill'. He describes the essential 'Churchill legacy' as 'unambiguous commitment to the United States, ambiguous commitment to Europe' (p. 41). Interestingly, the American conservatives around the Bush administration, and the president himself, have adopted Churchill as an icon, while rejecting his American ally, F. D. Roosevelt. The classic study of the British elite's inability to overcome the legacy of Churchill and the memory of the Second World War is provided by Hugo Young, *This blessed plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Gordon Brown, British Council Annual Lecture, 7 July 2004; HM Treasury text.

chancellor standing hand in hand at Verdun. British governments, in contrast, have carefully avoided investing our engagement with the continent with any domestic symbolism. The French government this year recognized the growth of Franco-British military cooperation (and the centenary of the Entente Cordiale) by including British forces in its 14 July parade along the Champs Elysées; I know of no plans for Britain to reciprocate this gesture. The oldest and closest joint force in contemporary Europe is the British-Dutch marine amphibious force; could that not be given the publicity of sharing guard duty at Buckingham Palace, marching behind a Dutch military band? Britain must now be approaching the end of its repeated celebrations of the Second World War; it might educate public opinion if we also celebrated the tenth anniversary of joint British-French operations in Bosnia, ensured that the 200th anniversary of Trafalgar is not purely a national(ist) celebration, or even in ten years' time—dare one say it?—remembered the crucial contribution to victory at Waterloo of Hanoverian and Brunswick regiments, of the Dutch troops in the reserve and the Prussians who ensured Napoleon's defeat.

There are some further elements that government should introduce into the British public debate. We need some more honesty about defence overstretch, and about the logic of closer European cooperation—and integration, of forces and of equipment—over the next ten to fifteen years. We should address the advantages and disadvantages of the network of UK-US agreements, and of their compatibility with the development of closer European cooperation in foreign policy and defence, rather than renewing without debate arrangements that date from the Second World War or the early days of the Cold War, before the majority of Britain's population alive today were born—as the government has done again in 2004. I recognize that nuclear and intelligence cooperation with the Americans represents one of the greatest taboos in British politics; it is time that we broke that taboo. It may be that the continuing advantages outweigh the costs; but after the transatlantic confusions on intelligence matters over the past two years, and with evidence of political pressures on the US intelligence community to bend its analysis to administration preferences, it is time for a more open debate.

None of this shift in British policy—and in the articulation of British policy, at home as well as abroad—will be easy. I have argued in this article, however, that the government, and Britain's foreign policy elite as a whole, now have to choose. We have to recognize that the assumptions on which British foreign policy has rested for the past half-century, since Harold Macmillan attempted after Suez to re-establish a privileged but dependent relationship with the United States, and a closer but hesitant relationship with the European continent, have now collapsed. We have to rebuild, on a different foundation. The prime minister, however, remains unconvinced that choice is necessary. He reasserted in his latest Lord Mayor's Banquet speech, on 15 November 2004, that Britain's 'place in the world' is underpinned by being at once the 'strong ally' of the world's 'one superpower' and 'a leading member' of the EU.

For Britain, for once the word 'unique' is fitting. We have a unique role to play. Call it a bridge, a two lane motorway, a pivot or call it a damn high wire, which is how it often feels; our job is to keep our sights firmly on both sides of the Atlantic.

The prime minister is mistaken. He has fallen victim to the illusion of the special relationship that has gripped so many of his predecessors, disregarding the accumulation of evidence that British governments on their own carry limited weight in Washington. In demonstrating that Britain must be the first in America's 'coalition of the willing', he has neglected the building of multi-lateral coalitions in Europe. Britain can keep a sceptical US administration committed to transatlantic partnership, to multilateral institutions and to global cooperation only from within a more coherent European grouping. That coherent grouping cannot be built without a more active British engagement, both on the continent and within Britain's domestic debate, than has been evident since New Labour entered office.