



Riding roughshod over Continental hypocrisy

BRUCE ANDERSON argues that, despite our European partners' rhetoric, they share Mrs Thatcher's reluctance to lose sovereignty and more will be gained by a step-by-step approach to breaking down barriers

MRS THATCHER'S latest pronouncements on Europe owed nothing to Foreign Office draughtsmen. Downing Street knew that there was no point in asking the FO for help; its views and the PM's are just too far apart. So yesterday's Bruges speech was mainly written by Charles Powell, the Prime Minister's foreign affairs private secretary—and when Geoffrey Howe read it, he probably wished he was back in Africa.

Predictably, the Tory party's Euro-enthusiasts were upset by the speech—and this might seem significant. In recent weeks, a number of commentators have wondered whether the EEC might be the issue which ultimately ends the Thatcherite hegemony. Could it be that either Mrs Thatcher's lack of support for the institutions of the European Community, or her successor's excessive willingness to accommodate them, will lead to the Tory party splitting over Europe, as it did on the Corn Laws and on free trade? The entire front bench of the *salon des refusés*, from Edward Heath to the TUC General Council, feel a stirring of renewed hope.

In this, they are almost certainly mistaken. There are good grounds for arguing that the anti-federalist position outlined by Mrs Thatcher yesterday has three great advantages. First, it is in Britain's interests; second, it is much less unwelcome to most of our Community partners than a superficial reading of their reactions might suggest; third, far from weakening the Tory party, it could provide the basis for renewed political triumphs in the 1990s.

On the question of Britain's interests, Lord Cockfield, the EEC Commissioner who has done more than anyone to push the case for free markets in Europe, makes a powerful case that the Community can never enjoy the full advantages of the single market unless it also becomes a single economy. This cannot happen as long as there are 12 different currencies, taxation systems, and legislative frameworks

His Lordship is right on all points—but so what? Even if the full grandeur of the Cockfieldian vision remains unrealised, and even if the full growth potential of the single market is unfulfilled, there are enormous advantages to be derived from intermediate steps. The freeing of capital movements: the ending of exchange controls: the harmonisation of banking and take-over legislation: above all, the genuine, absolute and terminal removal of every form of trade restriction—these measures are attainable and none of them requires the abrogation of economic sovereignty. But as Arthur Cockfield would cheerfully acknowledge, his single economy would create an irresistible momentum in favour of political union.

That brings us to the second point—a substantial majority of our community partners are no keener than we are on the prospect of losing their sovereignty. There is one difference. In Britain, no government dares sound enthusiastic about Europe: despite that, each successive government has conceded additional powers to Brussels.

But in most of the rest of the Community it is the other way round. Politicians derive electoral advantages from posing as good Europeans. This simply means that their rhetoric is much more *communautaire* than their actions. The French in particular are masters at non-compliance with Community decisions and European Court rulings of which they disapprove. When it comes to striking a balance between fair play and national advantage, French officials have nothing to learn from Pakistani umpires.

Given that our partners desire both to sound European and to protect their national interests, they find Mrs Thatcher's stance by no means unwelcome. Of course there will be head-shaking and tut-tutting: "Really! Will these British *never* learn to be proper Europeans?" But this is more than a little hypocritical. Many Continental politicians find it advantageous that they can qualify as good Europeans merely by being better Europeans than Margaret Thatcher.

As for the Tory party, it is becoming increasingly hard to find fervent Europeans among politicians under 50 (except for Euro-MPs—but are they politicians?). A decade and a half of hacking at the Brussels coalface, wrangling about budgets, sheepmeat regimes, and food mountains—while above all towers the bureau mountain: these are good antidotes to idealism. Nor has it helped the EEC to have Ted Heath as its most energetic proponent. The cause of Europe deserves amplitude and generosity, not bile and spite.

EVEN apart from Mr Heath, there is a question of political generations in all this. The commitment of the original Europeans was forged in 1945, on the ruins of old Europe. In the immediate post-war years, even Churchill seemed prepared to pay a price in sovereignty to bring Europe together. Other younger Tories saw Europe as a replacement for Empire, and a means of rebutting Dean Acheson's charge (lost an empire, not found a role).

Later, in the locust years of decline, when there seemed to be no domestic means of salvaging the British economy, many Tories saw Europe as the

only hope. To some extent, they joined forces with intellectuals of the Left and Centre, who had always despised this country, and thought that the EEC would transform it into something they might find acceptable.

But none of those impulses has much political resonance today. The dreams of an Empire substitute and the fears of economic collapse are both defunct. Most younger Tories are happy to be little Englanders, especially now that England does not seem so little.

In one sense, the EEC is a fact of life—so much of our trade is bound up with it, that a full-scale repudiation of membership is impossible. But that is an argument for a Common Market, not a Community—and there are precedents for such arrangements. The Americans and the Canadians are moving towards free trade with each other—more successfully than the EEC—while the Japanese may wish to create a free trade zone in the Pacific; in neither case is there any question of supra-national institutions.

The Prime Minister made it clear yesterday that her approach to European co-operation is to take matters a step at a time. Despite the criticisms—despite even some of the optimistic comments of those who wish to withdraw from the EEC—there is nothing anti-European about this; on the contrary. In these highly complex matters, the only alternative to proceeding step by step is to fall flat on one's face.

Mrs Thatcher's position could be summarised in General de Gaulle's words—she is seeking a Europe of the States. But so, if they were honest, are most of the other Community states.

Over the past few years, Britain has managed her relationship with the Community by a combination of Anglo-Saxon pragmatism and swipes with the Prime Ministerial handbag. Neither tactic should be lightly discarded: both are extremely popular with the voters, and will remain so.