

# THE LANGUAGE OF EUROSCEPTICISM: STUDY CASE - MARGARET THATCHER AND HER BRUGES SPEECH FROM 1988

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## Abstract

Distrust regarding the European Union's policies seeks a British legacy, raised upon an imperial and insular history and a consequent devised political factor inside the country. The intensity of the dilemma marks various rejections of integration projects and policies inside a European frame. Before the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union held in 2016, a series of reformist critiques were addressed in the public sphere, reaching a wide range of Eurosceptic dimensions. The phenomenon has been employed in various public speeches, first of all as a feature of the mainstream political landscape. The first articulated struggles towards the European Economic Community (EEC) were manifested in the 1980's, during Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's terms. The aim of this paper is to point out a comprehensive understanding of Thatcher's Eurosceptic legacy through an analysis of the language she used when she delivered her famous 1988 Bruges speech about the future of Europe.

**Keywords:** *United Kingdom, Euroscepticism, narrative, language.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

CHILTON (2004) argues that language and politics are intimately linked at a fundamental level. Using a particular type of language, whether for written or oral purpose, within overtly political contexts, it has to be viewed and understood as a phenomenon. Shaping that language is a feature of the political leader's culture of beliefs and personality. Moreover, depending on the extent this instrument is being used, it can formulate domestic or foreign affair agendas which define the parties. A qualitative analysis on political speeches delivered in a particular context is equally important to understanding parties as organized actors in the political arena.

Reviewing the main scientific literature, the current research highlights the central coordinates of Euroscepticism based on the analysis of a particular political speech and context in order to illustrate the paradigms in which it can be referred. ULTAN & ORNEK (2015) argue that Euroscepticism can be identified when a political actor is using a discursive formation of arguments in order to reject the European Union's policies.

HARMEN & SPIERING (2004) consider Euroscepticism a distinctively English phenomenon, integrating terms such as "awkwardness" or "otherness" which are the basis of the narrative against European integration. Having an authentic British birth certificate, the term Euroscepticism along with its lexical family began to borrow from the connotations and specificities of the political discourse inside the United Kingdom. FORTSTER (2002) admits that this term should be used under the umbrella of a school of sceptical thought that analyses different levels of British political approaches towards supranational European integration. Moreover, in an attempt to identify the emergence of the concept of Euroscepticism, it can be said that one of the first evocation was noted in a journalistic article written for the British press during the 1980's, as HARMEN & SPIERING (2004) note.

Back then it was a tendency to use the term "euro-sceptic", alternatively to the "anti-marketeer", in the context of that precise political climate, bringing public attention to a whole process of discussion and deliberation agreement on the Single European Act (1986), a major revision of the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which had the main objective of establishing a single

European market. The reforms introduced by the Single European Act have mainly shaped the institutions of the European Community. As the qualified majority vote was extended, increased powers were also given to the European Parliament and the Commission. At that time, achieving a single market was an eminently economic desideratum, and its political character was placed in a second plan, although Member States eventually had to give up sovereigns in order to achieve the commercial facilities. This is an important point of analysis for the broader of understanding of British Euroscepticism.

The premise underlying this research is that the current understandings of the concept of Euroscepticism are rather the substrate of the political discourse back in the middle and late 1980's, during Margaret Thatcher's series of mandates as Prime Minister of Great Britain, tracing a narrative representation of the transactional archetype of the UK's relationship with the European Economic Community before and after the agreement on the Single European Act. For a broad image of Thatcher's legacy, it is essential to have a clear vision of her European agenda by analysing the language of Euroscepticism.

## **2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

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First of all, a qualitative analysis of British Euroscepticism can only be structured as long as the country is part of the European integration project, with the amendment that some reminiscences of London's reluctance exist before joining this project. Europe has always been a deeply divisive problem in British politics precisely because it constantly raised fundamental problems of national identity and conceding sovereignty to Brussels. The British political discourse on this issue could be perceived as subject-precise in a sign of highlighting incongruity and inconsistency regarding European policies.

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, after a long period of reflections, severe party debates and French veto refusals. After this event, public discussion

shifted gradually towards a greater centralization of European policies and politics and the effects on the country, as TOPALOFF (2012) remarks. In essence, analysing Euroscepticism is possible only for member states of the particular European project; no matter how was it called throughout history, because you cannot oppose the direction a political bloc is heading without being part of that community.

In 1975 British voters had backed the UK's continued membership of the EEC by a large majority in the country's first nationwide referendum. After that plebiscite landmark, a series of direct and indirect antagonisms on the London-Brussels route contributed to the creation of UK's animosity against potential loss of its sovereign powers. Although both Labour and Conservative parties were starting to show sceptical attitudes towards the European project, through a series of their members, the right wing seemed to have generated much more reservations. However, if in the past the party cleavages based on Euroscepticism were only an inside issue, starting from the late 90's, the phenomenon reached a series of external consequences. One of them was the rise of Eurosceptic parties, with an anti-EU integration agenda which drawn increasing public sympathy and pressured on the political program of mainstream parties.

The financial crisis which started in late 2007, the spillover effect on the European Union and the development of austerity policies inside Member States exported Euroscepticism (WHITE, 2012) from Great Britain to the whole European continent. Thus, further integration, the viability of the Eurozone and enlargement aspirations were portrayed as a risk-sharing predisposition inside British politics.

Lacking an ideological attachment to a post-World War II European integration project, Britain's relationship with the EU has always been cost-effective, and the analysis that resides through the UK's European dilemma is determined by the question: Costs outweigh the benefits? Political Eurosceptic narratives emphasized mainly the costs, in a demarche to highlight the dispute between euro-elites and the British people, framing a context where the substance of integration is filled with European

crises. In modern British society, the process of forming political identity has led to the creation and resumption of Euroscepticism in various ways that appear to be updated continuously.

### 3. MARGARET THATCHER AND THE LANGUAGE OF HER BRUGES SPEECH (1988)

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Euroscepticism is associated constantly with the Conservative Party in the UK and with Margaret Thatcher as an initial exponent, with a language that consists of two main domains of opposition which constantly intertwine- the economic and political one. FORTSTER (2002) argues that the political discourse has a deep turning point in the years of her terms as Prime Minister and certainly the most vivid landmark is her Bruges speech on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 1988. That particular moment appeared during her third term, when Margaret Thatcher presented her vision about Europe and the future of the European Economic Community to the College of Europe. In the end, Thatcher led the Eurosceptic line of the Conservative Party, helping to make it harder for her successors to manage the situation.

First of all, Margaret Thatcher's relation with the European political project suffered a series of fluctuations in her first years in office and her sceptic rhetoric became contrasting at the end of her last term. The different standings reside from her initial struggle in the opposition campaign, for the UK to vote for staying in the European Communities, on the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1975 British referendum and her sympathy for the European common market, all of them in contrast with her modern Eurosceptic approach at the end of her last mandate. LSE Public Policy group (2013) notes that although she had a support for the European market principles, Thatcher blocked a series of necessary structural changes that had consequences in that specific field of action. The basic principle of her economic vision was the liberty of individualism and free market for Great Britain as a member state. At the same time, in relation to Europe, Margaret Thatcher is believed to have been a defender of national sovereignty and further power

prerogatives of EU Member States in relation to the European institutions.

Margaret Thatcher's third term, 1987-1990, meant several reforms, especially in education, taxation, and the health system. Back then, the Cold War was heading for an end, which coincided with the beginning of her decline, caused by the deeper divisions in the Conservative Party. However, her speech at the College of Europe in Bruges, although it was credited as the expression of British Euroscepticism and considered as a blocking factor in the development of the relationship with the EEC, it did not adhere to the idea of a reluctant Great Britain that questions its capacity as a member state of the EEC. Understanding the nature, scope and content of British Euroscepticism, its tinted approaches, are profound implications for the analysis of the European integration process and competition patterns in different political power arrangements.

TAGGART & SZCZERBIAK (2002) analyse Euroscepticism by giving it two forms - hard and soft - which are assessed by parties or political leaders in relation to a pre-existing set of ideas or issues about integration. Instead, KOPECKY & MUDDE (2002) have developed the conceptualization mode proposed by Taggart and Szczerbiak, starting from the diffuse and specific support for an apolitical system. In this regard, another effort to map the full range of possibilities is built on the distinction between European integration as a desideratum and the European Union as an existing set of institutions. The two researchers stress the importance of the ideological dimension and describe Euroscepticism as the confluence of four major projections, oriented towards the European Union (Euro-optimism / Euro-pessimism) and the idea of European integration (Europhilia / Europhobia). This perspective also produces a quartet of ideal types: *euro negativists*, opposed to the idea of integration and the reality of the EU, the *euro enthusiasts*, who support both the EU and the even closer union at a European level, *euro pragmatists*, who do not support integration, but views the EU as something useful, accepting its vocation as a necessary condition meant to bring profit to their own country and *euro sceptics* that support the idea of integration, but not its development through the EU.



GREEN (2018) argues that the Bruges speech did not pave the road to Brexit, but rather rejecting its principals. The language used at the College of Europe by British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, did not suggest a start regarding Britain's withdrawal from the European bloc. PALMER (1988) noted back then that Thatcher dismissed the economic and political transition of the EEC as a body where Britain might have to cede power to.

Her concept of independence views supranationalism as a feature of every member state in the pursuit of economic development, like in her famous line - "we have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them reimposed at European level, with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels" (THATCHER, 1988). By underlining this principle, Thatcher clearly designates a future of the European project in conjunction with each nation's interest, domestic power and identity, detaching the potential federalist approach supported, back then, by the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors. On the other hand, Thatcher's speech does not engage Britain in a rejectionist path from a systemic point of view. Eloquent is her sentence where she implies that British destiny is in Europe, as part of the Community (THATCHER, 1988). Although she admits the UK had real benefits throughout the history of Europe, Thatcher argues that a reciprocal approach is also valid, underlining Great Britain's institution development, monetary matters, rule of law and security arrangements. Also, her scepticism was oriented towards integration, not expansion if we are to submit this line of argument to another famous quote where she admits that "we must never forget that East of the Iron Curtain, people who once enjoyed a full share of European culture, freedom and identity have been cut off from their roots" (THATCHER, 1988). WHITMAN (2013) argues that Thatcher's line of argument at Bruges was not a stop of the integration process, but rather a process which is less than more, comparing the potential of a more centralized role of Europe with the failure of other projects that have embraced this idea - like the case of the Soviet Union.

Judging by the architecture of Eurosceptic trends build by TAGGART & SZEZERBIAK (2002), Margaret Thatcher's speech would follow the soft approach build on a cost-benefit analysis about the process of integration, the impact of European integration on the preservation of national identity and distrust in supranational institutions. This means that British public support, in her vision, was linked to the effectiveness of the European Economic Community's system and the precise conduct of its policies, as well as bureaucratic efficiency. In a broader utilitarian dimension, Margaret Thatcher denounced the necessity of integration and shaped a future scenario where the process could have become dangerous. Moreover, judging by the euro pragmatic dimension shaped by KOPECKY & MUDDÉ (2002), although there is a firm opposition towards further European integration in Thatcher's Bruges speech, her pragmatic considerations based on economic utility remain a feature for the profitability of Great Britain as a member state. Thus, her scepticism lies in a considerable proportion mainly on political grounds and on the potential of further sovereign prerogatives assigned to the European bloc. In both acceptations, whereas we speak about Taggar and Szezerbiak or Kopecky and Mudde, there are no elements which would suggest the consideration of a hard scenario for conditioning Great Britain's membership if these requirements are not fulfilled.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

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The empirical illustration of the language of Euroscepticism on an evolutionary scale is a rich instrument for observing how these ideas alternated during the history of the United Kingdom, the first country ever to experience and articulate strong reservations against the European project. Political disputes over Europe became a constant issue for Great Britain since their EEC membership was accepted back in 1973.

Analysing, mainly, the political beliefs of British Prime Ministers in power, who play a substantial role in setting the European agenda, we can underline the main fields of the Eurosceptic narrative. The initial steps of Euroscepticism can be tracked at the end of the

1980s. Back then, although there was a strong belief in better economic cooperation, the assignment of political powers from the UK to the European Economic Community's institutions was an anathema for the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, which later fuelled strong divisions inside the party. Although her famous Bruges speech, which was delivered in 1988, it is considered to be the milestone of Euroscepticism, the language she used back then is more a general guidance for a European project in which nations keep their political powers and cooperate mainly on economic and security issues. Thus, the Euroscepticism exposed at Bruges is rather an opposition on key unit level themes such as sharing sovereignty with Brussels and further empowering European institutions, without claiming a systemic approach of conditioning UK's membership if there would to be a deeper integration process.

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