

EMBARGO : 14.30 on Thursday 15 July 1976

The Rt Hon George Thomson :

Address to THE UNIVERSITY OF ASTON IN BIRMINGHAM  
DEGREE CEREMONY

Thursday 15th July 1976-----

The honorary degree which you have conferred on me is not only a personal honour, which I value very deeply. I take it also as a tribute from a great British technological university to the European Commission and to the European Community.

It shows that the University of Aston, which I am sure is normally on the frontiers of any new developments, is demonstrating its awareness that British membership

of the European Community has broken down the traditional barrier between foreign affairs and national affairs.

Birmingham is now as much a great European city - part of a continental market place with 250 million customers - as is Brussels. Indeed, I took part in the weekly meeting of the European Commission in Brussels yesterday afternoon and attended your Degree Congregation Dinner in Birmingham last night. In that sense Brussels is less travelling time away from Birmingham than London - if you can get a seat on the 'plane ! It is certainly a lot easier and quicker to do business between Birmingham and the

mainland of the Community than between Birmingham and my native Dundee, for example.

The great new Birmingham exhibition centre, which I visited while it was under construction, is not only an asset for the Midlands and an asset for Britain. It is a Community asset.

It is touchingly typical of the spirit of Birmingham for the University of Aston to invite me to accept an honorary degree for what the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor generously called in their original letter 'my contribution to regional development. It is typical of Birmingham, because Birmingham is not

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on the Community map of beneficiaries from the Regional Development Fund, and I am not usually accustomed to such disinterested invitations. I ought to add that I am much aware that in the recent recession the West Midlands suffered particularly severely, and for the next phase of the Regional Development Policy we are investigating whether we may not need to take account of new kinds of unemployment in new kinds of areas, like the English Midlands. So far, however, oddly enough the major Community Fund to benefit Birmingham is the one belonging to the Common Agricultural Policy. One doesn't usually think of Birmingham as being a rich agricultural area, and one usually thinks of the C.A.P. as being concerned with French butter producers and

Italian wine growers. But the C.A.P. provided €1,270,000 for the new Birmingham wholesale food market, which means that somebody in Birmingham was on their toes.

I mention this because it is this outward-looking attitude I like about Birmingham and the Midlands. I am accustomed to going around the Community with the question ringing in my ears - what can Europe do for us ? Here in the Midlands the attitude has always been the more self-confident one - what can we do for Europe ?

The answer to my fellow graduates - those who have got their degrees the hard way! - is a very great deal.

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I return to my original remark. In the European Community the old border between foreign affairs and domestic affairs has gone.

The European Community affairs are no longer the mysterious preserve of the professional diplomats. They are at least as much the responsibility of the Birmingham export director, the domestic Whitehall civil servant, and the engineers, architects, technologists and other professionals who are coming out of our universities.

I do not believe the real barrier Britain faces in the Community is the English Channel, which disappeared a long time ago with the aeroplane. It is

I was therefore impressed to see the importance Aston attaches to its Department of Modern Languages and to the increasing number of language options being taken in your Combined Honours Degree Course. I only hope these figures also reflect that there is an increasing number of chemists and physicists and engineers and planners amongst those using your language department and taking the need seriously to have a working knowledge of another European language. The graduates coming out of the continental universities certainly take it seriously - and it gives them a considerable advantage.

The other disadvantage from which Britain has suffered which is relevant to this ceremony is to have

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produced too many arts students and not enough students of technology; too many trained to consume our national wealth in no doubt civilised and sophisticated ways, and too few trained to produce that wealth on which our private and public standard of living in the end depends.

In the years I have been actively concerned with Britain and the European Community - either negotiating to get us in or working to keep us in - I have seen the continental view of Britain fluctuate dramatically. It has been a kind of roller-coaster ride. It began with affection and respect for our national qualities and a friendly hope that membership of the Community would be a stimulus to airing what was called the English

sickness; it was followed by a period of near despair as confrontation and inflation created doubt about our capacity to put our own affairs in order; and now, with the two year success over incomes policy, with the remarkable reduction in days lost through strikes and the impending flow of North Sea oil, there is a feeling that a British economic miracle may be within our grasp, if only we can stay the course with self-discipline and restraint. If that economic miracle is to be achieved - and above all is to be sustained - it will depend especially on the professional ability of the graduates of a great technological university like this one playing the role of leadership the modern world demands.