

SPEECH GIVEN BY THE RT HON. SIR CHRISTOPHER SOAMES, VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, TO THE EUROPEAN CONSERVATIVE FORUM AT THE EUROPA HOTEL, BRUSSELS, MONDAY 14 JULY 1975 AT 7.30 p.m.

WHAT SORT OF EUROPE?

I am very grateful to you, Mr Chairman, for your kind words of introduction, and to the European Conservative Forum for inviting me to speak to you this evening as a British Conservative and a man of the European Centre-Right and to make a contribution to the debate about the kind of Europe which those who share our opinions would like to see in the future.

Of course it is true that the politics of the Community are essentially coalition politics - a coalition of nine different countries, each with governments of different hues. But how each of us answers the question What Sort of Europe? depends to a large extent upon the particular tradition by which our political attitudes have been shaped. And in their contribution to the politics of the Community coalition the various European political traditions speak with very different voices and accents.

The development of the Community is making it increasingly necessary for us to have a coherent view of what sort of society, what sort of polity, what pattern of economic life we will want in Europe in the years ahead. We of the Centre-Right will need to organise ourselves so that our opinions may make the contribution that they ought to Europe's future.

We have a long way to go for our various parties still work in separate compartments and still tend to concern themselves almost entirely with issues posed in an exclusively national framework. And even in the European Parliament, the Christian Democrats and the Conservatives, the Gaullists and the Liberals, maintain a

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separate and distinct existence in marked contrast with the single socialist grouping which is now the largest in the Parliament.

The political movements which express themselves in conservatism and liberalism in Britain and in various like-minded / parties in the European countries undoubtedly belong today to a single family. But although there is a growing recognition of our cousinhood, we have not yet succeeded in finding a common ground for effective, practical, day-to-day cooperation. Yet one thing is certain - that we on the Right and Centre of European politics can only hope to play our full part if we penetrate through our differences to the common ground that lies beneath.

It is about this that I would like to offer you some thoughts tonight.

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Let me start by summing up what I think to be the essence of the British Conservative tradition.

To my mind the classic definition of British Conservatism was that supplied by Disraeli when he wrote, in the middle of the nineteenth century, that :

" In a progressive country change is constant; and the great question is, not whether you should resist change which is inevitable, but whether that change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws, the traditions of the people, or in deference to abstract principles and arbitrary and general doctrines."

Disraeli taught the Conservatives in Britain to embrace progress. It was this that differentiated him and his party from the continental conservatives of the time. Indeed, he regarded the various schools of continental Reaction - along with

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Radicalism and the miscellany of revolutionary doctrines - as yet another manifestation of those "abstract principles and arbitrary and general doctrines" which are inimical to true conservatism. And this aversion from ideology is still a characteristic feature of British Conservatism today.

The essential insight of Conservatism in Britain has been that the problem of politics is that of making something positive of change rather than resisting it - that of ensuring that as changes occur in response to real and genuinely felt needs they are channelled in a constructive rather than a destructive direction.

Accordingly, the practical task of the Conservative Party, as the organised political expression of this tradition, has been to define anew in each generation those changes that are necessary, to relate them constructively to the particular genius and the distinctive values of the people, and to devise practical ways of affecting change by an organic and evolutionary process that does not offend or disrupt their way of life. And the record of the Conservative Party in Britain over the past century and a half shows that we have so far been able to find that balance which it is our purpose constantly to seek.

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I do not want tonight to develop this conception of the conservative tradition as it applies to the present situation in Britain. Rather, the point I should like to stress is that the Conservative tradition, as it was defined by Disraeli, should not
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be regarded merely as a unique and insular historical experience specific to Britain. It is, I believe, a philosophy which has a wider significance, capable of contributing to the shaping of a distinctive Centre-Right approach to the future of Europe as a whole.

I know that on the Continent there is a tendency to regard British Conservatism as mere pragmatism, without a sufficient conceptual or even moral basis. But the fact is that in spite of our present difficulties in Britain there is nothing in our history to suggest that our philosophy of evolutionary adjustment has proved to be in any way inadequate as a practical and moral approach to the organisation of society.

Yet it is important that we should recognise the underlying reasons for the reservations on the part of the Continental Centre-Right. In almost every part of Europe except Britain, the past century and a half of revolution and counter-revolution, of nationalism, civil strife and invasion have led people to a kind of fundamental reflection upon the nature and purpose of politics which we in Britain have not been compelled to undertake since our own time of civil war and constitutional upheaval in the 17th Century.

Thus, continental liberalism - whether it be that of the Independent Republicans in France or that of the Free Democrats in Germany - tends to be more theoretically ideological in character than the British style of liberalism which is a continuing influence at the centre of British politics.

For their part the Christian Democratic Movements which were forged by de Gasperi, Schuman and Adenauer of the last war have a much more fully developed and explicit conception than we British Conservatives have of the Christian principles which are certainly an important element in every branch of European conservatism. And indeed there is in Gaullism, and its concept of being a 'movement' rather than a party, a dimension which we British have sometimes found it hard fully to understand.

It is also true to say that these failures of mutual understanding between the British Conservatives and the European Centre-Right are bound up with larger differences of national character and temperament. These were very well described by Harold Macmillan when he wrote of the difference between the British and Continental approach that :

" it is based on a long divergence of two states of mind and methods of argumentation. The continental tradition likes to reason a priori from the top downwards, from the general principle to the practical application. It is the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas, of the schoolmen, and of the great continental scholars and thinkers. The Anglo-Saxon likes to argue a posteriori from the bottom upwards, from practical experience. It is the tradition of Bacon and Newton. "

But the centuries of divergence are now over. The future that lies before us is rather one of increasing convergence in the manners, the customs, the laws and the traditions of the European peoples. In the past, the national differences which Mr Macmillan

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describes so well did not perhaps matter so very much. European history was essentially the history of the distinct European nations. But now the creation of the European Community and the prospect of its progress both enables us and requires us to overcome our historic differences. The differentiating forces which have held us apart for so long should now be receding into the background, and the elements of our common heritage here in the heartland of the Old World are increasingly coming to the fore.

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| Surely in our approach to the problems of the advanced and increasingly integrated industrial society which is emerging in Western Europe, we of the Centre-Right share two great themes.

We are committed to | the freedoms of the individual. And we are equally committed to social unity and an ordered and harmonious enduring society. . |

The first of these themes runs through our opposition to the concentration and centralisation of power and our commitment to freedom of choice. We believe in the widest possible diffusion of economic and political power, and broadly speaking, we share a common view of the means by which this is best secured.

Hence our shared concern for constitutional government and the rule of law. It is true that on the Continent these concepts are understood mainly in terms of written codes and specific legal structures, while in Britain we attach importance to the fact that for us they are mainly a matter of unwritten custom and long-established habit. But this|

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is in no way fundamental. Certainly, I do not see it as a serious obstacle to the development of the constitutional law and custom of the European Community.

Hence also the shared commitment of the European Centre-Right to private property and private enterprise. In our different countries this commitment has taken a wide variety of forms. Each of us has struck a different balance between the rights and the responsibilities of property. Some have given more emphasis than others to the social and cooperative elements in the rights of property and enterprise, and some permit a greater degree of public regulation than is regarded as appropriate elsewhere. And some of our societies do more than others to temper the inequalities which are the inevitable concomitant of personal and social freedom. But nowadays our historical divergences on these points are being steadily reversed by the effects of international communications and competition, and by the progressively expanding activities of the European Community - for example in the fields of social policy and of company law and practice.

And in any case these historical differences are insignificant when set against our common commitment to private ownership as such, which provides the basic element in the operation of what the German Christian Democrats christened "the social market economy". We on the Centre-Right all share the purpose of developing in Europe a mixed economy on these lines, giving individuals the greatest possible incentive for personal initiative and a larger share in Europe's social and economic progress. This is the way in which we can use the instruments provided by an increasingly advanced and integrated industrial society to promote our common
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aspirations to personal freedom, equal opportunities, growing prosperity and a wide diffusion of power throughout society.

Our second theme - that of social unity and orderly progress - runs through our shared conception of the legitimate authority of government. Today none of the elements which make up the European Centre-Right tradition adheres to the classical doctrine of laissez-faire and the uncontrolled and unregulated play of economic forces. We all recognise that government has important and legitimate claims upon the people, and clear duties towards them. We see one of our most important political functions as that of sustaining the sense of patriotism and active citizenship that is one of the chief purposes and disciplines of life in society. And we recognise that it is the special task of the Centre-Right to hold the balance between the excesses of individualism on one side and the excesses of collectivism on the other.

These of course are very general considerations. But I am convinced that if we were to set out with a will to trace the implications of these ideas through the various issues which confront us when we ask ourselves the question, "What sort of Europe?" - issues of economic and monetary policy, of industrial policy, of social policy, of external relations - we could find sufficient common ground to reach concrete and practical conclusions in every sphere. And often we shall find that these conclusions are significantly different from those of the Left, which are reached by a different route, starting from a different place, and aiming at a different destination.

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But what is to be done?

At the level of the Community as a whole, we are only now beginning to move beyond that early stage of development at which the main question at issue was not what sort of Europe we should build, but whether the Community should exist at all. Even in the Europe of the Six - and certainly in the Europe of the Eight-and-a-Half - the essential divisions on European questions have been more along the lines of nationality than along the lines of party politics or social philosophy. And although the British referendum has now consolidated the Community of the Nine it is still the case that what differentiates the various political forces at work in the Community is not so much the classical divisions between the parties as each one's different conception of the national interest of the country to which it belongs.

We now need to move beyond these peculiarly national concerns and to think of what contribution the parties of the Centre-Right could make together to the formulation of Community policy. ^{saying this} In / I am certainly not suggesting that we should begin by seeking to draw up an agreed blue-print of the future structure of the Community and the way we will build it. Men never quarrel so furiously as about words. It is when they find that after all they are the same sort of people, with the same sort of faith facing the same sort of situation that they best agree.

So as I see it we should concentrate on broadening and deepening the areas where we agree on specific issues and on the solution of practical problems. That way we shall progressively find ourselves moving towards common views on a wide range of questions affecting the Community.

Let me give you an instance of the way in which our philosophy can be applied to the policy of the Community.

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Harmonisation is a process which can bring great benefits to consumers and to the economic organisation of the Community as a whole. But it can also bring with it a quite unnecessary degree of standardisation, and unacceptable interference by the Community in areas where traditional and regional differences should be allowed to flourish.

So a balance must be found which combines the greatest possible advantage in respect of consumer choice and economic logic with the least disadvantage in respect of standardisation and centralised regulation. I believe that in the concept of 'optional' harmonisation which has now largely replaced the earlier emphasis on a universal regulation we have found the right balance which can have the support of all the elements of the Centre-Right.

The 'optional' approach enables you to produce whatever is required for consumption on the home market while the obstacles to international trade inside the Community in the item in question are removed so long as certain common standards are met. In other words, it means stopping governments from stopping people getting what they have a right to have. It does not mean narrowing consumer choice - it means enlarging it.

I offer this as just an example of ground. It where we can find common /
also illustrates a wider point - that as the Community acquires greater
responsibilities and powers the scope for influencing its policies will increase and we will all find that it is less and less satisfactory to approach its problems on a purely national basis. The stuff of party politics will be more and more in evidence at /the European

the European level, and we will find ourselves able increasingly to identify common interests to reinforce our alignment and give it the kind of depth which philosophy alone cannot supply.

Above all we of the Centre-Right will find our cohesion and capacity for common action tested by the strength of the rival political forces which are also contending for influence in Europe. The government of the Community is not and will not be conducted by the alternating of the various political groups in and out of office. But since all parties are represented in the Community's institutions - whether directly through the European Parliament or indirectly through the governments of the Member States - each is compelled to assume its share of practical responsibility for the conduct of a permanent working coalition. This will call for give and take between all the parties of the Centre-Right and the other democratic political forces in the Community. And if we are to put a Centre-Right spin on the European ball we shall have to work hard at it, and work at it in close harmony with all the European parties of the Centre-Right.

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And this will require a large measure of give and take on the part of all of us who share the same broad political beliefs. No single element in our alignment of the Centre-Right can aspire to a preponderent influence, and the policies which result from our common action will necessarily be a genuine synthesis.

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Nevertheless because of the historical distinctiveness of the character and traditions of the British Conservative Party, all of this will require of us in Britain an exceptional effort of reflection and adjustment - an effort which is bound to be as difficult as it is worthwhile. In the elaboration of new policies there will be things that will go against the grain. Most difficult of all, we will have to accept a psychological change affecting our vision of ourselves and of the world which presses in upon us.

We shall have to take on board the implications of the fact that it is no longer realistic to think of European policy as essentially a part of external policy - as a special kind of foreign relations. We must learn to think of the Community more as an extension of home affairs. We shall have to understand that what is at stake in Europe is the formation of an increasingly integrated and homogeneous society whose character we ought to be seeking to mould because it will increasingly in the future shape our own character and the way of life of generations to come. And we shall have to take to heart the fact that if our cherished tradition of British Conservatism is to make the contribution that it should to the future politics of Europe, it will only be by way of its participation in an effective Centre-Right alignment which joins it with the traditions of other parties and other nations.

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Europe, in short, will not be Britain writ large. And neither will a European alignment of the parties of the Centre-Right be a European-sized replica of the British Conservative Party. But just as the presence of Britain in the Community contributes an essential and indispensable element to the making of Europe, so the presence of the Conservative Party in such an alignment will give a special weight and character to the political life of the Continent to which we belong. "The Conservative Party", said Disraeli, "is a national party or it is nothing". A hundred years later, I believe his celebrated sentence should be given an added dimension: the Conservative Party of today and tomorrow is a European party or it is nothing.
