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From an Island off the  
North-West Coast of Europe

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# FROM AN ISLAND OFF THE NORTH-WEST COAST OF EUROPE

## Abstract

British history cannot be understood except as part of the European history. However much the physical separation for "the Continent" offers by way of comfort, the Channel is too narrow to permit real isolation. Yet British politics in recent decades has been marked, even scarred, by controversy over how close an engagement to accept with the "European project". The politics of Europe refuse to go away or to settle down. Fluid definitions of what "Europe" means seem only to make it harder for us as islanders to come to terms with the "mainland".

This is the text of the professorial lecture delivered by Professor Helen Wallace at the University of Sussex on Tuesday, 13 February 1996.

## FROM AN ISLAND OFF THE NORTH-WEST COAST OF EUROPE

'On the Continent people have good food; in England they have good table manners', so observed George Mikes in *How to be an Alien*. Or, more unkindly, 'Continental people have sex life; the English have hot-water bottles'.

These are observations by a foreigner arrived on this island from the continent. Our images of ourselves are a good deal more contented, even smug. Inhabitants of the 'green and pleasant land' of William Blake, the 'land of hope and glory' of Arthur Benson, made so resonant by Edward Elgar's music, and for John of Gaunt a 'happy breed of men' living on a 'sceptred isle..., this precious stone set in the silver sea ...' (Shakespeare, *Richard II*), an England, as William Pitt the Younger remarked, able to 'save herself by her exertions' ... 'and Europe by her example'. This imagery is based on old historical memories and a good many historical myths. Also note that the quotations that we all remember most readily are about the English rather than the British, although we all know that Britannia rules – or used to rule – the waves.

The potent images of Wales are not accessible to me, since I cannot read its native language, though I recognise with sadness that the English word for the Welsh contains as much disdain as do so many of our allusions to the French or Germans. As for the Scots, it is not for me to appropriate Scottish history, but it is marked by a very different notion of positive involvement with the continent. Perhaps that is what led Mel Gibson to imagine the entanglement of my husband's eponymous forbear with a sad French princess, forced into marriage with an unenthusiastic English prince.

The more recent overlay is of cultivated memories from the British Empire, from world war one and from world war two. References abound in the speeches of Churchill, the poignant poets of the so-called 'great war' and the still extraordinarily popular verse of Rudyard Kipling. Overwhelmingly the imagery is of English distinctiveness from Europe. .... Europe is a place that we each visit ... from time to time. I, for example, have 'been to Europe' five times in the last month. Europe is a continent in whose affairs we engage –from time to time –, ... a continent, about which we can choose the extent and the occasion of involvement –, ... a Europe of options, not a Europe of necessity, ... and a Europe of pain, as much as of pleasure. Waving poppies in a Flanders field; lonely soldiers far from home; more recently beleaguered negotiators, struggling to preserve British interests against the hyperbole of continental imposition.

It is much harder to find positive imagery of Europe in either our literary or our political discourse. The 'European project' of the 1950s simply did not appeal very much to the British. 'The continentals' needed it, because 'they' had gone adrift and been rescued by the British. Yes, 'their' countries needed reconstruction and rehabilitation, but ours had only to pick up the threads after a troublesome and costly interruption. Our contribution to the recovery was through a continued military engagement, notably the army on the Rhine, and the important, but detached, involvement in rebuilding domestic democratic institutions in the parts of West Germany and Austria that we occupied. Indeed, had it not been for the delayed arrival of a telegram from the War Office in 1945, I would have been born in Austria, where my father was supposed to have been sent as part of the Occupation

Authority. The debt that we, the British, owed was to the Americans and to the Commonwealth – many soldiers from distant parts of the British imperium had also engaged in the struggle to save Europe and decent values; by far the largest Commonwealth contingent, we too easily forget, came from India.

Small wonder then that the British political class delayed for so long before accepting involvement in the post-second world war effort at west European integration or that they found it so indigestible. It is only just over thirty years since Hugh Gaitskell (in October 1962) declared that a European federation would mean 'the end of a thousand years of British history'. Harold Macmillan, who tried quite hard as prime minister to take Britain into what he mostly called the 'Common Market', was opting for a narrow version of European integration, one of commercial attachment, not one of political aspirations. Indeed, as his memoirs state, he was rather disappointed when the Five rejected de Gaulle's resolutely intergovernmental Fouchet Plan, a concept with which he and many British politicians would have been so much at home.

Yet from the early sixties onwards each British Government in office found itself embroiled in the question of British membership of the European Community. It proved not to be a comforting experience, since it was so hard to keep the ball in play. Bodyline bowling from General de Gaulle did not help; and the home team often seemed unhappy with the pitch and the light. Cricket may be, as Lord Mancroft nicely expressed it, 'a game which the English, not being a spiritual people, have invented to give themselves some conception of eternity' (*Bees in Some Bonnets*, 1979), but, somehow the 'straight bat' could not be played with good effect in Europe. And, as we all know, it is impossible to explain the rules of cricket to other Europeans, except, curiously, on the island of Corfù, which retains an active cricketing culture as its main inheritance from a brief period of British rule.

The British came then to Europe, in the sense of the European Community, as a second or third best choice, not out of enthusiasm, without the symbolism of reconstruction, and as ambivalent partners. Some of us, of whom I was one, both professionally and personally, believed nonetheless that, given time, the British would become like other Europeans. This belief rested on what seemed common sense arguments. The costs of being outside were greater than the costs of joining, politically as much as economically. Interdependence was unavoidable – the Norwegians and the Swiss have recognised that too. But the free-rider option would be a poor policy for a country that had important military and political assets, as well as economic. The clear logic was to join and to find a place on the inside track, a place that seemed accessible and indeed would be welcomed more or less by other Europeans, by the French to counterbalance the Germans, and by the others to diffuse the influence of the French. Given time, we thought, the British would settle into being 'European', in the sense of being comfortable and, so-to-speak, 'normal' members of the EC family.

How much time that might take we had all considered rather less carefully. And what 'normal' meant was barely defined. With the benefit of nearly a quarter century's hindsight we can perhaps hazard a better answer. The **first** and blindingly obvious point is that 24 years are nothing compared with Hugh Gaitskell's thousand years. He was overstating; we, the proponents and beneficiaries of EC accession, were understating the extent of the change required. The founder members of the EC have had twice as long and several generations of political leaders to dig in to new ways of managing their public policies with a strong

European dimension. Even so it took the French until the mid-1980s to settle down inside the European Community and until recent weeks to admit that they really were proper members of Nato after all. Ernie Haas, grandfather of scholarship on European integration, had given up on the French in the 1970s after his initial advocacy of the feasibility of political integration. The French were for him then at the point in their relationship with Europe that the British have only recently reached. Yet, as we know, the integration experiment was to prove more robust.

**Secondly**, for the founders of the EC the language, the discourse and the symbolism to be prayed in aid were of reconstruction and of modernisation. This elided the 'national project' with the 'European project', a point that Alan Milward exaggerates somewhat one-sidedly as the rescue of the nation-state. This incidentally is highly *à propos*, since the Foreign Office has chosen Alan Milward as official historian of the history so far of British experience of European integration.

Some of the more recent joiners have been able to make the same elision of national and European project – the Irish, the Spanish, the Portuguese, also, I would argue, even the Greeks, and probably too the Finns. For the British a policy of last resort inevitably carried grudging overtones and many hostile undertones. Such symbols as surrounded the venture belonged to what was being replaced or supplanted, and not to the new opportunities offered by and through Europe. The minority of real British enthusiasts for Europe have precisely been those who have hoped that Europe offered a route to the implantation of Rhineland capitalism and continental constitutionalism.

**Thirdly**, the big British modernisation project that was Thatcherism was inherently unEuropean in crucial respects, rather what is oddly called 'Anglo-Saxon'. Thatcherism represented a rejection of precisely the Rhineland model of capitalism with its *Ordnungspolitik* and all those comfortable interlocking networks of public and private influence and those fearsome labour market rigidities. It showed disdain for the continuing attachment to public ownership, state intervention, and welfare cushions that seemed to the Conservative right so redolent of French Colbertism or Italian public policy. So, although the single European market was a much welcomed reorientation of EC policy, and although the British Conservative Government played a very important part in making it a viable European exercise, its achievement seemed to owe more to British endeavours and to American influence than to the ratchets of European commitments.

**Fourthly** and persistently, some EC policies and practices remained stubbornly disliked in Britain. The Common Agricultural Policy can be guaranteed to raise a jeer in most political and economic circles in this country, except among the numerically small and politically rather marginal farmers and financial investors who have benefited hugely from the CAP. Only the early risers in Britain, who listen to the farming programme at 6 o'clock, hear a more positive view of the CAP. The friend who was William's best man may happily, as an East Anglian cereals farmer, be able to joke that his second largest and very profitable crop is 'set aside', but this does little to improve the image of Europe. It does not take many stories of EC budget frauds to reinforce the negative imagery.

**Fifthly**, the more recently established notion of the EC, recast as the European Union, has collided with two other points of British neuralgia, one to do with citizenship, and the other to do with foreign and defence policy. The debate on European citizenship raises two

awkward problems for the British: the one is that British citizens' rights are under defined in constitutional terms and in practice left to rest on social decency and a sense of what the French might call 'le fair play'; and the other is that our outreach to people from other countries and willingness to include or exclude them from residence on this island is driven by the specifics of our geography and of our imperial and colonial history. These latter sit ill-at-ease with the discussion of a European land mass without internal frontiers, prompted so much by German preoccupations about immigration and asylum-seekers. It is not hard to see why the third pillar of the EU causes so much political indigestion, as the issue where the insularity of Britain is indeed a key and defining issue.

The case of foreign and defence policy is much more perplexing. *Realpolitik* and 'realism' (in the analytical sense used in international relations) collide for the British and perhaps converge for many of the other EU countries. The British have since 1939 been consistently committed to Europe. British military engagement has been continuous, extensive ... and very expensive. Indeed interestingly many of the British politicians and intellectuals who were to argue most strongly in favour of integration with Europe had been directly and personally involved in the war in Europe – Harold Macmillan, Edward Heath, Peter Carrington, Denis Healey. Hugh Gaitskell's connections had in contrast been with India, Harold Wilson's as a civil servant in the Ministry of Fuel and Power, Enoch Powell's in the Far East.

For the British Nato has actually been a European organisation, albeit under American leadership. Nato induced and sustained a depth of British obligation to the defence of Europe, and especially of Germany, that has been almost unquestioned. Mrs Thatcher and her immediate circle were the exception, not the rule, in feeling so ill-at-ease with modern Germany. Military commitments elsewhere in the globe have been since the mid-sixties as well as, not instead of, the European alliance. The largest group of fluent German speakers in Britain are army officers and their families. We may deplore the reluctance of recent British ministers to intervene sooner and more decisively in Yugoslavia, but the reluctance was as much because the British knew too much about Bosnia as because they cared too little. I have in my office the maps of Yugoslavia that my father used during the second world war; and his own unofficial diaries have a cluster of literally enigmatic references to the emergence of what became Tito's Yugoslavia – and how nearly Tito was removed from the scene, to be saved instead for posterity by clever analysis of fragmentary intercepts at Bletchley Park and by the quick footwork of SOE. The same diaries contain references to events across the whole continent, from Mikkeli to Mytilene, and from Stettin to St Nazaire.

Europe is thus very much the familiar 'backyard' or the 'near abroad' of the British. Increasingly over the past three decades the brightest and the best in the Foreign Office and in the Ministry of Defence have worked on European policy. They have been practitioners of efforts to align British foreign and security policies with those of other European partners. Whatever the public rhetoric of politicians about the need to maintain an independent British policy, the reality has been concentration on Europe and of largely convergent policy with other European partners – on east-west relations, on how to deal with the Soviet Union as was and Russia as is, and in the day-to-day management of relations with the United States. The differences have been of language, of nuance, and of emphasis rather than of substance or of broad policy goals.

Yet politicians have chosen not to acknowledge the logic of the practice of policy or of the extent of European engagement. The language of independence has cloaked a policy of deep entanglement. The French in contrast, in all save the symbolism of independent nuclear weapons – and the disturbing compulsion to give them continuing physical demonstration —, have eventually decided on the symmetry of accompanying deeper EU integration by a strengthening of Western European Union and, in effect, rejoining Nato. Meanwhile the British hold to the separateness of each of these three circles of European foreign and security policy, somehow lacking the confidence to assume that the British voice counts enough to make worries about being outvoted groundless.

Paradoxically, therefore, the British have found themselves apparently out of step with continental partners in the formal discussions of the second pillar of the EU, while actually ahead of most EU partners in comprehending what European engagement involves. The British commitment to EU enlargement – so as to include Poland – precisely recalls after all the original catalyst of Britain's declaration of war in September 1939.

This ambivalence about Europe has also divided British political families more than it has identified the differences between them – and recurrently so. Macmillan's memoirs and later Wilson's tell mainly a story of concern with whether the governing party could be carried behind a policy of accession to the EC. De Gaulle spared Macmillan the test of putting his policy into practice. Wilson and Callaghan got by through sleight of hand, the formal suspension of collective cabinet responsibility, the hard slog of renegotiation and an uncomfortable referendum on British membership. Mrs Thatcher rallied a united party behind the fight for the British budget rebate, but thereafter found the Cabinet irritatingly argumentative on European policy. John Major, temporarily the beneficiary of the argument over Economic and Monetary Union, when Mrs Thatcher was unseated, quickly became mired in the persisting controversy. With a smaller parliamentary majority and a less hectoring personality he has found that arguments on Europe have repeatedly eroded government solidarity.

Aggravatingly for each successive British government those damned continentals have repeatedly moved the goal posts, definitely not cricket. Each time that the British might have settled down to a period of cautious policy pragmatism, someone on the continent has had the bright idea of calling an Intergovernmental Conference or altering the ground rules. Most recently the British plea has been for a more flexible and less ambitious version of European cooperation. It is echoed in the readiness of some continentals to let the British off the hook and to accept British singularity. The recent talk of establishing an *avant-garde* group of countries excludes the British in all areas save defence; it inclines to include the Spanish because of 'their *affectio societatis*', their feelings of 'solidarity', even though the economic capability of the Spanish to keep up with the leading group is highly doubtful. Much the same point was made last year in an influential report to the Dutch government. It is a point to which I shall return a little later.

What does it all add up to then? A Britain condemned to semi-detachment? A Britain relieved of the necessity of European entanglement, able to pick and choose in which areas to commit? Willing military partner and 'free trader', but conditional involvement elsewhere and free-rider? Do all the structural arguments run in the direction of accepting that normality for Britain precisely does **not** mean being like either the French or the Germans? How could we all have imagined otherwise? To conclude so might seem logical. But to rest



the discussion there risks committing as grave an error as that of imagining that after the striking of the midnight clock Europe would come to fit Britain quite quickly like Cinderella's glass slipper – perhaps that has been precisely the problem – a warm and welcoming fur slipper might have been more encouraging!

There are at least **three** reasons why to conclude here would be premature:

**First**, determinism is almost always a mistake. Jean Monnet did not sell his famous plan to Robert Schuman in such terms. He observed that all the *données* were dreadful and likely to get worse in Europe; but he argued that politicians could change them – if they had a mind to. The basic and repeated flaw in British analyses of the 'European project' has been the oh so easily articulated belief that, when it came to it, the current version of the project would not work. Sir Gladwyn Jebb, as British Ambassador in Paris, repeatedly and wrongly advised during 1955 that the French would not sign up for an adventurous Treaty of Rome; and the Foreign Office papers of the period were confident that the French were incapable of engaging in a federal process, though to be sure there were always some diplomats who dissented. As early as 1963 Max Beloff, in a prescient piece on 'The planner's place in foreign policy', argued that 'future historians will be required to analyse a series of British miscalculations' – much food for thought here for Foreign Office planners and for British Ambassadors in Paris!

We can observe many replays of this over subsequent years: repeated misreadings of the French, and of the coordinates of Dutch and Belgian policy, repeated underestimating of the capacity of the German political class to shift the discussion on to future opportunities from past mistakes. The whole Maastricht period is riddled with such analyses. Though I am myself something of an agnostic about the viability of the EMU project, we can all witness the temptation of the British political class and of British policy analysts to be overwhelmed by the disbelief that was so cogent and so wrong in the 1950s. The important question for the British should rather be – but 'what if EMU succeeds?'

A **second** reason for worrying about persistent semi-detachment for the British islands is the unrealistic nature of the realist position. To be sure, the Eurosceptics make straightforward arguments. National independence **is** more appealing. It is so tempting to give continuing credence to the notion that national political territory is defensible and viable, and that British national identity is to be and can be, defended against all-comers and comers-in. Even the free-rider version carries some force. If you cannot any longer be a big power with a big voice, then at least protect what national autonomy you can retain, and avoid unnecessary commitments that make incursions into valued national political space. Of course it is easier to be Swiss – the analogy comes from current ministers' discourse, not from me. Indeed it may well be easier to see national political space being eroded by the diffuse incursions of vague globalisation than by the specific and structured incursions of the 'European project'. EMU is unpalatable, but somehow speculators in capital markets, even George Soros, are more acceptable.

My difficulty with this argument is that I believe the realist paradigm to be unconvincing, **both** as an explanation for international relations in general **and** as a good policy for Britain in the late twentieth century. It begs too many questions about the resilience and the attractiveness of the so-called nation-state, always an inappropriate label for the British polity. And realism simply fails to provide a convincing account of the history of European

integration. I do not want to argue that point through just now, except to comment that the transnational factors at work in the juridical processes and among policy-makers, among private interests, and even among politicians are extraordinarily influential. The issue for the British is rather whether there is an alternative way of striking a balance between the pressures of the world and the shared predicaments of Europeans, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the entirely understandable public and politicians' concerns to retain a local freedom of manoeuvre. So-called 'intergovernmentalism' seems the worst compromise possible – it provides weak voice for the British, no guarantee that the British will be invited to the most important meetings, and uncertain outcomes on the substance, while not in practice preventing external influences from biting on domestic political and economic choices.

**Thirdly**, much depends on how you think politics actually works – I have always been more persuaded by the cock-up explanations than by the conspiracy theorists. Or at least disjointed incrementalism competes well with structuralism in providing convincing explanations. Chance and irrationality, as well as human strength and frailty, make real differences to outcomes, i.e. things could have been different. If Heath had been in office for longer .... If the Labour party had been prepared to modernise earlier .... Even perhaps a Heseltine rather than a Major as Prime Minister ....., though the Rory Bremner treatment of both does leave me making this last comment only very tentatively. We could all have written the history books differently and from what one can be gleaned of the inside story, many of the actual outcomes have depended on marginal victories in the domestic debate on Europe, victories that were not sustained, but which might have been sustainable. All of us know from our experience of committees and collective decision-making that moments of decision can be seized – or avoided – and that chances for reform can be harnessed – or slip away.

These three points relate to the past and to the present in British experience with European integration. There is a **fourth** reason for pausing for thought, one that is more about the future, or possible futures. This reason is that Europe has changed so much in the past five years or so. The European project can be and perhaps needs to be redefined. There is much less cause than there was for the British doubters to worry about subordination to the form of European integration that was driven by past goals and interests to which so many of these islanders have found it hard to attach enthusiasm and which perhaps did not quite respond to core British interests or reflect British ideas. Instead, one might argue, the moment has come to define a European project that is about Europe and not just about the concerns of some west European mainlanders. A version of such an approach is to be found in some current British discourse about Europe. It no longer has to compete with transatlanticism or the Commonwealth as alternate poles of attraction, though the current fashion for recreating a new transatlantic dialogue might momentarily suggest otherwise. The more serious competitor for the minds, if not the hearts, of the British is the new orientalism. Indeed if we may take the *Financial Times* as a weather vane of informed forward-thinking, we should note its increasing preoccupation with east Asian dynamism. This view is by no means to be neglected as an important influence in the British debate.

But my immediate concern is rather with what form the European project might take. How might a redefined European project develop? And with what implications for the British? It is reflex practice in planning documents, at least within the British public service, to set out three possible scenarios about the future and to identify three possible options for British

policy. Three seems always a manageable number and, if you are lucky, neatly divides between two more radical ends of a spectrum and an apparently more comfortable and pragmatic intermediate preference. In the European case three options may be too few, though for the sake of time I shall follow the conventional practice. This means that I exclude now from consideration the more extreme scenarios of, on the one hand, the emergence of a thorough-going European federation, and, on the other hand, of European disintegration.

A **first** scenario would be the development of an enlarged EU into a trans-continental framework, with a more modest range of policies and significantly less constraining institutions and rules. Such a scenario has real plausibility, since the challenge of eastern enlargement is so great; enlargement may be achievable only by a severe curtailing of commitments to integration, as distinct from cooperation. This is clearly the preferred scenario for many British politicians; it would indeed provide flexibility and appears to avoid the risk of British marginalisation, since all European states would supposedly be in the same position. This would be a contemporary version of the Maudling Plan for a loose Free Trade Area in Europe, presented in the late fifties as an alternative to the Treaty of Rome version of economic integration. The difficulty, now as then, is that it does not correspond to the ambitions of enough of the protagonists. A loose-knit European framework is not what the Poles are after, and even Vaclav Klaus seems recently to have moved in favour of a more integrated formula. Nor does it correspond to the ideas or the interests of most of the current membership of the European Union. Much though political integration may be criticised elsewhere, and difficult though it may be to notch up to economic and monetary union or a common foreign policy, there is not much evidence that there would be widespread support for deliberately unravelling the current level of integration. Unintended drift is another matter. However, British advocacy of loose-knit flexibility seems to be provoking a different response from other Europeans.

Hence we need to examine a **second** and contrasting scenario, a scenario of a **hard-core** Europe, one which explicitly differentiates **both** between the faster and the slower **and** between the more committed and the less committed. Versions of this are now in circulation as part of the respectable not the eccentric debate. It is most starkly formulated in Christian Deubner's volume on *Von Maastricht nach Kerneuropa*; it has been echoed in the papers from Karl Lamers and Wolfgang Schäuble. The extreme version is easy to rubbish; it is less easy to dismiss the softer version that is creeping into many of the preparatory papers for the forthcoming Intergovernmental Conference. It is lightly sketched in Carlos Westendorp's Report from the Reflection Group, prudently so because the notion presents huge dangers for Spain. It is the emerging and reluctant preference of the Dutch, traditionally always concerned not to tie themselves too tightly to an essentially Franco-German alliance. It is emerging as a favoured position for the European Commission, even though it is by no means obvious that the Commission would retain as much leverage within the hard-core as it does as mediator in a larger cohort of countries. The Italian presidency seems to have adopted a similar position in its approach to the IGC. The French, with typical *panache*, are increasingly using the vocabulary of the *avant-garde*.

Advocacy of a hard-core inner group has three targets – I characterise them in the perceptions of those who make the case for it: the east Europeans, who may not be up to the full rigours of integration for some while; the soft and southern underbelly of the current EU, not 'up-to-scratch' as regards EMU; and the maverick British. The implications for the British are

pretty clear; much more freedom from collective constraints, but also much less influence. The one admitted exception is defence, where it is accepted that the British have a valuable contribution still to make, though here too we need to recognise two important factors of change – one is the declining importance of territorial defence; and the second is the shift inside Germany and among Germany's neighbours towards acceptance of a more extensive military role for the Germans. So the role for the British may be on the margins of an EMU-based hard-core, combined with an important, but perhaps less central role on European defence. The *Kerneuropa* scenario has another and quite different deficiency, namely that it risks condemning the central and east European reform democracies to long-term second-class status, which is not an objective of British policy.

What is much harder to establish is what the contours might be of a **third** and intermediate scenario, or to establish how it might come about. Logic suggests that the intermediate scenario should be of an EU that does slightly less in terms of policy – for an enlarged membership, and with rather more effective institutions than currently, – an EU which practises common sense flexibility, but which is not too elastic. Thus the Union would retain and reinforce the single market, flank it with some common policies, and underpin it with continuing resource transfers, and strive for an effective common external policy at least on those issues and towards those countries that are of crucial shared concern, that is certainly including Russia and the CIS, the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa, the transatlantic relationship (puzzlingly these days always talked of as about bridge-building – a testing engineering challenge) and in key multilateral fora. For this the EU would require the instruments of rather effective shared institutions.

The difficulty is that this requires rather subtle policy engineering and nuanced definition. It is probably the least likely to emerge by itself. It also seems to me that it would have more chance of working with the British engaged than with the British disengaged. The middle way is therefore no soft or easy option. But the rewards over the longer term might be considerable.

So it becomes clear where my own preferences lie. What remains hard is to find the route-map for getting there. Here I am bound to voice a different professional concern, and one that is relevant to the University as a whole. Sussex committed itself early on to the case for a European dimension in higher education. One of my first memories of the University is of the Centre directed by Roy Pryce and its small unit run by Pegotty Freeman dedicated to helping secondary schools to Europeanise their curricula. Thirty years later we observe a steady decline in language teaching in schools, certainly quantitatively and probably qualitatively; and we also observe declining demand from British students for undergraduate courses in European studies. Nationwide applications are down this year 12.3% for degrees in French, down 37.3% in German, down 20.6% in Italian, and down 41.7% in Russian. .. UCAS figures on applications for first degree courses in European studies as such also show a decline in applications nationwide in 1996. It is a little unrealistic to expect creative and nuanced public policy on European matters from a weakened human capital base of understanding of 'the continent'. Here then is an issue of crucial importance for both the education sector and the makers of external policy.

\* \* \* \* \*

George Mikes observed, you will recall, that the English preferred their hot-water bottles. The well-educated and well-read also know that the English like warm beer and hot water —

the latter especially at five o'clock in the afternoon. If only Asterix and Obelisk had not lost the magic potion and been forced to give them tea instead.....

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