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Losing the narrative:

The United Kingdom and the European Union as imagined communities¹

William Wallace

Abstract: The UK's awkward relationship with the countries on the European continent reflects the ambiguity of its national identity, wavering between European engagement and the English-speaking peoples, as much as differences over economic interests. The founding narrative of West European integration, after the Second World War, has also weakened with generational change, the end of the cold war, and eastern enlargement. Developing persuasive new narratives both for the UK and the EU are necessary but difficult tasks for continuing cooperation.

Key words: national identity, UK foreign policy, European integration, Anglosphere, globalization, imagined communities.

Foreign policy is in many ways a transactional process, built around the rational calculation of national interests, and the delicate – though sometimes also violent – manoeuvring among multiple actors with different strengths and weaknesses. Domestic politics, however, set limits to the rational calculations of statesmen and diplomats: national pride, myths of history and identity, concerns about sovereignty and foreign interference, sway politicians' responses and public reactions. International politics are, therefore, shaped by emotion and imagination as well as by interests and calculation: by claims about a country's 'place in the world', 'independence', 'sovereignty', even 'honour'. The tension between rational interests and emotional attitudes is fundamental to understanding foreign policy and international relations. Governing ideas and concepts, dominant narratives of historical development and current friends and enemies, shape the way in which foreign policy actors define their national interests, and the success or failure of their efforts to gain popular consent.

The outcome of the UK Referendum on EU membership, in June 2016, reflected this relationship between emotion and interest. Eurosceptic arguments about the disadvantages of continuing membership touched on the costs of the UK contribution to the EU budget, and the claimed burden of EU regulations from which British industry suffered, but their strongest arguments focused on the loss of parliamentary sovereignty, the supremacy of EU

law over English common law, and the unacceptability – after British victory in two world wars – of what they perceived to be rule from the European continent. The Conservative government's renegotiation objectives, in early 2016, concentrated on economic and financial issues, and the partly-economic partly-emotional issue of free movement of people and the scale of net immigration of other EU countries. Wary of deepening divisions within the Conservative Party about British sovereignty, history and identity, David Cameron did not challenge his domestic audience on these underlying emotional issues, nor did he seek to create symbolic events with leaders of other European states to remind British voters of shared elements in their history.²

In the Coalition Agreement of 2010 between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives insisted on including a commitment to examine the 'balance of competences' between the UK and the EU, across a wide range of sectors - in the expectation that the evidence submitted by interested parties and experts would provide the basis for the Conservatives' planned renegotiation with the European Commission and other member governments. William Hague as foreign secretary declared at the launch of this exercise that it would be 'the most extensive analysis of the impact of UK membership of the EU ever undertaken.'³ Four years later, after several thousand submissions from companies, think tanks, business organizations, the Faculty of Advocates, the Law Society and many others, supplemented by seminars and stakeholder meetings in London and other major cities, the overwhelming response in almost all sectors was that the current balance of competences suited the UK fairly well. Thirty two reports were published, at six-monthly intervals from 2012-2014, on fields that ranged from civil justice to transport regulation and from police cooperation to environmental policy.⁴

The response of No. 10 to each group of papers published, after careful review – and sometimes hard negotiations – by Liberal Democrat and Conservative ministers, was to seek to bury them by arranging for their release the day after Parliament rose for the summer, or for Christmas. The accumulated evidence could have been used by Conservative pragmatists to face down their Eurosceptic colleagues; but a Prime Minister who had described Britain's relationship with the rest of Europe as 'transactional' rather than deeply-rooted nevertheless hesitated to use evidence to counter deep Eurosceptic conviction. He had, after all, no alternative narrative of Britain's place in the world to theirs; indeed, he largely shared their narrative. He had publicly declared on more than one occasion that his favourite children's

book was Henrietta Marshall's *Our Island Story*⁵, written at the height of Britain's imperial self-confidence at the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, with so many within his own party and in the right-wing media sharing an 'Anglo-Saxon' narrative of British – or English – history, he hesitated to appeal to a different framework for national interests against their dominant narrative of national identity, that of an exceptional history of free institutions and common law stretching over 1,000 years from King Alfred's Wessex to Westminster today.⁶

In the 1960s, during the high period of the Cold War and of the dominance of the study and practice of international relations by assumptions of rational calculations of national interest, a young Marxist called Benedict Anderson, studying the international relations of South-East Asia in an American university, was so struck by the non-rational elements of those countries' foreign policies that after completing his PhD he wrote a study of nationalism as a force in developing countries: *Imagined Communities* (1983). His argument was that the spread of printing and of literacy brought with them the idea of communities wider than the local and more inclusive than the aristocratic, so creating national communities built around shared language, history, national myth, and differentiation from non-national outsiders. The argument that follows is that we do best to understand the current traumas of *both* the European Union and the United Kingdom through a constructivist, cultural lens as much as through the clash of perceived interests – through the construction, and disintegration, of imagined communities.⁷

The EU as an imagined community

The European Community was, of course, in many ways a product of political realism: an innovation pressed onto the French and the Benelux countries by the postwar US Administration as a response to the apparently acute Soviet threat and the necessity of reconstructing the West German economy. But it was also, very powerfully in those early years, an imagined community: constructed on the basis of selected historical images and evidence both by postwar West Europeans and by the intellectual community of exiled Europeans in the United States who saw 'Europe' as the cultural core of 'the West', the heartland of 'the Atlantic Community'. Within the US Administration and among its advisers there were many who wanted European states – after two devastating wars in which the US

had been forced to intervene – to federate: to form a ‘United States of Europe.’ Even Winston Churchill used the term, in his Zurich speech in 1947 – although he left the question of how far Britain would associate itself with such an entity deliberately ambiguous. Across the six states that formed the original European Coal and Steel Community, in the years after the war, there was a strong sense that the nation state had ‘failed’: most strongly, of course, in Germany and Italy, most contested within France. The Nordic states, with different narratives of wartime resistance or neutrality, and far less disastrous fighting across their territories, did not share this sense of failed statehood, and opted – like Britain – for a looser association. But it is correct to argue, as have Eurosceptics in the British debate, that European integration was a ‘project’: a postwar project, by leading American officials and by their counterparts in Germany, France, Italy and the low countries to integrate West European economies and societies to avoid yet another European conflict. And it was a project that drew on, and also propagated, a supporting narrative: of shared values and history, of the two world wars as betrayals of Europe’s common civilization, and of Western civilization as a concept and tradition shared by (Western) Europe and the North American countries that not only English but also French, German, Dutch, and later Nordic, Italian and Irish immigrants had settled.⁸

Eurosceptic commentators in the British media, from Nigel Lawson to Daniel Hannan, and the main Eurosceptic lobbies, have repeatedly claimed that the EU as an international experiment has ‘failed’.⁹ It’s more accurate to say that the effort to expand to others the sense of community shared by the original six members – or at least five of the original six, since Italy from the outset was something of an outlier – has weakened the sense of being within a *Schicksaalgemeinschaft* (a community with a shared fate, as the Germans call it). The European Community was built around French and German understanding, after three dreadful wars since 1870, that there was no alternative to partnership, and that a partnership of trust could be built only through both effective institutions and active efforts to reshape mutual attitudes and images. President de Gaulle did much to reshape the relationship through the terms of the 1963 Franco-German Treaty, which established regular exchanges between the two governments, from top to bottom, including extensive exchanges of civil servants to work within each other’s administrations, and a parallel programme of youth exchanges to shape attitudes for the next generation. Reconciliation was symbolised through a series of Franco-German military parades, in the presence of heads of state and government. The ceremony at Verdun in 1984, 60 years after the outbreak of the First World War, on the site of the bloodiest battle of attrition between the two states during that conflict, provided a

powerful symbol of reconciliation. President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl stood hand-in-hand, complementing what de Gaulle and Adenauer had conveyed in their joint review of French and German troops in Rheims in 1963.¹⁰

The three Benelux countries understood that they had no choice but to promote such a community. Neutrality had failed for Luxembourg and Belgium in 1914, and for the Netherlands as well in 1940. Three small countries could only gain from entrenching their position within institutions which they shared with their more powerful neighbours. The Dutch, partly Protestant, would strongly have preferred the British to join as well, to counterbalance the risk of too close cooperation between France and Germany, at the expense of the small countries between them and the North Sea. Dutch politicians and public derived comfort from active American engagement, embedding the infant European Community within the wider frameworks of the OEEC/OECD and NATO.

There was a historical community to re-imagine, to underwrite these institutions. It was, very largely, a Roman Catholic community – there was indeed a brief flurry during the negotiations to form the EEC when a guest at a dinner in Rome turned to the Protestant Dutch prime minister and asked him if he shared her enthusiasm that this would be ‘a Catholic community’. Lord Gladwyn, a British diplomat who became one of the strongest proponents of British entry to the European Communities, published a book on *The European Idea* in 1966 to persuade the British public that the EEC was a community rooted in European history. It included a map to illustrate how closely its boundaries coincided with those of Charlemagne’s Western Empire of 1100 years earlier.¹¹ The Council of Europe, the wider but looser international organization created in the first postwar attempt to bring together Western Europe’s economies and governments, including the UK and the Scandinavian states, commissioned a major historical study of Europe in the early 1980s, bringing together historians from Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Britain to fill out the narrative of the development of (West) European civilization.¹² Published just after the Iron Curtain had collapsed, with east-central Europe re-emerging from forty years of Soviet dominance, the volume’s interpretation of ‘Europe’ was challenged by champions of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and other countries of the former East Europe.¹³

With the exception of southern Italy and its Mediterranean frontier – southern Italy had not been part of Charlemagne’s empire – the ECSC/EEC also had well-marked and defended frontiers. The Benelux states had lifted frontier controls on the **indefensible** borders between

their small states after the war. It did not seem so radical an innovation for France and Germany to follow suit in the mid-1980s, in response to protests from truck-drivers at the time lost in queuing for inspection at internal frontiers, by signing the Schengen Agreement (in tiny and **indefensible** Luxembourg); the solidity of the EC's eastern frontier, defended by the Red Army, the Berlin Wall, barbed wire and watchtowers stretching across central Europe and through the Balkans, made it easy to control external frontiers as internal controls were lifted.

The ideology that underpinned the development of European institutions was encapsulated in the title of Ernst Haas's study of the European Commission, *Beyond the Nation State* (1964). What self-interested national politicians, working through short-lived coalition governments, had failed to achieve between the two world wars, enlightened technocrats with a broader and longer-term vision were now beginning to deliver: economic prosperity through freer trade (with discreet American leadership and support), the gradual spread of common standards and regulations through technocratic negotiations in Brussels, closer understanding through cross-border exchanges, and through these the emergence of popular support for European structures as against national states. The ideology was most strongly held by those whose experience of 1939-45 had been of imprisonment, exile, or resistance – common bitter experiences across frontiers, with time to reflect on the weaknesses, even wickedness, of nationalism and conflict among states. I can recall at a conference in the early 1970s hearing French participants insisting that World War II had been a 'European Civil War', in which the French resistance and the anti-Nazis within Germany were fighting for the same European ideals. Altiero Spinelli, an Italian who had been imprisoned for much of the war (as a Communist) and emerged to become a leading enthusiast for European Union, foreign minister and later member of the Commission and the European Parliament, insisted throughout his career that the peoples of Europe were instinctively in favour of closer union. It was national elites, he argued, holding on to privileges and power, that held union back.¹⁴

The proposal for a European Defence Community, in 1952-3, to allow for the rearmament of West Germany within a political framework which would also limit the sovereignty of its other five member states, was the high point of the first, direct approach to integration. The French National Assembly's rejection of the EDC in 1954, after the death of Stalin and the apparent diminution of the Soviet threat, made for a more indirect approach to 'ever closer union' from political leaders committed to that aim. The institutions of the EEC that were

negotiated in 1956-7 included an appointed Commission of experts (not intended to be the collection of national politicians partially representing national interests that it has now become), an administration of directly-appointed officials, a Court to adjudicate on challenges, and – almost as an afterthought – a Parliamentary Assembly that would meet at least once a year. National governments retained oversight through the Council of Ministers. The legitimacy of the Commission, championed by Walter Hallstein when challenged by de Gaulle, was that it spoke for the long-term interest of the whole European community against the partial interests of the member governments. The European Communities included limited but significant fiscal transfers, largely contributed by the prosperous but politically-inhibited Germans, which most benefitted the French and Italians. Respect for the effectiveness of national government within the member states, above all in Italy and Belgium, was limited; there were many prepared to accept that the direct effect of regulations from Brussels might provide better outcomes than dependence on local or national administrations. France, where the political right and the Gaullists had constructed an alternative narrative of the nation re-emerging from the defeat of 1940 to reclaim sovereignty and great power status, was in this respect an outlier among the original six.

I traced the same boundaries of Charlemagne's Western empire, as well as the borderline between Western and Eastern Christendom at the beginning of the fifteenth century, in dotted lines, in one of the several maps of alternative imagined Europes that I included in my Chatham House paper, *The Transformation of Western Europe*, in 1990, - to experience Sam Huntington adapting the latter into a thick and solid line, marking the eastern boundary of Western civilization.¹⁵ The outbreak of conflict within Yugoslavia, along the fault line between Catholic and Orthodox Christianity and the historic border between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, seemed to some observers to confirm Huntington's thesis. But Orthodox Greece was already an established part of 'the West' and, since 1981, of the European Community; and the continuing expansion of the EU has since extended through historically-Catholic east-central Europe to include Orthodox Romania and Bulgaria, though at the cost of weakening further the sense of 'shared fate' that the postwar generation within the original member states had recognised.

The end of the cold war, and the passing of the generation that had experienced the horrors of the Second World War, transformed the context for European integration. What had been 'Europe' in the Western discourse since the cold war developed in 1946-7 became again

Western Europe. West Germany, contained within the ‘western alliance’ as a divided country, returned to its previously central role in the European state system. Countries to Germany’s east, with different historical experiences and different expectations of their ‘return’ to this European system, brought distinctive assumptions about the objectives of European integration to inter-governmental negotiations. French and German political leaders, and their counterparts in the EU’s other founding states, saw the demolition of the iron curtain as a triumph of western values, but did not fully understand at the time that it also weakened the narrative that had driven integration so far. French, Belgian and Dutch politicians, and many of their colleagues in Germany and Italy, were reluctant to accept the pressing applications for EU membership which the newly-democratic governments of Eastern Europe presented; they feared that a wider Community would also become a weaker Community, as well as one that revolved around Germany. It was the UK government, under Margaret Thatcher and her successors, which promoted eastern enlargement from within the EU.

The United Kingdom as an imagined community

Britain emerged from the war with a ruined economy but a strong sense of nationhood: success in terms of national survival, though failure – not fully appreciated after 1945 – in terms of national prosperity. We – all of the ‘British race’, as it states on one of the postwar memorials in Westminster Abbey – had hung together, and we had saved not only ourselves but also civilization and democracy. Winston Churchill, conscious that those who write history shape history, conjured up through his wartime speeches and, above all, through his *History of the English-speaking Peoples*, a heroic narrative in which the Anglo-American alliance had together defended democracy and established a peaceful and well-defended Western world, successfully disguising British dependence on the USA and the progressive dismantling of its empire, which began with the independence of India in 1947.¹⁶ Britain remained a global power, in Churchill’s encapsulation, because it retained unique influence in ‘three circles’ of global politics: the Anglo-American special relationship, the British Commonwealth, and Europe – the first of these bringing us the most advantages, the last carrying the most military and other burdens.

Britain in the fifteen years after World War Two was a strong national community. It was, of course also a multi-national community; English historians did not distinguish clearly between English and British narratives, although Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland retained distinctive identities. The economy remained predominantly British in ownership, substantial parts of it state-owned; foreign companies in the UK, like Ford of Dagenham, built British-designed vehicles with British components entirely different from Fords produced in the US or Germany. Regional inequalities existed, but Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham had their own industrial elites and local pride. Coal-miners in Wales and Scotland shared a union with miners in Nottingham, Durham and Yorkshire; dockers in Glasgow and Cardiff shared interests, and union organization, with dockers in London. The national budget redistributed welfare payments, costs of health care and public investment across the UK, with high levels of taxation and welfare redistribution to narrow the divide between rich and poor. There was significant emigration from the UK to Australia and North America, but little immigration except from the Caribbean until the provision of charter flights brought a surge from the Indian sub-continent in the early 1960s. British identity seemed secure, reinforced by the shared narrative of national solidarity through two World Wars and the period of austerity and rationed food that persisted for several years after 1945. The fiasco of the Suez campaign in 1956, in which British and French forces failed to achieve their objectives in the face of American disapproval and a run on the pound sterling, shook national self-confidence, and hastened the process of imperial decolonization. It was slow economic growth in the years that followed by comparison with the European continent, and forced cutbacks in defence commitments and spending, from the 1957 Defence Review onwards, that gradually created a fear of British national decline.

The paradox of the UK's move towards the European Community, therefore, was that it came from a sense of British national weakness following the imagined strengths of 1939-45. The 1960s saw the end of empire, cutbacks in defence programmes that had proved far too expensive to sustain, an economy outclassed by the dynamic West Germans, and desperate denial that we had shrunk to become no more than 'a major power of the second rank', as the Duncan Report on Britain's overseas interests (1968) put it.¹⁷ The successive American Administrations that pushed British governments towards membership of the EEC saw Britain as a natural partner within the European pillar of their wider imagined Atlantic Community. British politicians and opinion-formers more often saw the European continent

as a collection of lesser states, and entry into collective institutions which did not include the Americans, the Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders as national demotion.

There *was* a potential alternative narrative, which might have flowed from the experience of the Second/World War. In the 1960s the most passionate ‘Europeans’ in British political debate were those who had fought on the continent between 1943 and 1945, in the Eighth Army from Sicily to Austria and southern France, or in the First Army from Normandy to Hamburg: Lord Carrington, Jo Grimond, Denis Healey, Edward Heath and others. They had lived through the common experience of European war, and recognised the economic and security interests – and historical and emotional ties - we shared with the continent. They and others had put much effort in the immediate postwar years into the rehabilitation of West Germany, and to building links with political parties on the continent. But those who had seen the war only from Britain, or from India and the Far East, such as R.A.Butler, Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson, did not share their view.¹⁸ They were persuaded to support British entry, if at all, by the promise of faster economic growth through easier access to continental markets. There was a brief attempt as the UK finally entered the EC, at its third attempt, to reshape patterns of interaction through programmes of official and youth exchanges with French, German and other counterparts, modelled on the established Franco-German programmes. But the Labour government which came into office in 1974 was deeply divided on European issues, and funding for these Conservative initiatives was rapidly cut back.

British disillusion was fuelled by the coincidence of British entry with the end of what the French have called ‘the thirty glorious years’ of economic growth which the EEC-Six had enjoyed from the first stirrings of post-war reconstruction. EC entry did not bring the faster economic growth that had been hoped for; what followed was deeper domestic economic crisis throughout the later 1970s. It was irrelevant to the domestic British debate that the proximate cause of the 1970s recession was the downturn in the US economy, exacerbated by the cost of the Vietnam war; what British workers experienced was that joining the EC appeared to make the country’s difficulties greater, not less.

Margaret Thatcher accelerated the internationalization of the British economy. Inefficient national industries were swept away, to be replaced by investors from abroad; nationalized industries were privatised, sometimes to state companies from other countries. Deregulation of the British economy in the course of the 1980s, including its financial sector, loosened the

ties between British-owned companies and their local communities and workforces. Takeovers by multinational companies made management more distant, company headquarters across the Channel or the Atlantic. Mrs. Thatcher's promotion of the European Single Market, her most successful EC initiative in her 12 years in office, extended the process of internationalization across Western Europe. Major newspaper chains were taken over by Australian and Canadian owners, with the government's active approval; both Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black believed strongly in the idea of the English-speaking peoples, and promoted historians and commentators who shared their views.¹⁹

Wider technological and economic forces were also at work. The processes of globalization – of integrated production across borders, and of cross-border service provision, both enabled by revolutions in communication, were reshaping continental economies as well. More active government oversight of economic development, and a higher sustained proportion of government ownership within the national economy, however limited to some extent the shocks that the British economy experienced. German and French companies invested in British industry and infrastructure, benefitting from the creative destruction that Thatcherite policies had unleashed on the UK's domestic industries.

Immigration had also diluted the sense of solidarity that bound the national community together, not only in Britain but also in Germany and France, as south Asians, Turks and North Africans came in to fill gaps in the workforce and stayed on to form minority communities. The social dimension of globalization was already becoming evident, as the rich and successful studied abroad, worked for international companies, often married outside their national community, and acquired second homes in other countries. What we now recognise as an international elite with intimate cross-border ties, semi-detached from the countries in which they were born, has weakened the bonds of national solidarity among the rich – while the growth of substantial diasporas, living in Europe but culturally linked to other continents, has weakened those bonds among the poor.

Yet the political rhetoric of the Thatcher government was of national reassertion, not of acceptance of the inevitable globalization generated through deregulation, open markets and international finance. The 1982 Falklands war, more than the battle over the British budget, shaped her narrative of a strong Britain, facing a weak continent: with global interests, rather than continental countries' parochial and commercial concerns, and as the proud and exceptional partner of the United States since the two countries had liberated the European

continent from Nazi oppression. Pride in Britain as a military power, prepared to stand alone if necessary, as in the iconic Battle of Britain in 1940, had been restored; the Second World War was the symbolic patriotic reference point, ‘Britain’s Finest Hour’. When Mrs. Thatcher met British academics at the end of her 1988 Bruges speech, the prime minister commented, with reference to the rest of her audience, ‘Well, of course, they owe us so much.’²⁰

So by the end of the 1980s the dominant narrative of the British national community had reverted to the Churchillian imagery of ‘the English-speaking peoples’. Timothy Garton Ash has referred to the frozen debate since then about British – or English, or ‘Anglo-Saxon’ – identity as ‘footnotes to Churchill’.²¹ Jacques Delors as President of the European Commission won over the Labour Party through his 1988 speech to the TUC, setting out his vision of a European social market; but that vision appalled believers in deregulated markets, and reinforced their imagined boundary between the free – and free market – Anglo-Saxon world and the social democratic continent. In her final years in office Mrs. Thatcher set out to reshape the way history was taught in British schools, to return to a more heroic version of ‘our national story’. She was defeated only by her discovery that she could not impose a standard curriculum on Scotland as well as on England and Wales, and by the robustness of the working party she set up (and its advisers) in resisting the simple messages that she wanted them to approve.²² The reassertion of a national narrative of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism and global free trade did not fit easily with active commitment to European cooperation. President George H.W Bush’s deliberate gesture, on taking office in 1989, of meeting the German Chancellor before he met the British Prime Minister, was a sign that for the USA Germany was now America’s most important European partner. But in London the idea that Britain retained a ‘special relationship’ with the USA, far closer than that of any continental European country, remained the prevailing wisdom.

The transformation of Europe

Margaret Thatcher’s 1986 initiative to create a more integrated market across the by-then 12-member EC by 1992, through the Single Market programme, accelerated economic processes already under way: the move from national production for largely national markets to cross-border assembly from widely-sourced components, and the spread of financial and other services from their national roots to multi-national operation and ownership. The strike and

blockade by truck-drivers that precipitated the opening of the Franco-German border and the signature of the Schengen agreement, in 1984, reflected the changes under way; deliveries of parts to assembly plants, and of goods and produce to cross-border shop-chains and supermarkets, had generated impatience with delays at what was now the ‘internal border’. Governments in France and Germany pursued industrial strategies which limited the loss of national ownership in key sectors, and intervened in cross-border takeovers to protect what they regarded as their national interest. Mrs. Thatcher’s government was much more relaxed about foreign ownership, seeing Japanese investors in the motor industry, and American and other investors in other sectors, as bringing revitalization to a sclerotic economy, at moderate cost to national autonomy.

Cross-border travel had also mushroomed, as working abroad, retirement to the warmer south, and second homes in France, Italy and Spain reflected rising affluence, while package holidays and charter flights allowed wider publics to travel abroad for the first time. British (and Dutch, and German) seaside resorts lost out to resorts in the Mediterranean; the numbers crossing national borders within the European Community, including between the UK and the continent, had increased rapidly well before the internal borders came down. In addition, migrant communities from outside Europe had become established in many West European countries. More people were beginning to live – and to marry – across national borders, loosening their sense of solidarity with the imagined communities within which they had grown up.

The end of the cold war added an additional dimension to this loosening of ties. The firm border between ‘Europe’ and the Soviet dominated ‘east’ was demolished. Europe itself had to be re-imagined, from Western Christendom to a wider region with contested eastern borders. Samuel Huntington, Norman Davies, and many other historians and politicians, fought over its redefinition, as states emerging from state socialism, and some from within the former Soviet Union, declared their rediscovered European identity and vocation.²³ Meanwhile, migrants, and criminal networks, spilled into Western Europe now that fences and border guards no longer kept them out. The disappearance of the perceived common threat undermined one of the foundations for West European solidarity. The expectation of assured external security **also** weakened multi-community states. Once citizens no longer felt that they needed strong states to defend them, smaller entities, with stronger bonds of

imagined community than Spain, Italy, or the United Kingdom – or Belgium, or Yugoslavia – might come to command greater loyalty.

The European Union's expansion across east-central Europe, through a combination of assistance and incentives that brought about the economic, social and political transformation of east-central Europe, was a strategic success. The contrast between the development of Poland and of Ukraine over the past 20 years, or between Slovakia and Moldova, illustrates the powerful and positive impact of the EU's conditional approach to accession. The EU has acted as a 'transfer union' in the sustained economic assistance it has provided to the new entrants: sums from Germany, Britain and other rich West European states manageable in terms of their overall budgets, but making a significant impact on the recipient economies.

The French government above all, feared that German unification and the opening up of east European markets would return the European continent to the position that John Maynard Keynes described in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919): of Germany as the central economy, with eastern and south-east states dependent on its prosperity, and its western neighbours also more dependent than they would wish. The Franco-German bargain that led to monetary union was intended to lock Germany and its economy inextricably in with those of its western neighbours before the recovery of eastern Europe offered it other options. Sustained pressures for closer political union from elites within France and the Benelux, above all, sustained through successive revisions of the treaties to the European Convention which drafted the Treaty on Political Union in 2002-4, was driven by recognition of the changing balance within the European Union as much as by the impact of closer economic integration and of technological change. The defeat of that treaty, through popular referendums in both the Netherlands and France, indicated that elites had run too far ahead of their citizens in their willingness to reduce the autonomy of their national communities within the wider European community.

25 years on from the end of the cold war, the European Union has now become a much more diverse community of over 500 million people, citizens of 28 small and large states. Those that have joined since 2004 have enjoyed rapid economic growth, but are still far behind the settled prosperity of north-western Europe: creating strong incentives for their young and talented to migrate to the west. The integration of these formerly state-dominated economies into the Single Market has brought with it a certain loss of national autonomy also for them,

as German and Japanese car companies, US aerospace manufacturers, and banks from Austria, Sweden and beyond have displaced local firms.

Direct memories of common occupation, deprivation and the other disasters of European war, experiences shared with continental western Europe, have faded. After the bitter experience of Soviet socialist control, indirect memories of historical grievances have however re-emerged, passed on to younger generations, to feed resentment against more powerful neighbours. Former socialist states see themselves as having regained sovereignty after 1990, after decades of external tutelage. Populist reaction against the tutelage of EU rules and regulations, in Hungary and Poland, reassert their imagined national values against the imposition of 'degenerate' western ones.

Changes of generation across western Europe have left only distant memories of war and postwar deprivation as bitter shared experience. Their citizens take for granted their privilege of free movement, for work or leisure, across the continent; they are much more conscious of the economic and social dislocation that continuing integration imposes. Rational reflection may demonstrate that the European Union is the best available institution through which European governments can hope to moderate the impact of globalization on their economies and societies. But for their citizens the EU itself often looks like the agent of globalization, intervening in previous spheres of sovereign national concern to bring in regulations negotiated elsewhere which make it easier for foreigners, and foreign companies, to come in and profit at their expense.²⁴

The pressures of globalization, with the manufacturing rise of China in east Asia, and the outsourcing rise of India leading the rest of south and south-east Asia, are profoundly destabilising for Western states and societies. Lifetime employment in mass industries has given way to short-term employment and enforced changes of career. The highly-skilled and successful have learned to operate across national boundaries, forming inter-connected international elites; the unskilled and unsuccessful still live resentfully within their local and national communities. The gap between rich and poor has widened, in all developed societies – though more sharply in some than others. The consequent loss of social and national cohesion has led Dani Rodrik, the Harvard economist, to pose the question as to whether the unmoderated forces of global markets and technological change are compatible with the maintenance of open democratic societies, and to argue that economic forces must yield to social and political values through imposing some limits on open global markets.²⁵

Migration has reshaped European societies further over the past 25 years – both from poorer countries within Europe and from other continents, where rising emigration has been driven by population increase, civil conflict, poverty and awareness through visual media of the attractions of settling within the EU. The establishment of substantial diaspora communities, as Paul Collier (in *Exodus: Immigration and Multiculturalism in the 21st Century*, 2013) has shown, both slows the rate of assimilation and increases the flow, as kinship networks and family reunification attract others to follow. Diversity has attractions and advantages, but, as Robert Putnam has shown, it weakens social cohesion and solidarity. European welfare states which were created in an atmosphere of national solidarity, after war, are harder to sustain when taxpayers no longer feel that they are contributing to the security and welfare of fellow-members of a deep-rooted national community; resentment, and populist resistance, grow.²⁶

The European Community's other legitimising narrative was the promise of economic reconstruction and growth. The banking crisis of 2008-9, the pain it inflicted on indebted Eurozone countries, and the slow pace of recovery since then, blamed by many commentators and politicians on German policy, have left a bitter perception of imposed austerity within many member states. Even before the latest surge of refugees and irregular migrants in 2015-16, from North Africa and the Middle East, the EU was approaching a crisis of legitimacy. **Today, the European project** is losing the narrative which had given it credibility.

The transformation of Britain

Britain has been affected as deeply as other European countries by these social and economic changes over the past 25 years. Of all the EU's member states, Britain has been the most open to foreign investment and foreign takeovers, including of large parts of its public infrastructure, and the least protective of its domestic industries. It has also been, until the last few years, the most open to both poor and rich migrants, both from elsewhere within the EU and from third countries and other continents.²⁷ London has become a global city, with 40% of its population born outside the UK and with many of its most expensive properties owned by rich foreigners, often through offshore companies. The international elites who work in London's financial companies contribute a great deal to the UK economy. But their generous salaries, like those of their British colleagues, have widened the gap between London and the rest of the country, and between rich and poor within London itself. As Putnam and Collier have observed, increasing diversity weakens social solidarity, in Britain as elsewhere.

Competition for housing, competing claims for social welfare, have weakened popular support for the welfare state, with the current Conservative government committed to reducing the scale of fiscal transfers further.

There is an acute contradiction between the national narrative of sovereignty and independence and the British population's perception of loss of autonomy and externally-driven change. Part of the appeal of the competing Scottish narrative is that it holds to a concept of a cohesive national community, within a smaller nation with a much smaller non-native component, which can support a more social democratic welfare state than diverse free market England. Sub-state nationalism, in Wales as well as Scotland, has been strengthened by the perception of a greater social and economic distance between London and the rest of the UK, as well as by the loss of the national (often formerly nationalised) industries that underwrote their employment and prosperity and gave them a visible stake in the state as a whole. The north of England, without an alternative narrative to justify resistance to London control, and without the assurance of fiscal transfers that devolved government has provided for Scotland and Wales, seems particularly open to the attractions of embittered populism.

Yet the British narrative remains stuck in Churchillian echoes. Michael Gove as Education Secretary attempted to revive Mrs. Thatcher's project of introducing a more patriotic history syllabus in English schools, to be defeated again by the reasoned objections of the history profession and by his removal from the Department of Education. The UK's most important annual national ceremony, Remembrance Day, is marked each November with a parade that has not changed in 70 years, without any non-British participation to recognise the multinational alliances with which we fought both world wars, and with only a small walk-on role for representatives of the Commonwealth. It symbolises the image of Britain standing alone, implicitly as in both wars against Germany: the image of 1940, of a Battle of Britain without the Polish, New Zealand, Canadian, Czech, Belgian and Australian pilots who made a significant contribution even at that isolated point in our island's history.²⁸

The emergence of devolved governments in Scotland and Wales, as well as in Northern Ireland, has encouraged some historians and political commentators to reinforce the idea of England, as a country with an exceptional history and contribution to the world. Andrew Roberts, a right wing historian, updated Churchill's contribution with *A History of the English-speaking Peoples since 1900* (2006). Daniel Hannan, MEP, one of the most prolific contributors to the Eurosceptic media, published a more populist interpretation in 2013:

W.Wallace, *Losing the narrative*: April 2017 text

Inventing Freedom: How the English-speaking Peoples made the modern world. The concept of the ‘Anglosphere’, linking Britain to the USA and Canada, Australia and New Zealand through shared values, institutions and history, has been widely promoted as an alternative to Britain’s European links.²⁹

A number of established English academic historians banded together as ‘Historians for Britain’ in the run-up to the 2016 referendum, declaring in their opening statement that ‘Britain has developed traditions and practices which are peculiar to our shores’ and that ‘the terms of Britain’s EU membership are undermining these values’: this provoked a riposte from other university historians to challenge their narrative.³⁰ The tabloid press, far more crudely, elided the European Union with the perceived threat of German domination; the idea of the EU as ‘the Fourth Reich’, giving Germany the European empire that Britain had fought two world wars to prevent.³¹ Political leaders since the resignation of Margaret Thatcher had hesitated to address the tangled narrative of national identity. Gordon Brown, a Scot who became Prime Minister of the UK in 2007, attempted to promote a public debate on the concept of ‘Britishness’, in the context of Britain’s disaffected young Muslims as well as the strengthening of Scottish nationalism, the impact of globalization and the resurgence of Euroscepticism; but his several interventions did not attract a widespread response.³²

Public confusion over British membership of the EU thus reflects a wider confusion about British – or English – national identity. As a Conservative MP said in a private meeting in 2014, ‘Our problem is that we don’t know who we are, and we don’t know where we want to go.’³³ Arguments over the economic costs and benefits of EU membership shrink when we recognise that the narrative that legitimised the integration of Europe, which never had the credibility within Britain that it had in our continental neighbours, has now weakened throughout the European Union, while the long-established dominant narrative of British nationhood is now confused and contested, and no longer fits the diverse community and globalised economy which our citizens experience.

In the optimism of Western security and continuing economic growth, with the cold war ending in what seemed to be a victory for Western values and an open global community, there were some within the IR discipline who argued that the nation state was the problem, that a move towards a global community through which we would all learn to recognise our shared interests would lead to a peaceful and prosperous world. In a world of failed states and civil conflict, **scholars** have come again to recognise the strong advantages of national

communities organised into nation states, of the concept of citizenship as a basis for sharing rights and resources, and of borders to distinguish between those communities and outsiders. Yet we are acutely aware of the limitations of national sovereignty and autonomy, of the desirability of borders as open as we can keep them and international markets as integrated as possible. We have not yet discovered how to build national narratives that are compatible with globalization, to create and maintain a sense of shared and multi-level community above and beyond the nation state. We find it difficult enough to hold together the imagined communities that have constituted some of Europe's larger states – including the UK. If we are not to succumb to nationalist reassertion or populist reaction, political leaders and intellectuals must develop persuasive new narratives that support international cooperation. But it will not be easy to persuade enough voters to accept such a liberal narrative, while economic growth remains low, while the impact of technological change disrupts patterns of living and destroys jobs, and while rising population and continuing instability in Europe's global south pushes desperate refugees and hopeful migrants towards our shores.

The British referendum on EU membership, in June 2016, concluded with a narrow majority in a divided country to reassert national sovereignty over European integration – and, implicitly, over globalization as such. The economic arguments put forward by those who argued for 'Remain' did not persuade voters who agreed that they wanted to 'take back control' of their country from the constraints of international regulation and multilateral negotiation; the appeal of a reasserted national narrative trumped the risks of economic uncertainty. The Remain campaign, over-confident in the prospect of winning, stuck closely to rational advantage and disadvantage, of economic interest and prospects for future growth. The Leave campaign, in contrast, played the emotional cards of identity and culture, roundly dismissing the economic risks claimed by their opponents. Boris Johnson, the most flamboyant of the Leave campaign's leaders, repeatedly referenced the Second World War and the EU as a German-dominated organization, feeding into the Anglo-Saxon narrative of Britain as a country separate and distinct from its continental European neighbours. David Cameron and George Osborne, anxious not to divide the Conservative Party further, deliberately avoided the language of shared history, security and values.³⁴ The importance of cooperation in defence, intelligence, counter-terrorism and control of cross-frontier migration was scarcely mentioned during the campaign – leaving difficulties for Theresa May's successor government after the vote to Leave in explaining to its domestic media and public why continued cooperation would remain in the UK's national interest.

The failure of successive British governments to develop an alternative narrative to that of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism over the 25 years since Margaret Thatcher's resignation was compounded in the referendum campaign by the failure of the Remain campaign to present a positive or emotional case for continued European engagement. This left symbolic references to history, sovereignty, and values to the Leave campaign, to their advantage. Making a profoundly political and cultural case for leaving the EU, their leaders nevertheless argued that the response of other EU governments to UK demands would be driven by economic interest rather than by cultural or cultural concerns: that the determination of the German car industry to continue selling cars in the UK, or of Italian wine producers to sell prosecco, would trump wider considerations. Britain, they asserted, valued sovereignty and independence above all else; but continental countries were primarily concerned with commercial interests.

Analysis of voting patterns in the 2016 Referendum have since indicated how much less united the British national community has become over the past half-century. The better-educated, better-paid, more widely-travelled, voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU; the marginalised, low-skilled, low-paid, voted to leave. Those optimistic about the future voted to stay; the pessimists, who regretted the pace and direction of social and economic change over recent decades, voted to leave.³⁵ The concept of the 'Left Behind' now entered the British political discourse: those who had not benefitted from globalization, who felt threatened by immigration, and resented the widening gap between their circumstances and those of the more fortunate and successful.

It has not, however, only been within the UK that many voters have resisted the force of international integration: resistance to foreign ownership, to the disruption of technological change and low-cost competition, and to the incursion of waves of immigrants competing for domestic jobs and disturbing established patterns of domestic society, has grown across western and eastern Europe, and even within the United States. The EU has no persuasive new narrative to legitimise its distant level of governance to the citizens of its 28 member states. British politics, and English, Scots, Irish and Welsh politics, also lack a coherent shared narrative round which to rebuild a broad national consensus. Yet France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Italy are all challenged by similar doubts and popular discontents. Diffuse new threats, the prospect of slow growth at best in an uncertain global economy, the increasing diversity of domestic societies and the contestability of national history for rising

generations, all make the construction of legitimising narratives at both national and European levels difficult to achieve.

¹ This is a revised and updated version of the 2016 David Davies Memorial Institute Annual Lecture, given in the Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University, on 4th February 2016.

² Tim Shipman (2016) *All-out War: the full story of how Brexit sank Britain's political class*, Harper Collins, London; Craig Oliver (2016) *Unleashing Demons: the Inside Story of Brexit*, Blackwell's, Oxford.

³ Toby Helm, (March 2015), 'Lords accuses Tories of burying review', *Observer* 29th.

⁴ The 32 Balance of Competences reports are available on the government website at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/review-of-the-balance-of-competences> (accessed 1 December 2016). See also, House of Lords Select Committee on the EU, (March 2015), *The Review of the Balance of Competences between the UK and the EU*, HL 140.

⁵ H.E. Marshall, *Our Island Story*, first published in 1905, most recently re-published by the *Daily Telegraph* and the conservative think-tank Civitas in 2006. See also *Daily Telegraph* 29th October 2010, 'Revealed: David Cameron's favourite childhood book.'

⁶ For a well-argued restatement of this dominant narrative, see Robert Tombs (2015) *The English and their History*.

⁷ Personal recollection: the author was a graduate student in the USA for most of the period between 1962 and 1967, overlapping with Benedict Anderson at Cornell, listening in seminars and conferences to a number of the exiled European academics who were teaching in American universities then – including Hans Morgenthau, Hans Bethe, Mario Einaudi, Karl Deutsch, and Carl Joachim Friedrich, and meeting US policy-makers whose attitudes to Europe were shaped by their participation in the war in Europe twenty years earlier and by the occupation and reconstruction (in the face of Soviet hostility) that followed.

⁸ Louis Halle, *The Cold War as History* (1967) examines the concepts of 'Western civilization' and 'Atlantic Community' which reshaped the mental maps of US and Western policy-makers in the years after 1945.

⁹ See for example the many publications of the Bruges Group, accessible at <https://www.brugesgroup.com>

¹⁰ I was struck when interviewing on German foreign policy in the early 1980s in Bonn, then the West German capital, how often German officials and politicians referred to these symbolic events of Franco-German reconciliation.

¹¹ Lord Gladwyn, (1966), *The European Idea*. Charlemagne's court attracted a number of English clerics as scholars and advisers.

¹² Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, (1990), *Europe: a History of its Peoples*, Viking, London. This book was published simultaneously in 8 different West European countries.

¹³ Norman Davies, (1996), *Europe: a History* Oxford University Press. Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech, in 1988, similarly pointed out to her continental audience that 'Warsaw, Prague and Budapest are also great European cities.'

¹⁴ There is no English-language biography of Spinelli, but his name lives on in the main building of the European Parliament in Brussels.

¹⁵ William Wallace, (1990) *The Transformation of Western Europe*, RIIA/Pinter, London; Samuel Huntington, (1993) 'The Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs*, pp.22-49.

¹⁶ Winston Churchill, (1956-58), *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, 4 volumes, Cassell, London; a one-volume 'concise' edition was also published. Churchill had begun the first volume in 1937, to return to the task when out of office in his late 70s.

¹⁷ Cmnd 4107, (1969), *Review Committee on Overseas Representation 1968-9*, Report HMSO.

¹⁸ Gaitskell's impassioned speech to the 1962 Labour conference, in which he spelled out his opposition to joining the EEC, appealed to '1,000 years of British history', referring back to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom: a powerfully emotive speech from a leader whose reputation had been made as an economic policy-maker.

¹⁹ Conrad Black, who considered himself a historian, welcomed contributions from Andrew Roberts, Niall Ferguson and others to his *Telegraph* titles; so did the Murdoch-owned *Times* and *Sunday Times*.

²⁰ Personal recollection, Professor Helen Wallace.

²¹ Timothy Garton Ash, (2005), *Free World*, Penguin Books, London, Page36.

²² The chairman of Mrs.Thatcher's review committee, Michael Saunders Watson, has written of his experience in his memoirs, *I am given a Castle*, Country Life, London, 2008. See also William Wallace, (1991) "Foreign policy and national identity in the United Kingdom", "International Affairs" 67(1) 65-80.

²³ Huntington developed his thesis more fully in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* Simon and Schuster, New York (1996). Norman Davies, (1996), *Europe: a History*, Oxford University Press, directly challenged Huntington's approach.

²⁴ This is an argument that right-wing parties in Poland and Hungary have advanced in recent elections.

²⁵ Dani Rodrik, (2011), *The Globalization Paradox*, Norton New York.

²⁶ Robert D. Putnam, (J 2007) *E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the 21st Century*, Scandinavian Political Studies, 30:2, . 137–174.; (2002)*Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society* (Edited by Robert D. Putnam), Oxford University Press,

²⁷ It's important not to exaggerate the scale of immigration into the UK, however. The number of foreign-born residents in France in 2015 was significantly higher than in the UK, and immigrants (and refugees) from eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East were also pressing into the other rich countries in north and west Europe.

²⁸ Over 500 RAF fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain came from these six countries; the largest and most experienced contingent came from Poland.

²⁹ Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce, (10th February 2015) 'The rise of the Anglosphere: how the right dreamed up a new conservative world order', *New Statesman*,. See also Michael Kenny, (2014), *The Politics of English Nationhood*, Oxford University Press.

³⁰ Historians for Britain website, accessed 9th June 2015; *History Today*, 11th and 18th May 2015. Robert Tombs, one of the leading members of Historians for Britain, had published an 800-page narrative of England's continuity in institutions and values from King Alfred's kingdom to the current day, *The English and their History*, Allen Lane, London 2014.

³¹ See for example Simon Heffer, (17 August 2011) , 'The rise of the Fourth Reich', *Daily Mail*.

³² See for example Gordon Brown, speech to Fabian Society, 14th January 2006; speech to Commonwealth Club, 27th February 2007; introduction to Matthew d'Ancona, (2009),*Being British*, Mainstream, London.

³³ Personal recollection of off-the-record meeting.

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Please check all references for house style. Books should be as follows:

William Wallace, *The European Union* (London: Parliament Press, 2016) on first mention, and the short form for further references: Wallace, *European Union*.

The house style – this is important, and consistent with widespread practice over the past 10 years or so – is to capitalise and abbreviate IR when referring to the discipline, but spelling out, in lower case, 'international relations' when referring to the real world.

³⁴ Daniel Korski (2016), *Why we lost the Brexit Vote: behind the scenes of the flawed campaign to keep Britain in the EU*, Politico, London. See also Shipman (2016) and Oliver (2016).

³⁵ Kirby Swales, *Understanding the Leave Vote*, (2016) NatCen Social Research, London; Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath, 'The 20126 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: an aggregate-level analysis of the result', *Political Quarterly* 87:3, July-September 2016.