

Churchill the European has been written out of history

Churchill devoted considerable resources, money, speech-making, and political organization to the cause of European unity. Today, Churchill the European is being written out of British history, writes Denis MacShane.

One of the comfort blankets for pro-Brexit evangelists is that Germany will ride to Boris Johnson's rescue and sideline Michel Barnier and impose a political deal that chimes with the wishes of Dominic Cummings or Michael Gove, and other Brexit hardliners. Sometimes President Macron is mentioned as the man on a white horse who can send Barnier packing and cut a deal *mano-à-mano* with the UK prime minister. French food and wine exports, and German automobile exports, are so important to Paris and Berlin, runs the argument, that the two leading governments will accept far more of what the UK is demanding than the inflexible team from Brussels.

There is not the slightest evidence for this. It is true that elected political leaders across the Channel have on the whole not attacked Brexit, or Johnson, though that may be because since February they have been overwhelmed by Coronavirus. Emmanuel Macron has been an elected politician for 40 months. Barnier was an elected French politician for 40 years rising to the highest post in the French government and the European Commission. While English newspapers are full of insult against a group known as "The Europeans", Michel Barnier has been on a punishing non-stop round of visits and talks to 27 national government leaders and their parliaments. The British decision not to honour the international treaty consisting of the Withdrawal Agreement, and the Protocol on Northern Ireland, has caused an uproar. Even if many in Britain see it as a negotiating ploy, the language of repudiating international law produced rebuke from Clément Beaune, the unflamboyant French Europe minister who has been Macron's main [aide on EU politics in the Elysée since 2017](#).

Now in *Der Spiegel*, the German Europe minister Michael Roth, quotes Winston Churchill, in an open letter to friends in Britain about Brexit. Roth writes: Winston Churchill was right when he said: "[You must look at facts, because they look at you](#)". Roth a veteran respected SPD politician would not have gone full frontal without the approval of Angela Merkel. It is interesting that Roth quotes Churchill and it is worth looking at Churchill's approach to Europe 1930-1955 to see how he saw the UK's relationship with the continent. Churchill, of course, is a political version of Shakespeare or the Bible. We can take from him almost anything we want. His decades of words and political activity contain endlessly different lines and contradictory positions.

Yet there is one Churchillian cause that never changed and to which he devoted considerable resources, money, speech-making, and political organization. That cause is European unity. It has been written out of recent Churchill historiography as the 21st-century biographers of Churchill, like Boris Johnson and Andrew Roberts, are all ideologically committed to Tory anti-Europeanism. Johnson referred to a "Gestapo-controlled Nazi EU" in his Churchill biography. He quotes, as do most Churchill biographers, his 1930 article for the American *Saturday Evening Post*, in response to the first stirring of pan-European unity. Churchill supported the principle but added that Britain would 'interested and associated, but not absorbed'. But this quick dismissal does no justice to Churchill's political commitment to European unity in the 1930s.

He applauded the speech at the League of Nations in Geneva in 1929 of the French foreign minister, Aristide Briand, who made the case for the abolition of economic frontiers between the nations of Europe. Briand was the honorary president of the Pan-European Union set up in the 1920s to promote European unification in response to the disaster of the first world war. Churchill praised Briand's call for "some 'federal link' established between all the different states (of Europe)". The most important component of that federal link' should be "economic agreement." But it was more than commerce. Why can't the citizen of different countries "realize himself as French, German, Spanish or Dutch, and simultaneously as a European and, finally as citizen of the world?", Churchill wrote. 75 years later his successor, as British Prime Minister, scorned Churchill's idea when she said: "If you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere."





Date originally posted: 2020-10-01

Permalink: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/10/01/churchill-the-european-has-been-written-out-of-history/>

Blog homepage: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/>



Commemorative plaque for the speech of Winston Churchill at the University of Zürich. The final sentence: “The

Churchill often returned to the idea of European citizenship worrying at the concept like a favourite bone. Speaking in 1948, he said:

“We hope to see a Europe where men of every country will think as much of being a European as of belonging to their own native land, and that without losing any of their love and loyalty of their birthplace. We hope wherever they go in this wide domain they will truly feel ‘Here I am at home. I am a citizen of this country too.’”

A decade earlier, in the News of the World in 1938, Churchill said Britain should promote “every practical step which the nations of Europe may take to reduce the barriers which divide them and to nourish their common interests and their common welfare.” At the high-water mark of Tory isolationism, under Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain, Churchill urged the creation of common European postage stamps, a single currency, and a tariff union. He argued the menace of fascism and the threat of war would “draw together the peace-loving states and so contribute indirectly to the development of the pan-European ideal.”

Nothing enrages today’s anti-Europeans more than the claim Europe is a peace project. The Tories of 1938 also hated Churchill’s visionary Europeanism and made serious moves to de-select him as an MP early in 1939. 80 years later pro-European Conservative MPs like Nick Boles and Amber Rudd faced de-selection at the hands of the descendants of Tory isolationist appeasers who tried to force Churchill out of politics. And just as Neville Chamberlain in 1939 made no efforts to call off the de-selection dogs so too Theresa May was destroyed by their successors as she was driven out of office by hard-line anti-Brexit Tory MPs.

In 1942, at the height of the war, in the darkest period of Nazi domination of Europe, Churchill sent a minute to cabinet colleagues stating: “I look forward to a United States of Europe in which the barriers between the nations will be greatly minimized and unrestricted travel will be possible.” In November 1945 he told the Belgian Parliament of his wish for “the United States of Europe within which all its peoples may dwell together in prosperity, in justice, and in peace.” A year later, in Zurich, he made a more famous speech calling “for a kind of United States of Europe” which set Europe ablaze with the vision of the European Union. In a recent book ([Churchill on Europe](#)), the Dutch historian, Felix Klos, has ranged far and wide in archives, the Churchill papers, diaries, memoirs both in English and continental languages. His research goes well beyond the limited inquiries by Tory English Churchill hagiographers. They are not quite honorary members of the Stalin school of falsification of history, but they go out of their way to belittle, or reduce to nugatory importance, Churchill’s enthusiasm for European unity between 1945 and 1951, and in the 1930s, or during the war.

In 1939, the Labour leader and prime minister after 1945, Clement Attlee had declared “Europe must federate or perish.” After 1945, Labour in power opted for a sturdy British nationalism in foreign affairs with a close alignment to Washington and hostility to European construction. The intellectual architect of post-1945 Labour hostility to European integration was Labour’s international secretary, Denis Healey, a Eurosceptic *avant la lettre*. He told the *New Statesman* shortly before he died in 2015 that he would vote Brexit in the forthcoming plebiscite.

Churchill by contrast took on Labour’s post-1945 focus on national sovereignty and rejection of European partnership. When Labour’s right-wing foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, told the House of Commons in 1948, he wanted to avoid “any reference to the surrender of sovereign rights’ Churchill replied that he preferred to argue for “countries acquiring an enlarged or enriched sovereignty through membership of a European Union.”

Churchill set up a secretariat to campaign for Europe hiring pre-war pan-European federalists to organize giant meetings in London and on the continent. He used his own money to finance the campaign pulling in younger MPs like Duncan Sandys, Harold Macmillan, and Robert Boothby to form a high-level political unit to make the case for European integration. In 1950, Churchill called for “the immediate creation of a unified European army subject to proper European democratic control” and said that for the Conservative Party “national sovereignty is not inviolable and that it may be resolutely diminished for the sake of all the men in all the lands finding their way home together.”

Churchill the European has been written out of history by today’s Tory Europhobes. Of course, Britain as one of the three big victors of the second world war was not going to fuse itself into a federal Europe. A Britain trying to take over Europe after 1945, or 1950, would have made the European unity boat top-heavy, and likely to capsize. In his monumentally unending Churchill biography, Andrew Roberts finds space for one paragraph, on page 975, to discuss Churchill’s fairly obvious point that on European integration:

“We play a part, but we are not merged with and do not forfeit our insular or Commonwealth character. Our first object is the unity, and consolidation of the British Commonwealth (...) Our second, the ‘fraternal association’ of the English-speaking world; and, third united Europe, to which we are a separate, closely – and specially related ally and friend (...) It is only when plans for uniting Europe take a federal form that we ourselves cannot take part, because we cannot subordinate ourselves or the control to federal authorities.”

But that was the same position of the French who had and have no intention of dissolving the French nation into a federal Europe. Today, seven decades after the first steps to the European Union, with the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1950, we are no closer to a fully federal Europe. Churchill was thus stating the obvious. But after he returned to power in 1951 he enthusiastically supported the creation of the European Court of Human Rights, whose judgements are superior to national British law just as those of the EU's Court of Justice have been in trade and commercial disputes.

In the last major speech he made in October 1959, Churchill said:

“The outlook for a closer unity of those who share the common fruit of Western civilization is full of promise. There is no reason why these developments should conflict with our ever closer association with the countries of the Commonwealth and the United States. In all this, we in Britain have a great part to play, a leading part.”

Boris Johnson was born five years after Churchill's final appeal for Britain to stay a leading player in Europe. He is now burying Churchill's pro-Europeanism. Meanwhile, British rightwing historians are re-writing history to take out of our national narrative the role of Churchill the European.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.