

The Blenheim Palace Speech (on the UK and Europe)

Speech by HE Mr Radek Sikorski, Foreign Minister of Poland
Blenheim Palace, 21 September 2012

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Introductory courtesies

It's always wonderful to come back to Oxford. I remember my first day when I arrived here in 1982, for an interview at Pembroke College.

I applied to read PPE. The examiners asked me about Marxism. I told them *'I'm a refugee from Communist Poland. I haven't met a Marxist yet.'* I'm sure they laughed into their sleeves at the thought of what was coming. Indeed, I was ill-prepared for the tutorials at the Soviet republic of Balliol.

In my second year I was a moderately successful hack at the Oxford Union where I organized a debate. The provocative motion was *'This House believes that the enforced stability of Poland is essential for the peace of Europe.'* In effect, a motion supporting martial law and Soviet rule.

I had two noble allies: Leszek Kołakowski and Timothy Garton Ash. We defeated it. But not by much.

I was elected to the Union's Standing Committee. I ran for Secretary. But I lost by a few votes to a rival from Christ Church. Pembroke was a much smaller college. I realized that in politics - as in other activities - size matters. That was my formative political experience, and you see where it got me today.

Since then, life has continued to bring new learning experiences. It's interesting what happens on your first day as Foreign Minister. Helpful officials flutter around you like so many butterflies. One of them produces a special secret red file marked *"How to be a Foreign Minister"*. Inside the file are papers on the Dos and Don'ts of the office. But decades of bureaucratic experience are best summed up in the immortal lines from my favourite instalment of *"Yes, Prime Minister"*: *"Once you start interfering in the internal squabbles of other countries, you're on a very slippery slope. Even the Foreign Secretary has grasped that!"*

It is in that fine spirit that tonight I mean to interfere recklessly in the internal affairs of the United Kingdom.

I want to offer some thoughts on a subject of considerable British domestic sensitivity: the UK's membership of the European Union. And I want to try to change some minds.

The unofficial results of last YouGov Survey 2012 confirm that 67% British people support the idea of holding a referendum on EU membership, with only 19% opposed. 42% say they would vote to stay in, while 34% would vote to leave.

Well, I would like to say to you: DON'T DO IT.

Let me be 100% clear right at the start where I am coming from on this subject.

I am Polish, from the Solidarity generation that helped bring down the Soviet empire.

From Oxford I went to Afghanistan, to report on the anti-Communist resistance there.

I have lived in the USA, working for the right-wing American Enterprise Institute.

I am a fervent believer in free markets. Lady Thatcher – may she live forever – acknowledges me in her book on ‘Statecraft.’

I represent a government which has won plaudits for its financial rectitude – our finance minister, Jacek Rostowski is a former member of the British Conservative party.

In other words, I tick every box required to be a life-long member of London’s most powerful Eurosceptics’ club.

The Travellers’ used to be my London club, but Euroscepticism is not.

On the contrary, I believe in the logic and justice of the modern European project. And my country, Poland, will do its utmost to help it succeed.

Let me explain why – and please accept that what I say comes from sympathy and admiration for a country which gave me refuge and an education when I needed it.

First of all, I think your society is vulnerable to several myths about the European Union. Before going any further, let me dispel them for you this evening, once and for all.

Myth No 1: Britain’s trade with the EU is less important than its trade with the outside world.

Facts: In 2011 the UK’s bilateral current account deficit with China was 19.7 bn GBP. You ran a deficit with Russia, too.

Your commercial success is in Europe. Roughly half of UK exports go to the EU. The United Kingdom has – until recently – traded more each year with Ireland than it does with Brazil, Russia, India and China put together. The UK’s trade growth with the new EU members is even more dynamic. Between 2003 and 2011 British exports to Poland have increased three times.

Myth No. 2: The EU forces Britain to adopt laws on human rights which are contrary in spirit to British tradition.

Facts: These rulings which you object to come from the European Court of Human Rights. The tribunal is not a part of the EU system. It is an institution of the Council of Europe, a noble British creation which pre-dates the EU. Here, as in so many other cases, the Eurosceptics blame the EU for the actions of European or other international institutions which have in practice nothing to do with it.

Myth No. 3: UK is bankrupting itself by funding Europe.

Facts: The much-debated monstrous EU budget is roughly 1 percent of the GDP of all members of the EU. UK public spending is nearly 50% of country's GDP.

Your EU budget annual net contribution is 8-9 billion pounds. Though it depends on the year, on average the UK contribution is similar to France's and less than Germany's. That is still less than 15 pounds per an average UK citizen and 5 times less than this year's interest on your national debt.

Moreover, some of this money comes back home. For example, UK transport and infrastructure companies have profited enormously from EU cohesion fund investments in Central and Eastern Europe. That improved infrastructure then gains UK exporters: higher levels of prosperity in those Member States mean new markets for UK companies.

The UK government itself estimates that every UK household "earns" between £1500 and £3500 every year thanks to the existence of the Single Market. That alone works out at between five and fifteen times of the UK's net budget contribution per household. It's a bargain.

Myth No. 4: The UK is drowning in the EU bureaucracy.

Facts: Yes, it is true, 33 000 people work for the European Commission, serving an entire continent. But at the moment, there are more than 82 000 people working for Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs alone. In Poland, a country of 38 million, we have 430 000 bureaucrats – and we do think it's too many. But Spain – similar in size to us – has almost 3 million. By contrast to any of its members, the European Union is a slimmed-down operation.

Myth No. 5: The UK is drowning in EU legislation and nasty directives coming from Brussels.

Facts: We all have a good laugh when we hear about the „banana directive“, or „euro-sausages“. But these are not the fault of the European Commission. Usually they are proposed by particular member states who are trying to protect their former colonies and their national products, and they are always negotiated with other states.

Directives, in short, are not Brussels diktats, but regulations that a British government's officials had agreed to, approved of, and signed off on. In any case, law inspired by Europe accounts for only a fragment of what your parliament passes. House of Commons research shows that only 6.8% of primary legislation and 14.1% of secondary legislation have anything to do with implementing EU obligations.

Myth No. 6: The European Commission is a hotbed of socialism.

Facts: Whether on Open Skies, rules governing public assistance to business, or – most prominently now – Europe's energy market, it is the EU that has helped to dismantle national monopolies and prevented national politicians from subverting rules of competition.

Myth No. 7: Through its invasive Social Chapter, the EU is preventing hardworking British people from working longer hours than feckless continentals.

Facts: The average Pole works 40.5 hours per week, The average Greek works 42. The average Spaniard, 38.1. The average for all EU27 is 37.2. The average for the UK? 36.2.

Myth No. 8: : New proposals for EU pesticides legislation would ban gardeners from using coffee grounds to tackle slugs.

Facts: No, they would not. Pesticides sold commercially need approval under the rules but products which are used primarily for other purposes, such as coffee, are specifically exempted. Like so many EU scare stories, this one is simply invented.

Those are the myths. Now let's look at arguments.

British Eurosceptics seem to have two different positions.

Some want out but not entirely. By replacing membership with a **negotiated free trade agreement, they argue that the UK will be better off**. Because Britain's market is too valuable for the rest of the continent to ignore, they say, the British government could negotiate a trade deal that would preserve all the advantages of membership in the single market, without any of the political and financial costs.

My answer to that is: don't count on it. Many European states would hold a grudge against a country which, in their view, had selfishly left the EU.

While you are an important market for the rest of the EU, accounting for about 11% of the rest of the EU's trade, your trade with the EU is 50% of *your* total trade. No prizes for guessing who would have the upper hand in such a negotiation.

Any free trade agreement would have a price. In exchange for the privilege of access to the Single Market, Norway and Switzerland make major contributions to the EU's cohesion funds. They also have to adopt EU standards – without having any say in how they are written. At the moment, Norway's net contribution to the EU budget is actually higher, per capita, than Britain's.

So think hard: the EU is a market of 500 million people who enjoy the highest average standard of living in the world. According to the IMF and the World Bank, Europe's GDP is about 2.5 times than that of China and nine times that of India. Do you want to lose your privileged access to that market?

But there is, of course, a more political Eurosceptic argument as well. Some argue that the UK probably will be better off by **leaving the European Union**, but even if it isn't any losses are worth suffering for the sake of regaining international freedom of manoeuvre. It's better to be Canada than Illinois.

My answer to that is: yes, the UK outside the EU would have more freedom of manoeuvre, in a number of significant respects. But the UK would be less powerful and less free.

Certainly Britain would lose its influence in many international forums. By negotiating as one bloc in world trade talks, the European Union gives all of us, the UK included, a powerful and united voice to use when speaking to China and the USA. If you leave, you lose that. Let me quote from the findings of a report prepared in 2011 for Business, Innovation and Skills Committee in the House of Commons, I quote 'We recognize the fact that the UK's influence on the WTO can only be exercised through its membership of the European Union'.

Britain standing alone would suffer not only on multilateral level. Are you sure that you will command the same kind of attention in, say, Kuala Lumpur, Lagos and Bogota? What about Washington? At the moment, your hosts know that you speak on behalf of London and have an influence to shape decisions taken in Brussels on behalf of the whole continent as well. Alone, you won't be so interesting.

And, are you confident that the Scots, who are more pro-European than you, will follow you?

David Cameron certainly gets it: "If your vision of Britain was that we should just withdraw and become a sort of greater Switzerland, I think that would be a complete denial of our national interests."

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Here we are this evening, enjoying the splendour and hospitality of Blenheim Palace. It commemorates the superb leadership of the Duke of Marlborough back in August 1704, and his decisive victory in the War of the Spanish Succession.

This war dragged on for 13 years. It involved the countries of Western Europe and even spread as far as North and South America. Tens of thousands of Europeans and others died as the rival armies tramped to and fro.

The point of the war? To stop France and Spain uniting under one monarch and so preserve the wider 'balance of power' across Europe.

In the famous battle of Blenheim England used its military skill to intervene on the continent of Europe.

Now, Britain's leaders need to decide once again how best to use their influence in Europe. The EU is an English-speaking power. The Single Market was a British idea. A British commissioner runs our diplomatic service. You could, if only you wished, lead Europe's defence policy.

But if you refuse, please don't expect us to help you wreck or paralyze the EU. Do not underestimate our determination not to return to the politics of the 20 century. You were not occupied. Most of us on the continent were. We will do almost anything to prevent that from happening again.

It's not difficult to see why. Poland wants to be with Germany and France as partners, leading a strong, democratic European political-economic space. We do not want to be a buffer between Western Europe and a less democratic Eurasian political-economic space dominated by Russia.

More importantly, we believe the Eurozone will survive, because it is its members interest for it to survive. The leaders of Europe will step up operational integration at the European level. The new institutional arrangements within the EU will be different. But eventually they'll be strong. They'll work because Europe's leaders want them to work. And be careful what you read in your tabloids: No country has benefitted more from the single currency than Germany.

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Since I first came to these shores over 30 years ago, Britain has become much more European. You've built the Channel-Tunnel, you got used to mixer taps, duvets and double glazing. Even your cooking has improved. Yet, your public opinion and politics is more Euro-sceptic than ever. And I think I can guess why: Marxists at those Balliol tutorials taught me the term "false consciousness" which is when the ideological superstructure is out of sync with the economic base. Britain today is living with false consciousness. Your interests are in Europe. It's high time for your sentiments to follow.

Your leaders need to make a more vocal case for your European interests.

Britain is famous through the ages for its practical good sense and policies based on reality, not myths. We hope you can return to this tradition soon.

Thank you