Churchill's Britain and Europe: To Leave or Remain?

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Introduction

The issue of Brexit and of Anglo-European relations has dominated political debate and policy in the United Kingdom since the 2016 UK Referendum on membership to the European Union (EU). Having voted by over 51% to leave the EU, the UK's deliberate choice to move away from Europe shocked many people[1], and has caused political deadlock in Britain that continues to this day. However, when analyzing the history of Britain's tumultuous relationship with the continent since 1940, the results do not come as a surprise. Indeed, British membership and involvement in Europe has been a major topic of debate for the past several decades. After the conclusion of the Second World War, Britain's role in post war Europe was yet to be determined; interestingly, the attitude of one of the architects of modern Europe towards the continent has become a topic of debate among historians. During the 2016 Referendum election, leaders of both the "Leave" and "Remain" campaigns invoked the images and ideals of Winston Churchill and his presence in British identity in an attempt to influence voters and convince them that Churchill would have been firmly in their camp. Vote Leave figure head and current British Prime Minister (and Churchill historian)[2] Boris Johnson invoked Churchill daily, saying that "he would be on his bus", and deterred dissenters by noting that "Britain needs to be supportive of its friends and allies—but on the lines originally proposed by Winston Churchill: interested, associated, but not absorbed; with Europe—but not comprised."[3] The then Prime Minister and pro-Europe leader David Cameron also invoked Churchill, arguing that Churchill was a founder of European unity and would have wanted the UK to stay in the EU[4].

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[1] Simpson, Cam, Gavin Finch, and Kit Chellel. 2018. "The Brexit Short." *Bloomberg Businessweek*, no. 4575 (July): 36–42.

[2] Johnson, Boris. *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2014.

[3] Felix Klos, *Churchill's Last Stand: The Struggle to Unite Europe* (New York: I.B. Tauris 2018), 5.

[4] *Ibid.*

This raises the question: how could the man, whose political career spanned six decades, wrote millions of words and delivered thousands of speeches, how could his position on such a clear question still be up for debate? For his part, Churchill's grandson and former Conservative MP Sir Nicholas Soames has said "the last things on earth Churchill would have been would have been an isolationist-to want to stand apart from Europe right now at a difficult time."[5] Conservative MP and future Minister David Davis responded by noting that Soames argument "is in defiance of history. Winston Churchill saw a very good argument for some sort of a United States of Europe. But he never wanted us to be a part of it. That's the key point"[6]. Indeed, this is the critical point where Eurosceptics and Europhiles disagree on Churchill's position towards British involvement in Europe. The former argues that while Churchill may have been a believer in a united Europe, that was the extent of his sympathies, and did not want Britain to be involved in this united European system. The latter argues that the fact that Churchill did call for a United States of Europe, supported his protégé Prime Minister Harold MacMillan and voted to join the EU's forerunner, the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1961[7], proves that if he were living in 2016, Churchill would have voted to for Britain to stay in the EU.

The truth is more complicated, and Churchill's positions on Europe do not fit neatly in to a 21st Century 'Leave' or 'Remain' dichotomy. His own attitudes had changed over his decades in politics, as had the makeup and structure of Europe. In his post-war years, European unity and communities were not consolidated into an international organization like the EU, but instead were various, communities and organizations, linked by individual states and various treaties.

This messy structure of cohesion proceeding the EU, having seen Europe divided twice in one century, and the new threat of the Soviet Union in eastern Europe all influenced Churchill's positions towards European unity, and those positions were responses to a very different world and Europe compared to 2016. Churchill also cared to

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[5] Nicholas Watt, "EU referendum: Churchill would back Remain, Soames says," BBC-News-Politics-EU Referendum. Last modified 10 May 2016,
https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36253224
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] Alistair Jones *Britain and the European Union* p. 15.

look beyond Europe's borders towards the Empire and nurturing the special relationship with the United States, undoubtedly prioritizing these relationships over Europe. To confuse matters further, Churchill would often make contradictory remarks towards Europe, depending on the context of the situation, like when he made clear to Charles de Gaulle that if forced to choose between the continent and the open sea, Britain would always choose the sea.[8] This makes it difficult for any contemporary historian or politician to definitively cast Churchill in either a pro-Leave or Remain position. However, many of the contemporary debates on Britain in Europe can be traced back to Churchill; although he himself was in favour of a united Europe, his political speeches, policies, and legacy contribute and serve as a foundation for modern Euroscepticism in Britain.

Churchill and the Unites States of Europe

During his tenure as Leader of the Opposition after the 1945 General Election, Churchill made several important speeches that would influence the way the world saw the international situation unfolding before them. The first was his famous "Iron Curtain" speech delivered in March, 1946 in Fulton, Missouri. This speech was significant in the debate on European unity because it defined the division in the European continent between the Soviet pro-communist East, and the Western pro-capitalist West. Therefore, unlike in 1914 or 1939 when nation states were attempting to obtain more territory for their nationalistic or ethnic and racial goals, the Cold War was one of ideology. As ideology can transcend nations, there was less utility in maintaining strong national character in exchange for common unity and effort in defense policy against the new enemy, the Soviet Union and communism. In this context, Churchill's Iron Curtain speech called for western European cohesion and alliance under a larger scale, and was something that unified these western nations against the Soviet Union. Therefore, it can be argued that Churchill's speech at Fulton contributed to the idea of globalism and pre-EU western connectivity, from which the EU eventually developed. However, this notion on its own cannot prove that he would have preferred British membership

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[8] "The Open Sea: Euroscepticism and its roots" *The Economist*, 15 October 2015, special report.

in an EU organization, merely at the time it was important to stand together in international partnerships against a common enemy. Thus Churchill's speech drew a clear line of separation between the East and West which called for the nations of western Europe to unify behind this dichotomy. Churchill's speech stresses the issue of independence and sovereignty as less important and common cooperation and unity behind the west nations opposed to the Soviet Union. However, nothing in this speech would suggest that he was in favour of an organization like the EU, with the expansive governance authority that it has. Rather, his speech suggests that in the post-war world, a division was forming, and that those nations on the western side were in the division together.

Perhaps the strongest indication of Churchill's support for a united Europe, and therefore a role for Britain in this Europe, comes from a series of other speeches he also made in 1946. In Metz, France on Bastille Day in July, Churchill used the opportunity of being in Europe to raise the issue of European unity, and asked the question:

> What will be the fate of Europe...Shall we re-establish again the glory of Europe and thus consolidate the foundations of Peace? Why should the quarrels of Europe wreck the gigantic modern world? Twice in our lifetimes we have seen this happen…We victors have set up together the United Nations Organization to which we give our loyalty and which we found our hopes. At the head of this stands the United States of America in all her power and virtue. But without the aid of a united Europe the great new world organization may easily be rent asunder or evaporate in futility because of explosions which originate in Europe and may once again bring all mankind into strife and misery.[9]

Another important speech he made with regards to a united Europe was at the University of Zurich in September, 1946. In his speech, Churchill was careful to mention at the dark state of affairs Europe would have found itself now in had it not been for American support. He noted that that this support still may not be sufficient enough to avoid European decline, but added that:

> Yet all the while there is a remedy which, if it were generally and spontaneously adopted, would as if by miracle transform the whole scene...We must build a kind of United States of Europe. In this way only will hundreds of millions of

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[9] Winston S. Churchill, *His Complete Speeches 1897*-1963, Volume VII. (London: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974) 7358-7359.

toilers be able to regain the simple joys and hopes which make life worth living.[10]

These two speeches demonstrate a clear indication that Churchill did support the idea of a united Europe and that it ought to form a type of international organization. The pro-European Remainer would argue Churchill's argument calls for something similar to what the EU eventually became. Indeed, he was in favour of stronger European ties in order to avoid what he described as "the tragedy of Europe"[11], essentially the continuous state of war among a European family. In 1947, he founded the United Europe Movement, seen as a pressure group calling for a European state and he also famously appeared at Royal Albert Hall under the banner "EUROPE ARISE!"[12]. All of these credentials support the claim that Churchill was a pro-European unity leader, and believed in the principles that established international organizations like the EU.

However, upon closer examination, Churchill's words do not directly support the notion of the UK being a member of a "United States of Europe". This is first suggested when he declared in his Zurich speech that "The first step in the re-creation of the European family must be a partnership between France and Germany. In this way only can France recover the moral leadership of Europe…[13]". This quotation suggests Churchill saw the leadership of the United States of Europe resting with France and Germany, notably omitting Britain. He continued to push this point further when he concluded his speech by noting:

> France and Germany must take the lead together. Great Britain, the British Commonwealth of Nations, mighty America, and I trust Soviet Russia—for then indeed all would be well—must be the friends and sponsors of the new Europe and must champion its right to live and shine.[14]

This conclusion is evidence that Churchill may have believed that Britain ought to be distinct from a new and united Europe. The fact that he connects France and Germany together to be the leaders of Europe, and that other, distinctive entities like the United States, the

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[10] *Ibid*, 7380.
[11] *Ibid,* 7379
[12] Klos, *Churchill's Last Stand*, 1.
[13] Churchill, *His Complete Speeches,* 7381.
[14] *Ibid,* 7382.

British Commonwealth, and Soviet Union should do their part to recognize them suggests that he saw these large federalist unions and organizations as the formula for France and Germany to create a new Europe. Thus, as Britain already was connected to British Empire and Commonwealth, there would be no need for British involvement in this experiment. Therefore, there is no evidence to suggest that Churchill's 1946 Zurich speech demonstrates his commitment to Britain in Europe. His Zurich speech, though undoubtedly pro-European unity, was more a call for Europe to adopt the general principle of internationalism and global governance.

Even when challenged in a pre-EU context on British involvement in a united Europe, Churchill was non-committal, noting to two Swiss diplomats before his Zurich speech: "I have preferred not to stress the point of British membership of the United States of Europe so as to leave the other nations the task of inviting us."[15]. By preferring to not insist or commit to British involvement in the United States of Europe, Churchill instead contributed to modern Euroscepticism in Britain by allowing a debate to initially take place. Had Churchill insisted on British integration in a European community, the British population would have had less time away from Europe after the war, and may have been less connected to the United States, and could have felt that Britain was dependent on the European relationship, and less secure outside of it. Instead, Churchill allowed Britain to remain on the sidelines of international European governance, refusing to take a leadership role in the European community, and it was this absence of integration that allowed for a sense of modern British Euroscepticism to emerge.

During the war, Britain was the obvious choice to lead a united Europe in the event of an allied victory. Exiled governments in London looked towards British leadership, and Churchill inparticular[16]. However, Churchill himself was the one to terminate the notion from becoming a possibility, as he believed that a post war Britain would not be able to initiate such leadership that rebuilding western Europe would require. The best he hoped for during this time was for a type of

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[15] Klos, *Churchill in Europe*, 5.
[16] John W. Young *Britain and European Unity 1945-1992*. (St. Martin's Press: New York) 1993. P.6.

regional council at the United Nations (UN).[17] Traces of this sentiment can be examined in his Zurich speech, where Churchill urged that "Our constant aim must be to build and fortify the strength of the U.N.O. Under and within that world concept we must re-create the European family in a regional structure called, it may be, the United States of Europe. The first step is to form a Council of Europe"[18]. This is also seen in an earlier address to the States-General of the Netherlands in May, 1946. His language here indicates that he believes the United States of Europe could exist within the UN, and suggests that Britain need not be a part of this, as he stated:

> Special associations within the circle of the United Nations, such as those of which I have been speaking, or like the great unity of the British Empire and Commonwealth, or like the association which prevails throughout the Americas, North and South…should be all capable of being fused together in such a way as to make U.N.O indivisible and invincible…I see no reason why, under the guardianship of the world organization, there should not ultimately arise the United States of Europe.[19]

Churchill's call to unite Europe through the "guardianship" of the UN as well as his noting that there existed a clear distinction of the British Empire and Commonwealth, and that it was not connected to Europe, both serve as evidence that even though he wanted Europe to be a strong and united bloc, it did not need to be of the type of structure that the EU is. Therefore, there is no evidence to suggest that he believed Britain should be involved in a type of organization like the EU. This distinction in Churchill's attitudes towards Britain's separate role in Europe allow for further debate on his beliefs about British integration in Europe to take place, and therefore can be said to contribute to modern British Euroscepticism by his lack of clear support for Britain in the EU.

Churchill Further Separates Europe Through Empire and America

While Churchill provided clear examples of his support for a United

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[17] *Ibid,* 7.
[18] Churchill, *His Complete Speeches,* 7381.
[19] Churchill, *His Complete Speeches,* 7322-7323

States of Europe, his belief in British involvement in the project can be questioned because of the foreign policy priorities he placed on the British-Empire/Commonwealth and the Anglo-American "Special Relationship"[20]. This can be seen both during the war, his time out of office, and his return to power in the 1950s; his triangular vision of British foreign interests being divided between the United States, Empire and Commonwealth and Europe still meant that Britain could not fully commit to European integration, and rather had to adopt more of a good neighbour policy with Europe[21].

For Churchill, preservation of the British Empire under his leadership was important, evidenced by his statement at Mansion House in 1943 that he had "not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire"[22]. From his earliest days as Prime Minister, Churchill associated Britain and the Commonwealth as one, and even thought of himself as the leader of the entire Commonwealth[23]. Thus for him, British post-war policy needed to include the Empire as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. Even after he left often in 1945, the Labour government's foreign policy also generally reflected this sentiment. Perhaps this is attributable to the fact that Churchill's attitude was reflective of the British population's at this time as well. In 1950 two-thirds of polled Brits believed that Britain's foreign policy for be centred on the principle of "Empire first", and that support was concentrated among upper and middle class Conservative voters[24]. This was clearly popular among his electoral base, it served Churchill well to not alienate his voters by integrating his foreign policy too close to Europe. Thus, Churchill the imperialist was happy dedicating a major portion of his foreign policy towards Commonwealth and Empire, even if it was at the expense of Britain further integrating into Europe.

As a half-American himself, Churchill's other foreign relation that he prioritized over Anglo-European relations was the "Special Relationship". During his "Sinews of Peace" speech in March, 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, Churchill demonstrated his commitment to the

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[20] John W. Young *Britain and European Unity 1945-1999* (London:2000) 1.

[21] Peter Sherman, *Britain, the European Union and National Identity*, 92.

[22] Winston S. Churchill *The End of the Beginning: War Speeches* (London 1943) p. 268.

[23] J. B. Watson *Empire to Commonwealth 1919 to 1970*, p. 79

[24] Bob Jessop, *Traditional Conservatism and British Political Culture*, 91.

Anglo-American alliance, evidenced in his speech when he noted: "The United States stands at this time at the pinnacle of world power. It is a solemn moment for the American Democracy"[25] and:

> Would a special relationship between the United States and the British Commonwealth be inconsistent with our over-riding loyalties to the World Organization? I reply that, on the contrary, it is probably the only means by which that organization will achieve its full stature and strength."[26]

Churchill's speech demonstrates his view that Britain's foreign relations future lies with the United States. By saying that the UN would only achieve its full stature and strength prove that he believed this was the most important relationship for Britain in rebuilding the western world after the end of the war. Therefore, while Europe was important and he believed in a United States of Europe, he did not necessarily believe that British interests rested there.

Churchill's prioritization of foreign relations and associations with both the United States and the British Commonwealth of Nations can therefore be seen as examples of why British integration in to Europe was not sudden or completely successful in the decade after the war. Britain saw the utility in focusing on these other relations, and saw how it could operate without European integration. Thus, Churchill's foreign policies helped to forge modern British Euroscepticism by not whole-heartedly embracing Europe in the immediate aftermath of the war, and instead having a focus on relations and associations with the United States and the British Commonwealth.

Wartime Imagery, Culture and Identity

As the British Empire began to diminish from its territorial height in 1922, in the decades following the war, the country's collective identity began to root itself in British responses to the Second World War[27]. Ideals of resilience during the Blitz, heroism of British civilians at Dunkirk, and the bravery to fight on alone against a fallen Europe could all be personified in Winston Churchill, the dynamic wartime

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[25] Churchill, *His Complete Speeches* ,7286

[26] *Ibid,* 7289

[27] Kelsey, Darren, Media*, Myth and Terrorism: A Discourse-mythological Analysis of the 'blitz Spirit' in British Newspaper Responses to the July 7th Bombings*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2-3.

leader and "Greatest Briton"[28]. In particular, 1940 has become a year of almost legendary folklore, viewed as Britain's finest hour standing alone against the face of tyranny after the Fall of France[29]. Churchill's speeches in particular serve as a source of inspirations for Eurosceptics to invoke ideas of independence from Europe. His "we shall fight on the beaches…we shall never surrender" speech demonstrates a political narrative of courage and self-reliance that did not apply to the fallen continent of Europe[30]. Therefore, as Churchill carefully crafted his own brand and image, as a type of personification of British identity, his romantic language of independence and distinction from mainland Europe serve as a bedrock for modern British identity. As this independence notion could not apply to mainland Europe, a distinct difference of identity began to emerge. Churchill's rhetoric of the British island standing alone separated Britain from Europe in the minds and hearts of the British and therefore contributed to modern British Euroscepticism as well.

While national identity is linked to the past, it also shapes the future. As one academic has noted, Britain has inherently been a conservative society, unwilling to adopt new methods of governance or risk effecting its independent and sovereign parliamentary-democracy[31]. Churchill helped to instill notions of British independence from the rest of Europe, and these perceptions have been reflected in the public's unwillingness to move towards European integration, and demonstrate Churchill's role in laying the foundation for modern British Euroscepticism. These notions became even more apparent during the 2016 UK Referendum.

Churchill and the 2016 Referendum

The use of equating Churchill to British identity has been used in contemporary times to promote a certain Leave/Remain stance towards British membership in the EU. As political discourse continued after the 2016 Referendum, Brexiteers have attempted to liken the situation to Churchill's handling of 1940. Conservative Minister Penny

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[28] Nicholls, E. Henry. "Endeavour's Greatest Briton." *Endeavour* 26, no. 4 (2002): 126.

[29] David Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War: Churchill, Roosevelt, and the International History of the 1940s*. (Oxford; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2007), pg. 75.

[30] Faza, Andres L. British Cultural Narrative in Winston Churchill's Political Communication, 2014.7-10.

[31] Peter Sherman *Britain, the European Union and National Identity*, 92.

Mordaunt wrote in *The Daily Telegraph*:

> In our long island history, there have been many times when Britain has not been well served by alignment with Europe…When Britain stood alone in 1940 after the defeat at Dunkirk, we were cut off and ridiculed. True leadership sometimes does feel isolating. Yet we have never suffered for it. We are resourceful; we are well connected; our brand is strong in the world[32].

In this piece, Mordaunt is clearly drawing several parallels to Churchill's speeches of standing alone, surviving without Europe and trying to utilize the instilled identity of the British independence and self-reliance that Churchill helped to build. In this sense, despite Churchill's own preference for a United States of Europe, with some form of British involvement, Brexiteers have been utilizing a Churchill/1940 narrative to push their own anti-Europe agenda.

During the Referendum campaign, the Vote Leave camp was highly successful at inserting a Churchill narrative in to their campaign messaging. Their entire campaign was surrounded around the idea of British exceptionalism, and therefore could stand to be independent from Europe. By invoking Churchill in to this messaging, the myths constructed around the history of the Second World War, and the British Empire were also utilized, which further contributes to the ideas of British exceptionalism [33]. Recognizing the successful marketing strategy being used by their opponents, the Britain Stronger in Europe camp also employed Churchill's popularity to push their agenda. Prime Minister Cameron was on record stating that:

> At my office, I sit two yards away from the Cabinet Room where Winston Churchill decided in May 1940 to fight on against Hitler—the best and greatest decision anyone has made in our country. He didn't want to be alone, he wanted to be fighting with the French and with the Poles and with the others, but he didn't quit. He didn't quit on Europe, he didn't quit on European democracy, he didn't quit on European freedom[34].

This was an obvious attempt to try and utilize Churchill in to the debate to strengthen a pro-Europe position, however there were serious

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[32] "The Spirit of Dunkirk will see us Thrive Outside the EU," *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 February 2016.

[33] Alex Von Tunzelmann, "The Imperial Myths Driving Brexit", *The Atlantic*, (August, 2019).

[34] Edoardo Campanella, Marta Dassu, *Anglo Nostalgia: The Politics of Emotion in a Fractured West*, 74.

flaws in the assessment. Rather than use points like Churchill's belief in a United States of Europe, Cameron's quotation instead focuses on reinforcing the myths surrounding Churchill pursuing independence from Europe—a point which strengthens the Leave campaigns messaging. Regardless, the Vote Leave campaign successfully utilized Churchill's speeches and persona to appeal to British identity in order to advance their political agenda. In this sense, Churchill himself helped to contribute to modern British Euroscepticism through these factors.

Conclusion

Over the past several decades, Churchill has become a legendary figure in the British imagination and identity. Therefore, it is no surprise that when Britain was about to decide their fate in the future of the European Union, leaders of both campaigns tried to argue that Churchill would have been on their side. The history of Britain in the EU is complicated and controversial; the history of Anglo-European relations is even more so. While it may be politically expedient to apply Churchill's legacy to lend support to a certain pro or anti Britain-in-Europe stance, the history of Churchill's attitude and policies make it impossible to cast him in either camp. However, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate, Churchill himself was a globalist, and he was a believer in a united Europe. Nevertheless, it was also Churchill and his speeches, legacy, and policies that laid the foundation of modern Euroscepticism in Britain. At any conclusion, it is worthy to note that the fact that politicians and historians continue to debate which position Churchill would have taken in a contemporary debate on British membership in the EU is a testament towards his lasting legacy as an influential Prime Minister and craftsman of British identity.

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