

**REITH LECTURES 1949:  
Britain in Europe: Reflections on the Development of a European Society**

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**Lecture 1: The Problem of Patriotism**

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I am starting these lectures with an assumption. It is that, when we say that we have decided to join a European Union, we mean what we say. This may be too large an assumption. For one thing, there is as yet no real European Union to join and it might be more accurate to say that we have decided to co-operate with others in trying to form such a union. There are certainly some people in this country who feel a sense of urgency about this decision. But we can hardly claim that this is at all general here, as it is in the rest of Western Europe. This is not surprising. In spite of our experiences during two wars, we have not suffered as much as many other nations in Europe.

**A Longing for Union**

On the Continent one feels that there is a longing among millions of people for a union of the kind we are trying to make, and there would be an intense sensation of relief if the difficulties were overcome and it was established. In this country we can find a good deal of interest in the question, sometimes an eager interest, but it is not generally felt to be a very pressing matter. Still, we may claim that we have made the decision, and, further, that we have contributed a good deal to the study of the economic aspects of the problem and are beginning to be interested in the political questions involved. Here, at any rate, a start has been made. But so far very little consideration has been given to what might be called the cultural aspect.

The word 'culture' is one of the least satisfactory words in the English language. It has become one of those words which are used when we want to avoid thinking clearly, as Mr. T. S. Eliot has shown in his book, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. I shall, therefore, endeavour as far as possible to get on without it. I mean by the phrase, 'the cultural aspect' which I have just used, such questions as the effect that this decision to join a European Union is likely to have, or ought to have, on our education and on our literature, in fact on our traditional ways of thought.

The first point to consider, when one studies the prospects of a union, is what is going to be united, and here we face at once a fundamental difficulty. Europe is divided into a number of states, often spoken of as nation states. It might be expected that the appearance of this demand for a union would coincide with a weakening of the sentiment of loyalty towards the individual states, the sentiment that is nowadays often called nationalism. But there is no evidence that there is any such tendency in Europe. Some would say, it is true, that the sentiment of loyalty to a class is taking the place of that of loyalty to the nation. It is difficult to see that there were any more signs of this between 1939 and 1945 than there were between 1914 and 1918. Two pieces of evidence, of very different kinds, but both in their way cogent, may be adduced to show the strength of national feeling today. If we believe that there is any

truth in the words of Shelley that poets are ‘ the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present’, we must recognise how significant it is that three of the greatest of recent poets, none of them conventional writers following an old tradition, were fervent nationalists-W. B. Yeats of Ireland, Stefan George of Germany and Alexander Blok of Russia. Or, to look at some evidence that is more prosaic, it was very significant that, when the terms of the Ruhr Statute were announced, the communists found it politic to say in Germany that it was a brutal infringement of German sovereign rights, but in France that it did not go nearly far enough in controlling the German economy. In both countries a flattering tribute was paid to nationalism by those whose political philosophy is supposed to disregard it. The attempt is sometimes made to escape from this difficulty by making a distinction between nationalism and patriotism. Patriotism is regarded as something unselfish and admirable, the disinterested love of one’s country: nationalism is thought of as something selfish and to be condemned, an aggressive attitude towards other countries. Certainly there is a difference to be expressed, and the tendency to make this distinction, which is giving the word ‘nationalist’ a rather derogatory flavour, at least when applied to a person from another country, has some significance. Few people, at least, would repeat today without some discomfort the well-known words of the American sea-captain of over a hundred years ago, ‘Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right; but our country right or wrong’.

But to make this distinction does not really enable us to escape from the difficulty that national sentiment is a sentiment of loyalty and its continuance within the boundaries of a union must tend to cause a conflict of loyalties. In fact, if we spoke throughout of patriotism instead of nationalism, we should still be faced with the same problem. It might be more honest to use the word ‘patriotism’ and then to consider whether the sentiment of patriotism, which nearly all of us hold to be a noble sentiment, is really compatible with this decision to join, or, as I suggested we might say, to work towards a European Union. If we are members of such a union we are certain occasionally to have to accept decisions which seem to run counter to our own national interests. What is much more serious is that we shall occasionally have to accept decisions which seem to us to be ‘un-British’. By this I do not mean that they will be morally wrong. It is very significant, of course, that that is the first impression the word makes on most of us. I mean that the decisions will not fit in with our own traditional practices and ways of thought.

It may be useful, perhaps, to look for a moment at what has happened, or is happening, in two other parts of the world: at eastern Europe, where a much more determined effort is being made to bring a number of countries into some kind of union, and at the United States of America, where this process was long ago successfully accomplished. In Eastern Europe we are witnessing a resolute attempt to destroy nationalist sentiment in certain states and to substitute for it loyalty to the Soviet Union as the state which leads the communist revolution. We can easily recognise that this is being done by force, and force is a perfectly conventional way of attaining unity, although the actual methods employed, which are those of the most up-to-date revolutionary technique, may be new to us. No one suggests that the union we are seeking to form should be secured by the use of force. As we have just fought and won the war to prevent that, this is not surprising. We are adopting the other way, which is for a number of states to unite by consent and agreement between

themselves, which was the way in which the United States of America came into existence. When this happens the sentiment of loyalty to the individual states is certain to be something to be reckoned with. The devotion felt by an American for his state was very strong for generations after the United States was created as a federal republic, often stronger than his feeling of loyalty to the union itself.

### **General Lee's Poignant Letter**

Robert E. Lee, the great General of the Southern States in the American Civil War, described in a letter to his sister who supported the opposing cause, one of the most poignant letters in history, how he wrestled with himself to determine whether his loyalty lay first to the Federal Government of the Union or to his own State of Virginia. 'The whole South', he wrote, 'is in a state of revolution, into which Virginia, after a long struggle, has been drawn; and though I recognise no necessity for this state of things, and would have forborne and pleaded to the end for redress of grievances, real or supposed, yet in my own person I had to meet the question whether I should take any part against my native State. With all my devotion to the Union and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home. I have therefore resigned my commission in the Army, and save in defence of my native State, with the sincere hope that my poor services may never be needed, I hope I may never be called on to draw my sword. I know you will blame me; but you must think as kindly of me as you can, and believe that I have endeavoured to do what I thought right'. This letter may remind us of the tensions which we can hardly hope to avoid if we succeed in creating a European Union. The United States of America is a great example to us now, but we must remember that it was secured at a price which is greater than we can possibly afford to pay.

Before we consider this problem further, it would be as well to draw a distinction between nationalism or patriotism and what Mr. T. S. Eliot, in the book to which I have already referred, calls regionalism. Regionalism we might define as the feeling of an intense affection for a particular district within a state, an affection based on a love for its peculiar traditions and customs and sometimes even its language. It is obviously in some ways akin to the sentiment of devotion we feel for our country, as we show when we use the term 'local patriotism'. But the difference between nationalism and regionalism may be seen in this that between the affection for a region and the love of country there is no strong clash of loyalties. When there is, regionalism becomes nationalism and it is true that it is sometimes difficult to tell which sentiment the inhabitant of a district feels. We can see an example of what we might call pure regionalism in Jane Austen's remark that she did not feel she could ever really live happily anywhere but in Hampshire. Everyone knows that that did not prevent her from being a most ardent English patriot.

### **Problems of Regionalism**

We do not need to go far from home to see that regionalism is very rarely as simple a matter as that. We have only to consider the history of the relations between the English and the Scots. King James VI of Scotland, very soon after he became also King James I of England, exclaimed, What God hath conjoined then, let no man separate. I am the husband, and the whole isle is my lawful wife.... I hope therefore

that no man will be so unreasonable as to think that I, that am a Christian king under the Gospel, should be a polygamist and husband to two wives'. But it did not take him long to learn that a polygamist he would have to remain, and it was not until a hundred years later that the Kings and Queens of England and Scotland were rescued from this unfortunate situation. Even now it would be a very bold Englishman who would suggest that the devotion of a Scot to Scotland was an example of regionalism. In Germany, where I have been working for the last two and a half years, I have constantly noticed the extreme care exercised by Englishmen, when speaking to Germans, to refer to their country as Britain, because they knew that there might be a Scotsman present who would have something to say if they used the word England. Germans have sometimes asked me, not unnaturally, why we speak of Anglo-German relations in the British zone of Germany: This continual exercise of tact which an Englishman has to practise, and which, I may say, has caused me a considerable amount of trouble in composing these lectures, is not without some significance. It may, perhaps, in the end point to a solution to the problem.

Conflicts of loyalties are inevitable in any society and they need not take the form of those about which I have been speaking. The conflict through the centuries in every Christian country between church and state is an example. But these are conflicts between different kinds of loyalties, while the conflict in a federal union is between two loyalties of the same kind. And what makes the difficulties so serious is that we are attempting to found this European Union while the old loyalties remain so strong.

National differences arise from age-long differences of historical development between nations, and these often seem to be visible in the very nature of their contrasting countrysides. Perhaps I may quote a personal experience. During the last year, until a few weeks ago, I spent much of my time in a village on the edge of the Teutoburgerwald in Germany. It had all the well-known characteristics of the great German forests. The trees shut out the light of the brightest day. Immediately you enter the wood it closes in on you so that you are at once far separated from the cultivated world of men. The paths seem to lead onwards to nowhere. Sometimes I used to feel, as I walked there, that the forest made thought impossible. In the evenings there were times when I could almost hear the music of that superb moment in the Valkyrie, when Sieglinde throws open the door of her forest dwelling and displays the glories of the spring night. I could well appreciate here the words of Byron:

*There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,  
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,  
There is society, where none intrudes,  
By the deep Sea, and music III its roar:  
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,  
From these our interviews, in which I steal  
From all I may be, or have been before,  
To mingle with the Universe, and feel  
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal.*

One evening I walked in the wood and then' took the night train to Paris. I had the next day to myself, and I spent it in the Forest of Fontainebleau. What an unbelievable contrast! Here all was light and free and, above all, defined. The path went straight

before you, obviously meaning to get somewhere. Every quarter of a mile or so, it is true, there was a meeting of several paths and then you had to be careful. A wrong turn and you might go very far out of your way. If the Teutoburgerwald spoke of German Romanticism, the Forêt de Fontainebleau seemed to speak of Descartes and Boileau and all the beautiful clarity of French prose. Here I did not feel 'what I can ne'er express'. To feel something was to be able to express it. In this contrast we may find a genuine difference between the two nations, something which affects their literature and, by influencing their whole way of thinking, their approach to political, social and economic questions.

It is no use ignoring these differences. We cannot hope to tame the German forest or to introduce a romantic disorder into the woods of France. The solution of this problem of national differences can only be found if we recognise that they exist. We then have to decide whether they are such as to make a European Union impossible, and, if not, whether they can be made to serve the larger union and not to destroy it.

We approach here a fundamental characteristic of western European civilisation. In a final analysis this is based on the ideal of diversity as something intrinsically valuable. Our civilisation is made up of a harmony of separate notes, with the inevitable danger that these notes may sometimes be formed into a discord. From the earliest days it has grown out of the reconciliation of conflicts. Its periods of greatest stability, as under the Roman Empire, have always been made possible by a willingness to allow local peculiarities to continue freely. Gibbon, who saw in the great days of the Roman Empire a golden-age of peace and unity, knew that this tranquillity was in large measure secured because, as he put it, 'the deities of a thousand groves and a thousand streams possessed in peace their local and respective influence; nor could the Roman who deprecated the wrath of the Tiber deride the Egyptian who presented his offering to the beneficent genius of the Nile'. The same acceptance of diversity may be seen in a very different kind of empire to the Roman, the British Commonwealth of Nations. The historian of the future is sure to point to this as a perfect example of a refusal to confound union with uniformity. In fact it has been a fundamental characteristic of the Commonwealth that it has refused to be frightened of nationalism. It has always been paradoxical and it is now preparing to face the supreme paradox that one of its units, Great Britain, is joining another union, that of Europe, without that causing embarrassment to those of its units that are in other continents altogether.

### **Two Traditions**

This essential diversity in our civilisation is not, of course, only one of national differences. They appeared late in its development. Our civilisation has been mainly formed by the interaction of two traditions, which it has been very difficult, though not impossible, to reconcile, the Hebrew and the Greek. These two traditions themselves may be said to have arisen out of a sense of the value of diversity, as they were derived from two peoples who felt themselves to be sharply differentiated from their neighbours.

It is something gained if we can recognise that the problem is not an unnatural nor an unusual one. We might go so far as to say that our civilisation would be dead if no such problem existed. But the danger created by the problem has still to be faced and

here we may find guidance in some passages from a work by Dante, called *About Monarchy*. He was not thinking about kingship as opposed to republicanism, but about the rule of one man over a unified state as opposed to the rule of several kings over different, wholly independent states. He was speaking of the unity of Christendom and this, of course, possessed in his day an underlying common philosophy which was lost at the Reformation. Dante's dream of a United Christendom did not come true and he was, in a sense, as it has been said, writing the epitaph of a dying ideal, the ideal of the Middle Ages. But the principles that he expressed are the only possible ones on which a Union of Europe can be based. He accepted the differences between the various parts of Christendom as in themselves natural. In what may seem to us a rather naive illustration he points out that people living in the Arctic Circle will not only need other clothes from those living in the tropics, but other laws and customs. And the differences are also desirable. Neither one individual nor one nation can hope to fulfil in itself all the immense potentialities of man. To think this was, of course, in our own days the final heresy of the Nazis. Different nations, each contributing from their own potentialities, are then necessary and desirable, but all, Dante said, must subordinate themselves to an ultimate loyalty to the Emperor, which ultimate loyalty was made necessary by the overriding necessity of peace.

We must recognise one obvious difference between Dante's conception and our own. Dante thought of the rule of an Emperor, while we think in terms of some kind of representative assembly. Our idea is one more difficult to realise. But the problem here is exactly the same as the one that is found in a democratic state. No one could suggest that democracy is an easy form of government: it is much the most difficult. The essential argument in favour of democracy, as a form of government, is that it is one that allows the different potentialities in all kinds of men and women to make their contribution towards the common good. It demands a very difficult kind of humility, the readiness to accept the fact that one may be wrong, while still trying to persuade other people that one is right. This is exactly what will be demanded of the various states of the union. It is the longing for peace, of which Dante wrote, that causes the urgent desire for union in Western Europe. Our first need is to establish the principle that war between the members of the union is unthinkable, and by that I mean, not what we usually mean by the word, something which we know to be possible but find so dreadful that we refuse to think about it, but something which does not enter our minds. Such is the relationship between this country and the United States, for instance, and there are other examples just as good to be found in Europe. The crux here is the relationship between Germany and the countries that have already joined the union.

It is not my intention to deal with the political issues involved in European Union, though we must never forget them, because they bring us up against realities. The problem of the rivalry between France and Germany is an exceedingly difficult one, which it will need much patience to solve, as all the best minds in those two countries know well. But I might take as an example of the rather facile way in which some people think of the influence this country may have in Europe the suggestion that is often made that we should act as a bridge between the two nations. It is argued that we are particularly well fitted to do so, because our national traditions, and even our language, derive from both countries. It is certainly true that our way of thinking seems sometimes to be like the one and sometimes more like the other. There have

been periods in our literature when we have aimed principally at the clarity and precision of which France has always been for us the great example. There have been times, on the other hand, when, to recall the quotation I used from Byron, we seem to have aimed not so much at expressing what we feel as at expressing the sensation of feeling, and then our literature has been more akin to much German writing. But when we come to try to discover to what use we can put this dual 'tradition it is not very easy to see that it counts for much.

My own experience in Germany has led me to believe that we are much more different from both French and Germans than we sometimes think and that it is a good deal easier for them to understand each other than for us to understand them or them us. In such matters as parliamentary procedure or the relations between the central government and local authorities, or the technique of education, all those things which are the 'brass tacks' of culture, it is quite absurd to suggest that we stand midway between the Germans and the French. To take an example, H. A. L. Fisher, certainly one of the greatest Ministers of Education we have ever had, once told me that, during the whole time that he held that office, he was very careful never to praise a book which might conceivably be used as a textbook, in case it might be thought that he was recommending its use in the schools. That was an expression of a tradition in our national system of education of which we may well feel proud, but it would be equally incomprehensible to the French and to the Germans.

Although we certainly have much to offer Europe, we must not think that traditions which we find satisfactory in this country are necessarily going to be relevant in others. We have a great deal to learn about Europe. In fact we have little idea yet of the revolution in our ways of thinking that our decision to join Europe will involve. To prepare for this we may learn much from our past history, at times as an example to be followed, at times as a warning. But we must remember that our contribution towards creating a common tradition in the union cannot be made from our past, but only from our present, and anything we can offer will depend, first of all, on the vigour, the skill and the confidence we can muster to solve our own problems.