

Britain's claims to leadership in and of Europe (1945 to the present day). An analysis of British political discourse towards Europe.

The study of official documents from the British archives, in particular those of the Foreign Office and the Prime Minister's Office, of contemporary speeches by British leaders and of their memoirs, clearly shows how, over the past half-century, these leaders (diplomats and politicians of all political hues) have laid claim to be the leaders in and of Europe. Although many people in Britain (most obviously the Eurosceptics), and even more from continental Europe, have argued that Britain has been very much on the periphery of European affairs an analysis of the discourse of Britain's political elites, up to and including those of the present day, indicates that they have consistently laid claim to just such a leading position. Two examples can be given here: George Brown, the Foreign Secretary in the 1960s, wrote that "We have a role: our role is to lead Europe... It may be that Britain is destined to become *the* leader of Europe... we must... offer leadership wherever we can. I don't see where else leadership can come from other than from this country". Twenty-five years later, Tony Blair's rhetorical style was hardly different. Shortly before the 1997 election, he said that "Century upon century, it has been the destiny of Britain to lead other nations... That should not be a destiny that is part of our history. It should be part of our future... We are a leader of nations, or we are nothing".

This campaign for the leadership of Europe relates in part to what one British diplomat referred to in 1963 as a simple "battle for the leadership of Europe". This has included an ideological battle in which British decision-makers have attempted to lead Europe in what they see as the right direction, towards what Harold Wilson called the "right sort of Europe". Tony Blair, for example, argued in 1999 that Britain should be a "leader in ideas" in Europe. Most frequently this 'battle' has been conducted against the French who, both on ideological grounds and in terms of power politics, have often been identified as the chief adversary.

If, however, the discourse of many British politicians and diplomats has often claimed the leadership of Europe this needs to be contrasted with the absence of any true project for Europe. In this British claims have been more negative than positive, based on the denigration of other European 'leaders', on complaints that they are misleading Europe, taking it in the wrong direction, and of having failed to provide effective leadership at a personal level.

In this the British ideas of European leadership can be related to their vision of Europe as a field of battle, with winners and losers, as a continuation of past conflicts (as shown by the constant references to Waterloo, Trafalgar, Fashoda, Joan of Arc...), rather than in terms of collaboration and cooperation.

Richard Davis, Université de Lille.