



# Who do you think you are kidding, Mr Major?

**A**LBION vs Europe: a sad story. Britain has come a long way (down) since she sank the Armada, laid low Napoleon and wiped Goering's Luftwaffe out of the English skies. This is how Churchill put it in 1938 in a somewhat idealised rendering of Britain's classic role as the distant power-broker: "For 400 years the foreign policy of England has been to oppose the strongest, most aggressive, most dominating power on the Continent.... We joined the less strong powers, and thus defeated the Continental military tyrant whoever he was...."

Churchill might have added: "...and then we left again." It was always in and out — beat the villain *du jour* and back to whatever England did best in those days: grab yet another piece of overseas empire, produce world-class bards, start the industrial revolution.

Except that the game has changed. Today's "tyrant" is the EU, and the battlefield is the pastures and stables of England, with British cows as hapless pawns. But the EU is different from Philip II or Napoleon I. Britain is *part* of the community, and the EU is a club from which Britain cannot resign. You can switch from Boodle's to White's, but where can Britain sign up outside the EU? Just scan the trading patterns, and then the Commonwealth and North America don't look so enticing. Why is Britain such a favoured investment location? Because it is a good place for Honda and Intel to get into the sheltered EU market.

So why would Mr Major "go to war at last" against Europe, as the *Daily Mail* puts it with its usual understatement? War over tallow, gelatine and semen? In the old days, Britain picked worthier targets — like the Armada or the Luftwaffe.

OK, we know why he has gone to war. If you head a government that has a majority of one, if the polls predict a bloodbath at the election, any straw looks like an English oak. Attacking the wogs is still a good

## Beef is not worth a war, says the distinguished German commentator *Josef Joffe*

way to rally the troops and corner Labour. After all, it worked for Mr Major in the case of the Iraqi wogs, and for Mrs Thatcher in the case of the Argentinian wogs. But the issue goes deeper. When it comes to Britain and Europe we are dealing with psychology as much as psephology.

Professor Freud would have a field day. Let him have a look at the British side first. "Ach ja," he would muse, "we have here a clear case of an inferiority complex *anglo-saxoniensis*, rendered worse by the distinct reality of British impotence in EU circles." Stroking his beard, he would continue: "In such cases, patients will grab any issue, no matter how insignificant, and elevate it into a symbol of the whole, of a galactic struggle to the finish." The professor would conclude: "Natürlich, this goes hand in hand with delusional perceptions, even paranoia."

And so the battle over tallow and semen becomes one with the *mélée* in the trenches of Flanders. As a letter-writer to *The Daily Telegraph* put it last week: we should "realise that although the military conflict with Germany ended 51 years ago, that country is now waging a stealthy war of diplomacy to dominate Europe monetarily and economically".

Really? Herr Kohl with his 11 per cent unemployment level and a deficit that has rendered Germany unfit for monetary union? And it so happens that the Americans have had a ban on British beef since 1989 — long before

your Health Secretary admitted concern about the transmission of BSE to humans. Ergo, either the Yanks are even keener than we Krauts to destroy British economic independence, or there is a real problem that transcends both profits and politics.

"Although the BSE epidemic is declining," notes William Rees-Mogg in *The Times*, "there are still more than 100 cases each week." Now, we still don't know whether BSE in cows leads to Creutzfeldt-Jakob in humans. But in a world where pork, turkey and lamb are easy substitutes for beef, it is quite rational to

forgo the latter and to splurge on the former. It would also make sense for governments to ban British beef and its by-products until we know more. To be anti-beef is not to be anti-British.

But Uncle Sigmund would also have something to say about his German

cousins, and that something would probably be: "We have here an evident disposition for successive collective hysteria." In the autumn of Chernobyl the ingestion of mushrooms and lettuce became an ideological litmus test that would turn old friends into mortal enemies. Likewise *das Waldsterben* ("dying of the forests"), nuclear power plants, whales, ozone holes, Brent Spar and now British beef. Only yesterday pork was *verboten*; today pigs are our best friends.

How would Professor Freud explain it? He might point to German obsessions with "purity" and

"cleanliness", and if he were in a really nasty mood, he would link fear of bodily poisoning to its racial predecessor during the Nazi period. But let's not over-diagnose. Modern Western society, no longer threatened by real existential foes like war and (most) diseases, has generally become obsessed with health and longevity. Look into any tabloid or magazine between Berkeley and Berlin, and you will find a myriad blaring messages that order you to eat this and to eschew that.

In the old days we had to eat what we could get, and death was part of the deal. Today we can pick and choose and hope for eternal life. That is a feature of contemporary Western culture neither the *Daily Express* nor the *Daily Mail* can change — not even Mr Major. Nor is the EU Commission really in charge. Even if the beef ban were lifted, would European consumers wolf down Aberdeen Angus again? They don't even trust their own cows any more.

Far be it for a Continental, let alone a German, to tell Mr Major how to win the next election. But here is some advice. First, get rid of BSE, then we can get rid of the ban. Second, don't go to war against Europe. One against 14? Not even Wellington could have pulled it off (remember Blücher's army that arrived in the nick of time?). Herr Kohl is no twin of Wilhelm II, let alone Adolf I. He is a democratic politician with an acute eye for his voters' moods. Nor are today's Germans, disillusioned and domesticated, plotting for supremacy in Europe. At worst, they believe in "*Deutschmark über alles*", but they are just as opposed to a common currency (about two-thirds) as Britons are.

Indeed, we have so many common interests — from free trade to Atlantic, rather than purely European, security. Only the psychology of the relationship is horrid. Why? Let's ask Professor Freud? "Ach, that will require many more sessions."

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