The metaphors multiply, ransacking a whole lexicon of modes of transport. The British express train with tabloid editors heaving coals into the fire chamber, rough-rides across the sleepers – clickety-click – towards a violent crash. The car with the Conservative Party in the back seat (who knows who is in the front?) speeds increasingly out of control towards a fork in the road. The Not-so-Easyjet takes off, with no one at ground control able to tell the pilot where or when he is to land. Or, perhaps instead of all this “enemies of the people” stuff, the ship of state, liberated at last, weighs anchor and sets course, the wind of freedom in its sails, for the open seas and distant horizons. Take your pick.

Well, I took mine years ago; an “enemy of the people”, guilty as charged. I guess this affects whatever I say about John Major and the impact of the European debate on his seven-year premiership when the roots of today’s problems were dug in and watered.
There is another confession that I must make. John is a friend, the ablest member of my political generation in the Conservative Party, the cleverest of the three party leaders for whom I worked, and one of the most decent people to lead both country and party for years. His premiership was both undermined and attenuated by arguments about Europe, the source and the consequences of which I will try to describe in this lecture without plodding from one European Council meeting to another.

It is stretching vocabulary to describe this story as a tragedy. There is nothing resembling the Oresteia about it; blood only occasionally stains the carpet. Nor is there the sort of history-shaking drama of Suez, when a clever, vain and ill Prime Minister, re-ran history and discovered in the course of doing so the new reality of Britain’s role in the world, a middle ranking power whose future as a great nation was threatened by its delusion that it was still a great power. It is this same abuse of history which was part of the problem facing John, and it has morphed into today’s national psycho-drama.

Begin with the history. Our deliberate choice, despite the hope of our best friend across the Atlantic, not to take part in the creation of what was to become the European Union has dogged our subsequent membership. Some years after we declined to be one of the Founding Fathers, having failed to find
an alternative to Common Market membership in EFTA, we concluded that we should no longer exclude ourselves from a historic European co-operation in which some notional de jure sovereignty was traded in for greater de facto sovereignty. More of this later.

For France and Germany, at the heart of this creation, the case for a historic reconciliation was a “no-brainer”. France achieved what the blood-shed and humiliation of two wars had not accomplished: a peaceful settlement with its biggest neighbour and competitor – Sparta to its Athens. No longer would armies fight across Alsace-Lorraine; instead diplomats would argue deep into the night in debating chambers in Strasbourg, where French negotiators were able to secure arrangements which heavily subsidised rural France and tied German industry into Europe’s common market.

For Germany, the Messina agreement offered an exit from half-a-century of calamitous history in which, to borrow from Auden –

“In the nightmare of the dark

All the dogs of Europe bark.”
Germany had barked loudest and suffered most, reduced by wicked excess to moral, economic and political rubble. The creation of a structure to unite Western Europe offered Germany the chance to bury the past in an institutionalised reaffirmation of the values and civilisation to which Germany had contributed so much in the past. Into the bargain, this would also make the rest of Europe feel safe with Germany as friend not enemy.

What of Britain – no disrespect to other Western European countries, but the third of Europe’s most significant makers and shapers? Where was the narrative that would underpin our relationship with Europe? When we tried to create one we often stumbled over the task, with our characteristic insistence on the practical and the pragmatic above starry-eyed visions. For some who had fought in one or other of the world wars the argument for membership was overwhelmingly obvious, and moral too. Macmillan bore the scar of the five wounds he had suffered fighting in the First World War. He had lost many of the friends with whom at Oxford he had studied the classic texts of western culture. Ted Heath and Roy Jenkins in their turn had grown up through the years of rampant fascism and had fought in another European civil war. Yet all of them, try as they might (and Jenkins especially did it explicitly and well) found it hard to shake off the national self-delusion of Britain’s post-war place in the world.
Churchill articulated better than any others the case for a different way of governing what he called “the noble continent”. He also accepted, in his own words, the need “to part with a degree of national sovereignty ….. for the sake of a larger synthesis …. national sovereignty is not inviolable, and ….. may be resolutely diminished for the sake of all men in all the lands finding their way home together”.

After Maastricht and the ejection from the ERM, John Major made the same argument very clearly in the House of Commons reflecting the needs at the end of the century:

“……. it is in the interests of Britain – our interests, our objectives and our prosperity – for us to be part of the development of our continent. By part I do not mean a walk-on part; I do not mean simply being a member. I mean playing a leading role in the European Community. I mean helping to determine the direction of policy, building the policies that we want and fighting those that we do not want. We will need to compromise on some matters, but so will every national state in Europe unless we return to tribalism right across the European Community”. In his view, Britain clearly still had a place in helping Europeans to “(find) their way home together”.

5
So, he argued elsewhere, to surprising consternation on the Conservative Right, that we should be “at the heart of Europe”.

John and I were part of a generation, the first of our century, that had not fought in a war or been prepared to do so through military conscription. We were well aware of Britain’s heroic exploits in the Second World War – of standing alone, of bearing great costs in blood and treasure in the name of freedom, our own and that of other nations. But we were also aware, to put this point a little too directly for some, that that was then. We have become, as the years have slipped past, a diminished country politically and economically, not unimportant, not second-rate, but no longer the power we once were. There was no Empire, and we were no longer one of the world’s major work-shops. We had been diminished partly because of the rise of others, first in Europe, then in Asia, partly by our own mistakes, and partly by the ineluctable and welcome progress of others. We could not continue to strut our stuff as the then independent point of balance between Europe, the United States and the Commonwealth; to use Churchill’s words, the sole member of these three rings: as it were the Lord of the Rings. We could not simply go our own way, respected by others, bank-rolled by others because of what we had once been. We had to earn respect for what we were and could become, a middle-sized
pretty fair and tolerant country that could influence and even lead its neighbours but could not go it alone without costs to our own well-being, influence and prestige. You could sing Jerusalem until you were blue in the face (with its first verse of questions to all of which incidentally the answer is a negative); but however loudly we sang it, it was not enough to bring home the bacon and to overcome the challenges of the late 20th century and beyond.

John was not a great linguist, no more am I. But he knew enough about our continent and its history to recognise three things. First, culturally, politically, economically, genetically, our history was tangled with that of our neighbours. How could it not be, given that all that separated us from our continent was a few miles of cold sea water. Our language and our law made by precedent could admittedly claim a relatively self-contained history at least for almost a millennium. Yet some of our greatest monarchs had come from foreign stock. We were, to borrow from Defoe, a “mongrel breed”. We had been launched on our greatest century of liberty and prosperity by a Dutchman. Moreover, invariably when we had isolated ourselves from our neighbours, there was trouble. We provided an important balance in an occasionally turbulent continent. Naturally, therefore, Major sought to develop as strong a relationship as possible with the leaders of France and Germany.
So far as “l’hexagon” was concerned, there can have been few personalities more different from Major than former President Mitterand, the emperor of ambivalence, who slipped out of one skin into another with neither embarrassment nor much by way of integrity. No “tu-toi” there, he lapped up flattery, requiring as Helmet Kohl said, that when meeting him you should first bow three times to the tricolour.

Switching countries, I can personally attest to the warmth of Major’s relationship, actually friendship, with Helmut Kohl. The great German, an initially underestimated leader, warmed to Major and took him seriously as a like-minded conservative with a social conscience. A good relationship is not always better than a transactional approach to international affairs. People can love you to bits in a meeting and shaft you when it later suits them. We almost certainly exaggerated how much Kohl would help us to manage our fraught position in the ERM in 1992. If Kohl had to choose between a row with the Bundesbank or a row with Britain, you did not need to be a genius to know whom he would support. Yet, overall, relationships do matter and they can assist a lot at the margins, helping you in European negotiations for example to get your own way in the darkest passages of the night. Relationships attract goodwill; they attract the benefit of the doubt rather than the reverse.
Major was brilliant at this as he showed at Maastricht, partly because he recognised that like him others had to deal with political pressures at home, partly because he was a naturally gifted negotiator always knowing his brief better than anyone else knew their own, partly because of his transparent decency. I doubt whether many who dealt with him disliked him, though they probably sympathised with him in part because of his predecessor and the party he had to attempt to lead.

This was and remains today a central part of the European story. Jock Bruce-Gardyne, a clever, right wing Eurosceptic MP before his time, is said to have remarked about Margaret Thatcher that she had saved Britain but would destroy the Conservative Party. Both deserved their fate, he concluded. These propositions are exaggerated, but there is some truth in both of them. Exactly how much truth there is in the second remains to be seen. I fear that some Conservatives seem intent on making it come true.

John Major’s European inheritance from Thatcher was mixed. On the whole, the substantive part of it was admirable. She had swung her hand-bag to good effect to get a fairer budgetary settlement for Britain than the one that followed inevitably from the arrangements made before we became members.
She had driven through the creation of the Single Market, sustained by the Single European Act and the extension of qualified majority voting. She had been insistent on standing up for economic and political freedom in the centre and east of the continent, among the countries of the Warsaw Pact. All this was admirable. Yet I doubt that it was necessary to offend all her interlocutors quite so much in order to accomplish these considerable successes.

Margaret Thatcher in government was of course always more sensible and cautious than she was after her defenestration, arguably an act which would have been better left to the country than carried out by her party. (It did not however feel like that at the time). In retirement her good sense was overwhelmed by often ill-informed prejudice. I was once privileged to hear, admittedly late at night when the whole company was enjoying “the lovely stuff” (as Anne Fleming called alcohol), Margaret’s pocket history of Europe. France and Germany did not come well out of her account; it would have seemed like a caricature even in the intemperate hands of a tabloid editorial writer. We know of course that she attempted – an embarrassing failure – to foil the re-unification of Germany.

Margaret Thatcher was probably led on by acolytes who told her that her principled stand against turning Europe into a federal state (not something that
was ever likely to happen) was the reason why she lost office. Maybe they had never heard of the poll tax. In any event, they encouraged her, and she encouraged them, in mutually reinforcing serial acts of disloyalty to her successor. That disloyalty was vigorously encouraged by Norman Tebbit who had once chivvied and bullied his parliamentary colleagues into supporting the Single European Act.

Reading John Major’s memoirs, it is remarkable how restrained he is in describing what he called “a pathological source of division within the Conservative Party”. Explaining on one occasion to Stephen Wall, perhaps his principal adviser on Europe, one of several clever and sensible Foreign Office diplomats who tilled this stony ground over the years, why he could not be bolder on some aspect or other of EU policy, he said, “You forget that I am standing astride a crack in the Conservative Party that is growing wider by the day”.

This would have amazed me when I made my mostly involuntary departure from domestic British politics in 1992. We had after all just won an election in which Europe had hardly been mentioned save in the context of John Major’s diplomatic triumph at Maastricht. It was certainly a mistake to be quite so enthusiastic at the conclusion of this Council meeting about what had
been achieved – “game, set and match”. This was, however, a pretty accurate assessment of the outcome. A close friend of mine who was at Maastricht as Europe Minister, Tristan Garel-Jones, when discussing his territorial designation on becoming a member of the House of Lords, asked if he could choose Maastricht. “We are sorry” he was told, “but normally one can only choose a foreign place if it was the scene of a great British victory”. Precisely, Tristan replied, though he had to settle for Watford.

At Maastricht, Major got everything Britain wanted and it underpinned the extent to which we achieved membership of the European Union on the terms that best suited us. We had the Single Market and Enlargement without the Social Chapter and any commitment to signing up to monetary union. We were in due course to secure opt-outs from the Schengen Agreement in the Amsterdam Treaty during the Blair premiership.

So in the early summer of 1992, why should anyone have predicted the growing turbulence over Europe which has deeply troubled the Conservative Party to the present day and has made it ever more difficult for party leaders to pursue what most have believed to be the national interest, while keeping the Conservative Party together?
John Major’s account of what happened is remarkably free of rancour. The relatively small parliamentary majority secured by the Conservative Party in 1992, in comparison with its plurality of votes, made party rebellion particularly destabilising, even more so since the Labour Opposition chose to support Conservative rebellions rather than focus on their view of Britain’s European role. Legislation to implement Maastricht had been postponed, fatally it transpired, until after the election. When this decision was made a main reason was undoubtedly the positive reception initially given to the outcome of the treaty negotiations. The passage of the legislation itself was bedevilled by Black Wednesday (the ejection from the ERM), the “no” vote in the Danish referendum, and anxieties about the outcome of the French referendum. A group of backbenchers, several of them new to Parliament, emboldened by Margaret Thatcher’s “Queen over the water” much-denied plotting and by an increasingly hostile press, demonstrated day after day, week after week, the fiction of the proposition that loyalty is the Conservative Party’s secret weapon.

Attempts through compromise to curtail rebellions got nowhere. Major promoted opponents; the “bastards” became even bigger bastards as they got their hands on a red box. He blocked the nomination of the Belgian Jean–Luc Dehaene as President of the Commission and got in his place a less wily and
more federalist Luxembourger. We conceded a referendum on potential membership of EMU. Our able Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, was sent around Europe to lecture other states on the sort of Union they really wanted if only they realised. Our negotiators were periodically obliged to tie themselves in knots over voting rights and enlargement. Over an issue where most people around the negotiating table behaved badly – BSE in British herds – we seemed to go along with the tabloid depiction of the argument as a European assault – on the sanctity of roast beef as our national culinary story. None of these political gestures made a scrap of difference to the Europhobes, which would not have surprised Rudyard Kipling…..

“…………we’ve proved it again and again,

That if once you have paid him the Dane-geld

You never get rid of the Dane”.

I assume that Major has compared notes on Danegeld with David Cameron and Theresa May.

What can you do if some in your party put dogma before evidence, ideology before country; or if they are prepared to make their party increasingly unelectable at a time when the majority of their parliamentary
colleagues still wish to continue working for what they believe is the national interest. And the story is not yet over.

In his memoirs, Major asks – without any sign of self-pity – “Was there something I could have said, some point I could have adopted, someone I should have fired, someone I could have hired, a speech, a broadcast, an argument which might have begun my party’s journey back to sanity”. He goes on to ask rhetorically, “Could a different man have done it”. Neither a man nor a woman, we now know could have done it. If a party is hell-bent on self-destruction there is not much you can do about it, so it appears. The biggest trouble (looking beyond partisan politics) is the collateral damage to the country, both externally and at home.

So, “stuff happens”, as Donald Rumsfeld used to say. Was all the recent trouble caused by John Major’s views on Europe, by – for example – a departure from the sacred texts of Thatcherism? When anyone actually describes John Major’s idea of how Europe should best work, and how Britain should conduct itself within the Union, you rapidly become aware of a description that sounds boringly platitudinous. Major wanted much the same Union as every other British prime minister, except perhaps Edward Heath, and he did a great deal to secure it. He spelt out what he describes as the result of
his musings on holiday one summer in the Douro Valley (presumably spurred on by the then Ambassador to Portugal, Stephen Wall), in an article for “The Economist” in 1995.

“It is for nations”, he wrote, “to build Europe, not for Europe to attempt to supersede nations. I want to see the Community become a wide union, embracing the whole of democratic Europe, in a single market and with common security arrangements firmly linked to NATO. I want to see a competitive and confident Europe, generating jobs for its citizens and choice for its consumers. A Community which ceases to nibble at national freedoms, and so commands the enthusiasm of its member states”.

And he continued, such a community would offer peace, security, more free trade and safeguards for infant democracies. It would reflect “the instincts of free people in the nations” and re-tune the Treaty of Rome to make it more relevant for the times.

The exposition of this thoroughly sensible objective did not immediately lead to unilateral disarmament of those within Europe who had federalist ambitions with which Britain would not go along and which remained a distant
dream. Yet “ever closer union” has always meant, and is likely always to mean “ever closer union among freely co-operating sovereign governments” (to borrow the phrase from Major’s successor). Did Major ever do anything that could raise suspicions that he was intent on another destination? You certainly could not say that about the Exchange Rate Mechanism, entered in weakness while Thatcher was in Downing Street, and left in humiliation. The consequences of the illusory Lawson boom in the late 1980s persuaded most British policy makers, including the then Prime Minister that it provided our best chance of cutting interest rates while stabilising the exchange rate, enabling us to promote growth and job creation without stoking inflation. Our unceremonious exit was the consequence of several factors. First, politics was starting to have an unsettling effect on the financial markets. The Danes had voted to reject the Maastricht Treaty, and France had just announced that they would hold a referendum on the Treaty as well. Second, and more important, the costs of German re-unification had pushed the Bundesbank into a tougher monetary stance. Higher interest rates there were attracting a great tide of money from Wall Street as the US dollar weakened. A stronger Deutschmark and high German interest rates put a huge strain on other currencies in the ERM, above all sterling, the lira and the franc.
Major’s experience of trying to cope with membership of the Exchange Rate Mechanism did nothing to dilute his existing opposition to Britain joining the monetary union. He foresaw all the problems of a monetary union embracing countries of widely varying economic performance. How could such an arrangement be sustained without fiscal and political union, with stronger economies needing to make substantial transfers to weaker ones. Germany and Greece spring quickly to mind. He had seen the merits of a common but not a single currency; a common currency based on a strong Euro driving out of use over time weaker currencies. In retrospect this looks like a very much better idea than EMU. Had as much political effort in Europe gone into another cause, like completion of the single market, as has gone into holding the Eurozone together, our continental economy would have been even stronger, though it does now seem to be emerging from its long-running and flat-lining difficulties.

What Major did here and elsewhere was to preserve Britain from being “shackled to a corpse” to borrow from the vocabulary of Brexiteers. These days the corpse seems to have enjoyed a Lazarus-like emergence from the tomb, with the funeral party now looking in a different direction west from Picardy. But the most important point is this. Major helped us to get membership of the EU on the terms which we thought best suited us. We grumbled about the
welfare bills in continental Europe holding back economic growth. But our welfare state was almost certainly less generous and expensive than that in our major competitor countries. We grumbled about an excessively regulated labour market. But according to the OECD we had the least regulated market in the E.U. We criticised the EMU. But we were not part of it. We pointed to Europe’s demographic challenges. But free movement of people in Europe had added brain and muscle power to our work-force. Now that Polish plumbers are going home, who will deal with the leaks in the kitchen? Perhaps our old age pensioners will have the time to do it, in between – as leading Brexiteers have suggested – picking peas in Lincolnshire or digging for Britain.

So Major’s stewardship of our European Union membership, while not perfect, did underpin the fact that we were members of a Union, which we had done so much to create, along the lines that we wanted. We negotiated a membership which suited us. What’s not to like, as they say?

What’s not to like, apparently, is that the price for all this was that we had lost much of our sovereignty. We had not just stood by and watched as nefarious foreigners carried off great chunks of it, as though it had been hacked from the Cenotaph. We had actually helped to transport all these vandalised pieces to Brussels and Strasbourg.
Sovereignty is not nothing. There are clearly limits to it in terms of the area over which you believe it extends: a government’s sovereignty does not normally extend beyond its borders. It can grow and diminish according to external and internal circumstances; it is not like virginity, as Geoffrey Howe used to say, here one moment and gone the next. Yet plainly you do need to know at any one time where it is located. And in Britain there has always been one answer. It rests legally, de jure, with parliament in Westminster. If parliament wishes, it can decline to pool any of its sovereignty with others – NATO, the WTO or the EU for example. We are at present intent on reversing the pooling of sovereignty to which we freely agreed. We are doing this because of a departure from what we have always believed in the past to be our preferred method of accountability, decisions taken in parliament. The referendum rules, O.K? Not if you were Edmund Burke. Not if you were Margaret Thatcher. And why are we to do it? Because we believe that we “must take back control” of our destiny, take back control in a world where most of the problems faced by individual member states, including let it be said mass immigration, can only be dealt with through international co-operation.

How had we lost control of our ability to run our education system (not conspicuously well), or our health service, or our welfare service, or our
steadily diminishing defence forces? The main area where we had allegedly lost control was in the creation of a genuine single market. As Margaret Thatcher said, “Almost every major nation has been obliged by the pressure of the post-war world to pool significant areas of sovereignty so as to create more effective political units”. That is why we agreed in the Single European Act to give away allegedly hunks of our parliamentary sovereignty. Who were the enemies of the people when the Single European Act was being whipped through Parliament?

Now, while sovereignty is a notoriously slippery idea, slithering down the slope from the divine right of kings and the will of God to the will of the people, there are limits which most of us would put on the distance and duration of the slide. This was true for John Major, who unlike some of his political colleagues, wished to stop the slide in about the same position as the passing of time suggests is sensible. He did not believe that monetary union was possible without political union. He reckoned that this would raise far more profound issues of sovereignty that would be difficult to sell to electorates in their own countries. So what has changed? President Macron, whom I much admire, was in his early teens when the Conservative Party was racked by all these rows in the 1990s. Perhaps the hand on the clock has moved far more rapidly than I think is the case. Perhaps we have arrived already at a day in the 21st century
when a German finance minister will be able to decide the rate of VAT on French restaurant bills. Perhaps …… I suspect that Madame Le Pen will not be the only person in France to tell the clever President that such a destination is not “vaut le voyage”.

Meantime with admiration and mild alarm, we will watch the French President’s efforts to increase the margin between French and British productivity by even more than the existing twenty per cent. But I forgot. Our abysmal and steadily impoverishing rate of productivity must be a result of our membership of the EU, mustn’t it? Take back control, and all will be well. Get rid of the EU and watch British productivity soar.

De facto and de jure sovereignty – reality and delusion. Remember Shakespeare’s Henry IV, Part 1:

Glendower: “I can call spirits from the vastly deep”.

Hotspur: “Why so can I, or so can any man; but will they come when you do call for them?”

Well, the spirits are summoned. Boris Johnson and the tabloid editors are on the case. And, forget not, if they don’t arrive on time by March 2019 it is
people like you, an audience at Oxford University (that probably includes experts and members of the elite) who will be to blame.

Which brings me to my final point. An important chorus in the drama of John’s negotiations with Brussels and with the Conservative party was the media – the British media, parts of which have been the catalysts in moulding opinion on Europe over the years, and whose role will be even more significant and divisive I fear over the coming months and years. Given their activities during the Major premiership, I have always been surprised that he was not more critical of them. In his memoirs he does refer to the “tweedey fantasies” of some of the pretentious fogeys who patronised and ridiculed him. He noted how often “fantasies …… took the place of facts”. He talks about all this “(ripping) into my premiership, (damaging) the Conservative Party and (coming) close to destroying the government”. I think it often hurt him; it would have hurt me. It certainly hurt the Conservative Party and will, as like as not, help bring the Conservative Party to the verge of breaking point and the country to a period of divisive bitterness. Indeed, it has come close to doing that already.

Shaped as we are by the Enlightenment and its values, we should defend free speech and a free press. We may not like journalists or newspapers with
whose opinions we disagree but toleration of them is part of the wholly acceptable price of living in a democracy which is pluralist and free. The best response to bad free speech is good free speech. I gave evidence to the Leveson Inquiry arguing against greater parliamentary or government regulation of the press. In doing so I often wondered why it was that trust in our public service broadcaster was so very much – indeed, mountainously higher than that in our newspapers despite the regular assaults which some of them made on its journalist integrity.

All of which is a prequel to that most commanding of all conjunctions – “but”. What should we think about newspapers which show little regard for the truth, which promote their own divisive agenda, which whip up hate against those with a different view of Britain’s best interests. What should we feel about newspapers who regard those with whom they disagree as unpatriotic enemies? Isn’t all this worth debating without fear of the next day’s hatchet headline.

The end of this European drama may well be our departure from the Union. We may “take back control” wherever it is that control resides. I hope such “control” includes promoting the civility of public discourse. I trust we will not lose the civic clubability which has been such a hallmark of our public
life at its regular best. I fear losing this even more than I worry about the
consequence, economic and political, of departing the EU. I think that Major
was an example, despite the squalls and storms, of the attempt to hold on to that
value while leading a divided party and attempting to do what he thought best
for the country. And what next? To return once more to William Shakespeare,
as King John says to a messenger bringing ill tidings, “So foul a sky clears not
without a storm”. I hope that in Britain the storm does not blow away too
much of what really matters to this civilised country.