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With looming EU trade deal, Harper's message to UK is to stay put

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Stephen Harper was the first Canadian prime minister to speak to the Lords and Commons since William Lyon Mackenzie King addressed them in 1944. On that occasion, King evoked the bonds that united the two countries in war. Mr. Harper is in Europe, not to strengthen those bonds, but to submerge them in a greater European accord.

King spoke on May 11, 1944, less than a month before D-Day. With Winston Churchill looking on, he diplomatically reminded Parliament of its great debt to the Canadian people.

A nation of only 11.5-million had put 750,000 men in uniform, he observed. (Can you imagine Canada creating an equivalent army, navy and air force of some two million today?) Half of the nation's output was devoted to the war effort, and much of that production was being freely given to Great Britain and its allies.

"Of the nations of the Western hemisphere, Canada was the first to defend in arms the frontiers of the freedom of the new world," he told Parliament. "For more than two years, our country, alone in the Americas, was at war."

Canada committed to total war in defence of Great Britain because the ties binding mother country and dominion were that powerful. Mr. Harper evoked that shared commitment in his own address Thursday.

"From the War of 1812, to the great conflict that brought Churchill and King together, to the dusty landscapes of Afghanistan in our own time, Britons and Canadians have pursued what is right in the world, often at great cost," he declared.

But the Prime Minister's greatest objective this week is to advance the negotiations toward CETA, the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada and the European Union.

Great Britain remains a major trading partner with Canada. But as Jason Langrish, executive director of the Canada Europe Roundtable for Business, observed in an interview, "the economic times have changed."

Great Britain, like much of Europe, is still struggling to recover from the shocks of 2008. And while Canada and Britain retain a special relationship, said Mr. Langrish, "it's becoming more marginalized by the day."

Despite a rising English tide of Euroskepticism, the UK's economy is fully integrated with Europe's. Although many in England "believe that there's a special relationship" between Great Britain, the United States and Canada, "on the ground I'm not sure how special it is any more," said Mr. Langrish.

Hostility to the Continent within and outside the Conservative Party could force a referendum on whether to leave the European Union. If the Canadian government were asked its opinion, the advice would be: Don't do it.

Not only does Canada intend to cement a powerful free trade agreement with the EU, the United States plans to do likewise. The ultimate destination could be a European-North American free trade zone. For Great Britain to abandon that zone even as it is being created would be potentially suicidal.

King ended his speech with a far-sighted call for greater unity. Let the Commonwealth become a model for global peace and prosperity, he urged.

"In the perspective of time, this world-encircling danger may prove to have been a blessing in disguise," he maintained. "Only in this way, perhaps, could other nations as well as our own have come to see that the interests of mankind are one and that the claims of humanity are supreme."

Sixty-nine years later, King would have been well pleased to see Canada negotiating a free trade accord with a Europe united and at peace, even if the prime minister making the deal was a Conservative.

And we can predict what his own advice to the British would be: This, of all the times, is not the time to abandon the Continent.

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