

Accepted for Journal of European Integration History

Pre-copyedited

Ignoring Europe?

Reassessing the British Labour Party's Policy towards

*European Integration, 1951–60*¹

Abstract

The 1950s were a turning point in British European policy during which the country moved from passive bystander to prospective member of the European Economic Community (EEC). Existing scholarship, though, depicts the opposition Labour Party as choosing largely to ignore this shift. This article by contrast shows that at various levels Labour did systematically talk about the vexed question of Britain's European future. Indeed, a critical mass of the Party quickly recognised the necessity of a closer relationship with the EEC, supported membership of the Free Trade Area (FTA) as the best institutional forum for this undertaking and, following its collapse, sought with some energy to prevent the ensuing economic and political division of Western Europe. In revealing Labour policy as more nuanced and measured, the article aims ultimately to promote the 1950s as a far more crucial component in the broader story of how the Party grappled with closer cooperation among European states.

Introduction

The European policy of the British Conservative Government underwent a rather dramatic shift in the 1950s. As is already well known, when in June 1955 six countries opted to 'relaunch' the stalled European integration process by working towards

¹ This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 658375. I would like to thank Anne Deighton, Mika Suonpää, Ville Laamanen, Ezequiel Gonzalez Ocantos and the anonymous reviewers for their diligent reading of the piece and extremely helpful feedback.

building a common market and customs union, Prime Minister Anthony Eden responded with ambivalence.² Continental efforts were hence greeted by deep-seated scepticism of any scheme seen to undermine national autonomy and weaken Britain's world power role, cynicism about whether a unified European market was even viable, and a more general belief that divisions among the countries involved would in any case thwart a new joint initiative.³ All too quickly, however, the determination of 'the Six' to launch what in 1957 became the European Economic Community (EEC), mixed with growing alarm already before this date at the emergence of a potentially powerful economic and political unit from which Britain stood to be excluded, modified attitudes. Nonchalance hence gave way to the search for a different framework that could either substitute the embryonic EEC in the event (as some in government still thought likely) that it failed or wrap it in a looser British-led intergovernmental structure to make it less harmful were it to triumph. The result was a 17-member industrial Free Trade Area (FTA), proposed by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer Harold Macmillan in November 1956.⁴ And it was the failure of the FTA thanks to a veto delivered two years later by French President Charles de Gaulle, and the recognition soon thereafter that a consolation prize in the form of the smaller seven-member European Free Trade Association (EFTA) was scarcely a viable substitute, that led to a further reappraisal of policy culminating in Macmillan's decision – now as Prime Minister – to launch Britain's first EEC membership application in July 1961.⁵

In almost complete contrast, this same period is generally perceived to have been one in which the Labour Party exhibited remarkably little concern for or curiosity in the integration process. True certainly is that the 1945–51 governments of Clement Attlee attached some importance to looser forms of cooperation like the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) set up to administer Marshall Aid, the Strasbourg-based Council of Europe founded to promote human rights, and the defence-

² Those six countries are of course Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany. The literature on Conservative/British European policy in this period is vast, but among the main pieces are M. CAMPS, *Britain and the European Community 1955-1963* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964); N.J. CROWSON, *The Conservative Party and European Integration since 1945: At the Heart of Europe?* (London: Routledge, 2007), 14–44; W. KAISER, *Using Europe, Abusing the Europeans: Britain and European Integration 1945–63* (London: Palgrave, 1996); A.S. MILWARD, *The Rise and Fall of a National Strategy 1945–1963* (London: Routledge, 2005); J.W. YOUNG, 'British officials and European integration, 1944–60', in: A. DEIGHTON (ed.), *Building Postwar Europe: National Decision-Makers and European Institutions, 1948–63* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1995), 87–106.

³ A clear sense of this decision-making can be found in KAISER, *Using*, 43–6.

⁴ Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 561, 26 November 1956, 35–55.

⁵ The best study of the FTA remains J. ELLISON, *Threatening Europe: Britain and the Creation of the European Community 1955-58* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000). See also M. SCHAAD, 'Plan G – A "Counterblast"? British policy towards the Messina countries, 1956', *Contemporary European History*, 7 (1998), 39–60.

centric Brussels Treaty Organisation.⁶ But so too was the Labour hierarchy suspicious of further entangling Britain with its European neighbours and cool towards supranational integration in these or other forums. Little wonder then that in its last eighteen months of office the leadership discussed, but chose ultimately to reject, participation in the Schuman Plan designed to integrate the Six's coal and steel industries under a centralised high authority.⁷ And it is with this act, per most accounts at least, that Labour's flirtation with all things European abruptly ended. As Michael Newman puts it: 'In opposition from October 1951, the Labour Party showed little interest in the integration process during the next ten years'.⁸ Similarly, Kristian Steinnes claims that Labour's fall from office brought with it a 'lack [of] a coherent European policy' – a spell seemingly only broken when Macmillan's 1961 initiative compelled Transport House to take more active interest in the burgeoning integration process.⁹

Labour, in this analysis at least, thus never really underwent the sort of transition that its Conservative opposite experienced. Instead an already lukewarm response to European integration under Attlee supposedly gave way to complete apathy under his successor as leader, Hugh Gaitskell, with military intervention in Suez, debates over German rearmament and possible British unilateralism purportedly commanding the main share of the Party's attentions.¹⁰ A degree of academic consensus has consequently emerged which suggests that Labour all but dismissed the Six's common market initiative, likewise overlooked the Conservative government's FTA proposal, 'virtually ignored Europe' despite de Gaulle's subsequent veto, and thereafter paid 'scant attention' to EFTA when its founding treaty was initialled in November 1959.¹¹

⁶ For more, among others, MILWARD, *Rise and Fall*, 32–5; T. INSALL and P. SALMON (eds.), *The Brussels and North Atlantic Treaties, 1947–1949: Documents in British Policy Overseas, Series I, Volume X* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 1–182.

⁷ R. BROAD, *Labour's European Dilemmas: From Bevin to Blair* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 18–31.

⁸ M. NEWMAN, 'The British Labour Party', in: R.T. GRIFFITHS (ed.), *Socialist Parties and the Question of Europe in the 1950s* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 163.

⁹ K. STEINNES, *The British Labour Party, Transnational Influences and European Community Membership 1960–1973* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014), 37.

¹⁰ On these topics, R. GERALD HUGHES, "'We are not seeking strength for its own sake": The British Labour Party, West Germany and the Cold War, 1951–64', *Cold War History*, 3 (2002), 67–94; J. CALLAGHAN, *The Labour Party and Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2007), 162–90; R.M. DOUGLAS, *The Labour Party, Nationalism and Internationalism 1939–1951* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 214–65.

¹¹ Quotations come from S. RIPPINGALE, 'Hugh Gaitskell, the Labour Party and Foreign Affairs, 1955–63', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Plymouth, 1996, 220–1. Similar sentiments exist in BROAD, *Labour's*, 30–5; P. CATTERALL, 'Foreign and Commonwealth policy in opposition: The Labour Party', in: W. KAISER and G. STAERCK (eds.), *British Foreign Policy, 1955–64: Contracting Options* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 96–8; A. MULLEN, *The British Left's 'Great Debate' on Europe* (London: Continuum, 2007), 60. Biographies of Gaitskell are also thin on details, see B. BRIVATI, *Hugh Gaitskell* (London: Richard Cohen, 1996); P.M. WILLIAMS, *Hugh Gaitskell* (Oxford: OUP, 1979).

At one of the most crucial, indeed defining periods in Britain's relationship with its European counterparts, Labour, it appears, was nowhere to be seen.

The aim here is not, to be clear, to dispute that on its fall from government in 1951 the Labour leadership was anything but wary of a deeper, more substantial relationship between Britain and its near neighbours. Nor is its purpose to assert that some ten years later the Party suddenly found itself fully supportive of Macmillan's bid for EEC entry. Grounded in a reading of Labour's own archival material the article will, rather, seek to highlight how the Party's European policymaking between these two dates was rather more complex and nuanced than the hitherto dismissive historiographical treatment suggests. For in these years not only did Labour pay greater attention to the integration schemes on the continent in a way that few scholars have previously appreciated. At some point during this period large swathes of the Party elite also decided that, contrary to their own earlier assumptions, Britain's economic and political future was ever more inextricably bound with that of its European neighbours and ever less reliant on the traditional relationships with the Commonwealth and the United States. Put slightly differently, the 1951–60 period was one when we can first detect Labour's established worldview shifting from a global to a regional, European one – with lasting consequences for its subsequent stance on European affairs.

An anti-European party?

Little at first suggested that Labour's return to opposition in October 1951 would do anything to dent the essentially negative stance to European integration that it had taken while in office. The first restatement of its European vision indeed made clear that the looser framework of the OEEC was still the structure in which the Party preferred to coordinate European trade. Similarly, the European Payments Union (EPU) – a convertibility mechanism designed to ease commercial transactions – was held up as a practical example of what intergovernmental cooperation could achieve. And while Labour was to place 'no obstacle' in the path of those European countries which did seek closer association, the Party remained convinced that Britain for its part could not join a 'federation or a European customs union. We must safeguard our freedom to play a full part as an independent member in the Commonwealth and the Atlantic community'.¹² Everything seemed very much business as usual.

¹² Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester [henceforth LHA], Box File 328.5 (1950-), 'Labour's foreign policy', 1952.

On closer inspection, however, and probably more easily identifiable with hindsight than was the case at the time, the sincerely held belief that Britain ought to absolve itself from full incorporation in the schemes being discussed on the continent was increasingly mixed up with a more pragmatic understanding of European cooperation as a process from which Britain could ill afford to be completely detached. On some level this trend was already visible before Labour had left office. The rather rushed publication of *European Unity*¹³ in May 1950 – a policy statement drafted by the Party’s ruling National Executive Committee (NEC) which denounced the Schuman Plan and the supranational characteristics of what would become the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) – had after all been allowed to overshadow the more conciliatory statement Labour agreed with its European socialist counterparts just a month earlier. Apart from anything else, this ‘lost’ statement was noteworthy because it claimed that a Europe body ‘of parliamentary and political significance’ with centralised powers and authority might be needed to control basic industries like steel, coal, transport electricity. In Labour’s reasoning, coordination beyond that already available in the OEEC was the only way European countries could hope to avoid national price wars and resultant unemployment or depression of wages.¹⁴

European Unity was also allowed to dwarf the far more nuanced response to the Schuman Plan outlined by Attlee in the House of Commons a few weeks later. Attlee himself was no fan of the supranational grouping envisaged by the Six. And the Labour government was genuinely put off by the need from the outset of the Schuman negotiations to accept certain preconditions that would almost certainly have made later refusal of a deal impossible. But all this was balanced by an awareness that Washington was a keen supporter of any measure which fostered greater coordination between the economies of Western Europe. For the sake of the Anglo-US alliance Britain could thus not entirely dismiss the initiative. Nor could the Attlee government simply ignore the fact that an economically stable Europe not only offered Britain rich commercial pickings but that, in the context of the Cold War, it was also strategically valuable as a way of promoting stability vis-à-vis the Eastern Bloc. In his remarks to the Commons Attlee consequently went some way to differentiate Labour *party* policy as enshrined in the NEC’s document from official Labour *government* strategy. As he put it, the West

¹³ LHA, Box File 328.51 (-1964), “‘European Unity’: A statement by the National Executive Committee of the British Labour Party”, 1950.

¹⁴ *The Times*, 25 May 1950, 5.

was entering ‘a formative and decisive stage’ where ‘a more effective pooling of resources’ and ‘the surrender in an unprecedented degree by each country of the ability to do as it pleases’ were ever more essential pillars of the international community. The inference, in remarkable contrast to the downbeat statement issued by Labour’s national executive, was that even if it objected to membership now, Britain ought to leave open the prospect of future participation in the Schuman scheme.¹⁵

These more emollient approaches to European integration help explain major policy choices made on Labour’s return to opposition. It first accounts for why from 1954/55 the Party leadership was so welcoming of the idea that Britain might associate with the ECSC.¹⁶ For starters, the Six would represent a ready market for British coal and steel, the prices of which were much lower than continental counterparts and thus well placed to compete in a larger market. By uniting with other trade unions, meanwhile, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) – Britain’s national trade union centre with close institutional and financial ties to Labour – might well end up with greater collective bargaining power, thereby helping to raise workers’ wages. So too was there likely to be a social element to an association deal. Britain and the Six might for instance exchange knowledge on safety, health and welfare that would benefit workers in the British coal and steel sectors. And while a larger market would likely push British industry to modernize and seek technical improvements that would inevitably lead to some redundancies, increased exports to the continent would also furnish the government with money to retrain workers in new emerging sectors.¹⁷ An agreement covering Britain and the Six might even ‘induce workers to move to other areas in Europe where there is work available’, thus lowering unemployment. Perhaps most crucial for Labour, though, and key to understanding subsequent Party policy, was the idea that a UK-ECSC agreement would offer a ‘model of association which we would be ready to accept in any organisations, any communities that may be set up in Europe to deal with things other than coal and steel’, with transport, fuel and power, and road haulage those areas given special prominence.¹⁸ Little wonder that Labour’s Shadow Foreign Secretary Alfred ‘Alf’ Robens should claim how through association Britain would reap the rewards of the ‘very effective’ ECSC without having to commit to the

¹⁵ Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 473, 13 June 1950, 35-47. See also J. BEW, *Clement Attlee: The Man Who Made Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), 487-8.

¹⁶ LHA, Misc. Folder: European Coal and Steel Community, 1953-57, ‘The Schuman Plan’, undated.

¹⁷ LHA, Misc. Folder: European Coal and Steel Community, 1953-57, ‘Notes on the European Coal and Steel Community’, February 1955.

¹⁸ Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 537, 21 February 1955, 980-7.

more controversial political aspects that came with fully fledged membership of a supranational grouping.¹⁹

It secondly explains why Labour showed more interest in the European Defence Community (EDC) than often acknowledged.²⁰ At first sight the somewhat extraordinary claim in 1954 that Labour supported ‘the integration of a British contingent in [the] EDC’ as one component in a much broader strategy towards West German rearmament does seem somewhat anomalous.²¹ For only four years earlier Labour had rejected British participation in any European-centred defence community.²² But against a backdrop of the 1948 Czechoslovak coup, the Korean War and the mounting cost of Britain’s overseas defence commitments, Attlee and his team had slowly come to believe that the Federal Republic needed to make some type of contribution to Western defence and that, however remote a possibility, an inadequate response to the West Germans’ burgeoning relative power might push Bonn to seek closer ties with the Soviet Union.²³ The notion, embodied by the EDC, of wrapping all six ECSC members in a supranational military structure thus gradually emerged a valuable solution variously to the re-emergence of (West) Germany as a European power, the need to secure Bonn’s contribution to its own defence while guarding against possible future German aggression, and the challenge to Western European solidarity posed by the Soviet Union.²⁴

This being the case, the reference to possible British inclusion in the EDC was not merely accidental or made with little reference to a more general policy towards the Six.²⁵ Instead it reflected a genuine acceptance of European integration as a process which if correctly harnessed could meet Britain’s broader foreign policy objectives. Offering advice, training and political support to the Six was a preferable vehicle through which Labour hoped to work more closely with the EDC and help create the environment in which the whole question of West German rearmament might best be settled. But as internal planning on the matter more than made plain, the Labour leadership was prepared to go one stage further by actually contributing British forces

¹⁹ Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 537, 21 February 1955, 890.

²⁰ Cf. BROAD, *Labour’s*, 27-31.

²¹ Labour Party Annual Conference Report [henceforth LPACR], 1954, 23.

²² LHA, Box File 328.512: Germany (Box 69), ‘It need not happen: The alternative to German rearmament’, 1954.

²³ *Socialist Commentary*, October 1951, 237.

²⁴ LHA, Box File 328.512: Germany (Box 69), ‘German rearmament’, 13 March 1954.

²⁵ Although M. CEADEL argues as much, see ‘British parties and the European situation 1950-1957’, in: E. DI NOLFO (ed.) *Power in Europe? Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy and the Origins of the EEC, 1952-1957* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), 321.

already stationed in Germany if this meant that the chances of the Six succeeding in establishing a new defence infrastructure were improved.²⁶ And such was the sobriety with which Labour approached the matter that when in August 1954 the EDC negotiations collapsed, the Party quickly labelled events as a missed opportunity to deal with the ‘German problem’ at a time when Bonn’s admittance to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was still seen as one step too far on the road to Germany’s exoneration for its Nazi past.²⁷ Suddenly, the value of European integration appeared to be appreciated in a way unlike ever before.

Engaging with the Six

Seen in this light, the decision by the Six to establish the Spaak Committee was a move bound to elicit at least some interest from Labour. The first major, if gradual element of the reaction that did follow was reflected in the decision by the Party leadership to reform the NEC’s own structures to take closer account of developments on the continent. It was likely no accident that as the Spaak Committee began seriously to contemplate the creation of a new common market and customs union towards the close of 1955, Labour chose to establish a high-level European Cooperation Sub-Committee tasked with navigating ‘the complexity and specialisation’ of the integration process.²⁸ Nor was it altogether surprising that within a month of the Six’s May 1956 gathering in Venice, Labour chose to bolster the Sub-Committee to undertake a further ‘detailed examination’ of the Messina proposals – a task more than accomplished by expanding its ranks to include those who like Robens, John Hynd, the former Minister for Germany and Austria, Geoffrey de Freitas (Member of Parliament (MP) for Nottingham Central) and a former minister close to Attlee, and George Thomson (Dundee East), were rather more interested than the average Labour figure in the question of European integration.²⁹

Greater engagement at the European level was the second feature of the Party’s reaction to the Messina initiative. The Council of Europe’s Consultative Assembly in Strasbourg had by the mid-1950s become a particular favourite for Labourites

²⁶ LHA, Box 16 (4): International Sub-Committee Minutes and Documents 1953-1962, International Department memo, ‘The European Defence Community and possible ways of British association’, April 1954. See also S. DOCKRILL, *Britain’s Policy for West German Rearmament 1950-1955* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 108.

²⁷ LHA, Box 16 (4): International Sub-Committee Minutes and Documents 1953-1962, International Department memo, ‘The German question’, September 1954.

²⁸ LHA, NEC minutes 23 November 1955, Minutes of International Sub-Committee meeting, 15 November 1955.

²⁹ LHA, NEC minutes 27 June 1956, ‘The Council of Europe and European cooperation’, June 1956, and NEC minutes 25 July 1956, ‘Memorandum concerning the Sub-Committee on European cooperation’, July 1956.

engrossed in European affairs. The young Roy Jenkins (Birmingham Stechford) was a regular frequenter of debates; John Edwards (Brighouse and Spenborough) another. Rather than being passive spectators to the discussions had by representatives from each of the Six about progress in the Spaak Committee, however, Labour delegates were able to use their seats to have a direct say in the ongoing common market negotiations. Jenkins for his part offered the principle assessment to the Strasbourg Assembly as to the impact of the Six's economic plans on its European neighbours.³⁰ Arguably more important was Edwards, a devoted supporter of European integration and a would-be President of the Consultative Assembly, who was especially proficient in relaying opinions originally thrashed out in Transport House to his European counterparts. Among the more notable of these was the decision by the Party to encourage the Six to pursue an atomic energy agreement. For Labour this was best based on national parliamentary oversight; the fear that the West Germans might acquire a nuclear capability remained palpable. But Edwards struck a more amenable tone when he intimated that the Six and Britain might work together on the technological development of nuclear energy to counteract any future reliance on foreign oil. And in the same vein came a speech by David Jones (Hartlepool), who encouraged Spaak (often present at most of the Assembly's meetings) to make sure that the Six included in their common market a unified transport scheme. The possibility that Britain might somehow be involved in this was seemingly based on a desire to give trade unions on both sides of the English Channel greater say in the running of inland transport and port services.³¹

Few of these initiatives seem to have produced much by way of a more encouraging Labour policy towards the EEC in the short term at least.³² But running through both gatherings of the NEC European Sub-Committee and proceedings in Strasbourg were three crucial currents. The first was that Labour did at this early stage seem to understand that the emergence of the Six as a distinct grouping was both economically and politically problematic for Britain. In terms of the former of course the United Kingdom would see a slowing of exports across the English Channel thanks to the Six's common external tariff. It was the latter upon which most concern centred,

³⁰ N.P. LUDLOW, *Roy Jenkins and the European Commission Presidency, 1976-1980: At the Heart of Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 25.

³¹ LHA, NEC minutes 25 January 1956, 'Report on the Second Part of the Seventh Session of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 14-27 October', undated.

³² LHA, Box File 328.5101 (1961-1975: Pro-EEC), 'Freer trade with Europe?', 1956.

however. For the Six promised to be a major force in Western affairs; Britain's ability to exert influence on the continent would correspondingly decrease should it not have at least some way of influencing developments. All this meant, turning to the second component, that the integration process ought to take place in a framework that could accommodate as many Western European states as possible, not just those countries who felt able to pool their sovereignty in a supranational organisation like the ECSC. Third, therefore, even if Britain continued to resist joining the Six's own common market discussion, it should as a matter of course seek a more intimate link with the continent as part of a wider framework. Labour's reluctance vis-à-vis European integration was in the mid-1950s consequently tempered rather than absolute.

Inevitably, perhaps, these strands of thought helped to create an environment in which Labour MPs were to a quite remarkable degree able to go well beyond the official Party line and call for more direct British involvement in the Messina process. Within the confines of the European Cooperation Sub-Committee this most clearly took the form of calls for Britain to be fully absorbed in the Six's plans for a coordinated market for nuclear power, widely known as Euratom. Not everyone of course was enthusiastic about the idea: Ernest Popplewell (Newcastle upon Tyne West) recognized that Euratom was still a supranational grouping, while in an early display of his anti-European credentials, the left-wing Fred Peart (Workington) suggested that joining Euratom risked becoming a mere prelude to accession to the Six's common market. Even so, the dividing line had much less to do with the idea of actually pursuing functional cooperation with the Six in the realm of nuclear energy, than with the framework in which this was best done. The Sub-Committee, upon which also sat Attlee's successor as leader, Hugh Gaitskell, could consequently settle on association as a compromise solution that would variously allow Britain access to the Six's energy market, provide London with an opportunity to scrutinize the project and ensure that any nuclear capability was employed solely for peaceful civilian use.³³

A group of Labour parliamentarians went still further by suggesting publicly that Britain ought to be more deeply involved in the Six's common market negotiations. Jenkins is usually credited as the one Labour figure who, while not quite advocating full participation in the Six's customs union, was most aware of the implications for Britain of being excluded from a new powerful grouping.³⁴ Every bit as crucial though were

³³ LHA, NEC minutes 24 July 1957, Minutes of NEC European Cooperation Sub-Committee meeting, 3 July 1957.

³⁴ *The Times*, 23 October 1956, 8; Ludlow, *Roy Jenkins*, 25-7.

those MPs who signalled a willingness to go well beyond Jenkins and accept the major political adaptation that would go with fully participating in the Six's plans. Epitomising this was the decision on 24 July 1956 by Edwards and Hynd to table a motion in the House of Commons, signed by forty-five fellow MPs – one-sixth of the entire Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) – which urged the Conservative government immediately to include Britain in the common market talks as a full member.³⁵ True, the motion accepted that there would be 'risks and sacrifices involved' in joining the planned community, not least relating to existing Commonwealth imports. But alongside this was the refrain that exclusion from a continental grouping with its own tariff wall would see Britain, and hence the British worker, suffer on commercial terms. And alongside this also was the perception that the Six's plans, while economic in outlook, had much broader political connotations. Indeed it was not unreasonable to think that an institutional divide and burgeoning economic rivalry between the Six on the one side and Britain and its non-Six partners on the other might soon undermine the cohesion of Western Europe vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. 'British participation in the common market on an acceptable basis' was hence deemed the only acceptable way to secure both the prosperity and peace of all European states.³⁶

Accepting the FTA

The logic of these arguments made it almost inconceivable that the Labour hierarchy would completely ignore the FTA. The leadership indeed moved at some speed to formulate a coherent response to the expected announcement of the proposal. The starting point was a meeting on 16 October, which in Gaitskell's absence was chaired by Shadow Chancellor Harold Wilson and attended by Robens, Arthur Bottomley (Chatham), Patrick Gordon Walker (Smethwick) from Labour's Board of Trade team, and Tony Greenwood (Rossendale) for the NEC. In practical terms, no one substantive conclusion was reached at this gathering. But despite this and the fact that the five men were drawn from across Labour's ideological spectrum – Wilson and Greenwood were widely viewed as being on the left of the party; Bottomley, Gordon Walker and Robens were, broadly speaking, all from the revisionist right – several general areas of agreement did emerge. The first, and by far most important, was that the FTA was considered a welcome response to a new continental economic grouping. Labour would

³⁵ *The Times*, 19 July 1956, 6.

³⁶ Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 557, 24 July 1956, 212.

therefore support the government's attempt to negotiate a wider industrial trade bloc with the Six and other Western European states. Second, though, such support would be conditional. The government would have to ensure that tariff-free trade did not adversely affect British workers' standard of living and that London retained the freedom to pursue any economic policies it so desired. And membership of the FTA would, thirdly, have to be accompanied by measures designed to protect struggling industries from competition from more efficient manufacturers in Germany and elsewhere.³⁷ It was thus a remarkably confident Wilson who stood in the Commons in late November formally to announce Labour's 'encouragement and support' for the free trade negotiations but who also warned his then Conservative counterpart, Harold Macmillan, that the Party intended on 'pressing the Government extremely hard on some of the national safeguards' which it had begun to identify.³⁸

Matters were complicated somewhat because not everybody on the Labour benches was willing blindly to kowtow to the Party line. Tellingly perhaps it was the left which had most to say about the proposed FTA. For Aneurin 'Nye' Bevan – *éminence grise* of the Labour left who in July 1956 had displaced Robens as Shadow Foreign Secretary – support for the free trade area marked an inexorable slide towards joining the Six's common market. Of Bevan's distaste for such a possibility there could be little doubt; both the common market negotiations and the Conservative's proposal for a wider free trade zone were, he claimed, 'the result of a political malaise following upon the failure of socialists to use the sovereign power of their Parliaments to plan their economic life'.³⁹ Other members of the PLP were more prosaic but the argument was much the same: the FTA was an 'anti-socialist threat to domestic planning'.⁴⁰ At the opposite end of the spectrum stood a group of Labourites, coalesced around Hynd, who each regarded the leadership's conditional approach much too muted a reaction. This theme took on new meaning when, in March 1957, the Six finally signed the Rome treaties establishing the EEC and Euratom. For Hynd *et al*, there existed a real danger whereby the Six, committed to their new Community and reluctant to envisage the changes necessary to accede to a broader trade area, might well decide to reject the British FTA proposal in its entirety. All this meant that Britain, less still Labour, was no

³⁷ Modern Records Centre, Warwick [henceforth MRC], Trades Union Congress archive, MSS.292/564.7/1, Wilson to Heywood, 16 October 1956; LHA, NEC Sub-Committee Uncatalogued Misc. Documents Box 60, 'European Cooperation Sub-Committee: Draft Statement on the European Free Trade Area', March 1958.

³⁸ Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 561, 26 November 1956, 70.

³⁹ *Tribune*, 30 August 1957, 5.

⁴⁰ LHA, PLP minutes 1956-57, Minutes of meeting, 7 November 1956.

longer in a position to lay down ‘conditions’ on which it would accept a closer relationship with the Six.⁴¹

Despite these periodic outbursts, however, the Labour leadership did more than enough to demonstrate throughout the course of the FTA negotiations that the free trade area scheme was a central plank of the Party’s drive to both respond to and engage with the integration process. Officials from Gaitskell downwards indeed spent much of 1957 defending the free trade plan.⁴² And in September the same year both the European Cooperation Sub-Committee and the NEC’s International Sub-Committee – the principle foreign policy-making forum within the Party – agreed to recommend to Labour’s Annual Conference that the Party back the FTA.⁴³ Labour now formally accepted a new institutional agreement between the UK and the nascent EEC.

The task of securing the necessary support from within Labour’s ranks was always likely to be a hazardous one. By 1957 the Party’s divisions over German rearmament had admittedly mellowed somewhat, Gaitskell’s demand that it ought to support a remilitarized West Germany as part of a broader *détente* having won the day. But the PLP was still notorious for its factionalism; the NEC, while dominated by the right-wing, was in 1957/58 chaired by the influential left-wing figure Tom Driberg (then parliamentary candidate for Barking); and Wilson and Bevan – Shadow Chancellor and now Shadow Foreign Secretary respectively – were no fans of Gaitskell. Why, then, did the main organs of the Labour Party come out in favour of the FTA so remarkably unscathed? One factor behind this success, undoubtedly, was that the very issues over which Labour’s divisions on Europe would in subsequent years be most acute – the impact of deeper links with the continent on both the Commonwealth and on British sovereignty are the two that immediately spring to mind – were not really caught up in the FTA. In fact, the free trade zone as envisaged by Whitehall was not only intergovernmental in character, but it was also designed specifically to safeguard existing trade with third countries. It also probably did no harm that, however invested many of the names mentioned in this article were in developments in the integration process, the topic of European integration did not yet have the same emotive or

⁴¹ LHA, NEC Sub-Committee Uncatalogued Misc. Documents Box 60, ‘Memorandum on the “Draft Statement on the European Free Trade Area” by John Hynd’, March 1958.

⁴² *The Times*, 16 February 1957, 4.

⁴³ LHA, NEC Sub-Committee Uncatalogued Misc. Documents Box 63, Minutes of joint meeting, 17 September 1957.

ideological resonance for many in the labour movement. The leadership could in the late 1950s thus formulate policy on the integration process with relative impunity.

The best explanation for why the most important cogs in the Labour machine all with relative ease accepted the FTA lies however in the way the free trade scheme was widely acknowledged as the most appropriate answer to a conundrum that the Party had in various guises grappled with ever since 1950. A structure comprising seventeen OEEC states promised neatly to draw the United Kingdom closer to the Six and thereby tackle the various issues that the Party had identified over the previous few years, all while absolving the country from the need either to join a far more politically contentious supranational organisation or erode the links with the Commonwealth to which many in the Labour Party – including its leader – were still deeply attached. Almost as important was that the FTA, by enveloping the budding EEC in a British-led intergovernmental framework, would also guard against the creation of European federation centred on Germany and dominated by right wing parties. And freeing up trade with the Six was also bound to bring commercial opportunities for British firms while all the while safeguarding Britain's various military, economic and political links with the United States.⁴⁴ Evidence as to how critical these various elements were to Labour is provided by the queue of Labour parliamentarians speaking out in support of the FTA in a Commons debate on the subject in late March 1958. As the various speeches each made clear, the FTA as Labour saw things was the most cost-effective way of squaring the circle that was the emergence of a powerful political and economic bloc developing on Britain's doorstep.⁴⁵

Finding alternatives

It was likely this thinking that caused Labour to be so visibly alarmed when on 14 November 1958 France announced that it no longer thought it possible for the Six to join a free trade area without a common external tariff and accompanying common social and economic policies.⁴⁶ And it was also this line of thinking that in turn made it far less likely Labour would welcome the compromise solution being touted of a seven-

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ LHA, NEC Sub-Committee Uncatalogued Misc. Documents Box 63, 'European Free Trade Area', 17 September 1957, and Misc. Folder: European Coal and Steel Community, 1953-57, 'Note on the European Free Trade Area', March 1958.

⁴⁶ LHA, NEC minutes 17 December 1958, Minutes of meeting, 25 November 1958, and NEC Sub-Committee Uncatalogued Misc. Documents Box 63, Minutes of joint meeting, 9 February 1959. For the reasons behind the collapse, ELLISON, *Threatening*, 198–220; KAISER, *Using*, 88-108. EFTA comprised Britain, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland.

member trade area.⁴⁷ For sure, there was an obvious rationale behind the Conservatives' choice of a narrower trade unit: it would save face for a government deeply embarrassed that the centrepiece of its European strategy had been so spectacularly rejected by the French; any alliance consisting of the valued Scandinavian markets would itself be beneficial to British industry; and it could represent a future possible route to the Six should Britain decide to apply to join the EEC.⁴⁸ The Labour leadership, the NEC and the PLP all quickly rejected these arguments, however.⁴⁹ Opposition sprang in part from a belief that British exports to the Six would even in the short-term face quite severe discriminatory action. It was even thought likely that a trade war might break out between the two blocs in which the British worker would emerge as the prime casualty. Compared to its Conservative counterpart the Labour leadership was thus unwilling at this stage to show any hint of flexibility by accepting a smaller trade zone.⁵⁰

The potential political fallout from the emergence of two competing economic blocs further convinced Labour that a seven-member grouping ought to be treated with suspicion. The Cold War in late 1958 was entering a new and dangerous phase; Nikita Khrushchev, in his role as Soviet First Secretary, had only recently called time on the four-power occupation of Berlin, the beginnings of a crisis which would culminate with the building of the Berlin Wall. For Labour this changed the dynamic of the FTA entirely. Quoting Wilson, there was so far as Labour was concerned the very real risk that an economic division in Western Europe might 'spill over into the political field and undermine NATO'.⁵¹ The security and stability of Western Europe relied in other words on a strong, unified economic alliance.

The real question was what alternatives existed to the 'outer Seven'. Unfortunately for Labour, it did not really have the luxury of time to find a substitute. On the contrary, the timetable foreseen by EFTA members – as the organisation was to be called – envisaged that a convention be initialled by the end of 1959 and a new association commence work at some point in mid-1960. The Party had, moreover, already found frustration in its efforts to formulate an alternate plan to EFTA when a

⁴⁷ Arbejdermuseet & Arbejderbevægelsens Bibliotek og Arkiv, Copenhagen [henceforth ABA], Social Democratic Party archive [henceforth SD], Box 672, 'Notes from Conference of the Socialist International on the European Free Trade Area', 19 March 1959.

⁴⁸ See ELLISON, *Threatening*, 214-20.

⁴⁹ LHA, International Department Uncatalogued Files Box 3, 'Note on the Common Market and the Free Trade Area', 28 April 1959, and PLP Minutes 1958-59, Minutes of meeting, 11 February 1959.

⁵⁰ LHA, NEC minutes 26 November 1958, Minutes of joint meeting, 25 November 1958.

⁵¹ ABA, SD, Box 672, 'Conference of the Socialist International on the European Free Trade Area', 19 March 1959. See also M. BROAD, *Harold Wilson, Denmark and the Making of Labour European Policy, 1958-72* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2017), 31-5.

meeting of Western Europe's socialist parties failed to articulate a common approach to overcoming the Six/Seven divide.⁵² Left to its own devices, Labour would therefore have to act with some speed to postulate a coherent substitute to the Seven. It is all the more remarkable then that already in the opening weeks of 1959 Gaitskell and Wilson were together able to formulate at least three rival ideas. First was an organisation comprising those countries in the OEEC not already members of the Community.⁵³ Second was what Wilson referred to as a 'Commonwealth economic relationship', where the existing Imperial Preference of reciprocal free trade would be complemented by a new second tier extending to both the Six and other Western European states.⁵⁴ The third, not dissimilar scheme centred on expanding the Commonwealth preference to include the three Scandinavian states. Were this to happen, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish exports to the UK would be treated as equal to those from Australia, Canada and New Zealand with regard to import duties. The preference could even later extend to include the Six and other European states, creating one multi-continent trade bloc with Britain at its heart.⁵⁵

Of the three, the first blueprint was promptly dismissed. What in effect was little more than a slightly larger version of EFTA was after all the least ambitious solution and without the inclusion of the EEC considered almost worthless. Such was the distaste for EFTA however that Transport House quickly began working on the assumption that one of the latter two ideas would emerge as Labour's favoured response – even going so far as to seek the backing for the plans from the Australian and New Zealand labour parties.⁵⁶ A two-tier system would expand trade opportunities for OEEC states and all the while allow Britain to keep importing cheap food from the Commonwealth. More crucial, this sort of agreement could help bolster London's influence in the Commonwealth at a time when – as Labour itself readily acknowledged – far less importance was being attached to Britain by its former Dominions.⁵⁷ And a bloc linking Britain, the Commonwealth and Scandinavia would have additional political advantages, not least strengthening Britain's bargaining position with the Community in any future trade negotiations.⁵⁸ For Labour there was hence much to be

⁵² Broad, *Harold Wilson*, 38-40.

⁵³ LHA, NEC minutes 25 February 1959, Minutes of joint meeting, 22 January 1959.

⁵⁴ LHA, NEC minutes 25 February 1959, 'Secretary's Supplementary Report', February 1959.

⁵⁵ LHA, NEC Sub-Committee Uncatalogued Misc. Documents Box 63, Minutes of joint meeting, 9 February 1959.

⁵⁶ LHA, NEC minutes 25 March 1959, 'Report of Mr Callaghan's Visit', undated.

⁵⁷ Socialist International archive, Amsterdam, Box 584, 'Note by Balogh', January 1959.

⁵⁸ LHA, NEC minutes 25 February 1959, Minutes of joint meeting, 22 January 1959.

gained and little to be lost from including the Commonwealth in any solution to the Western Europe's burgeoning institutional divide.

The failure of all three substitutes might allow us immediately to assume that Labour was rather naïve about the international environment of the late 1950s. Suggesting that the EEC might be prepared even to consider some sort of second-class citizenship of the Commonwealth did seem to demonstrate a complete lack of awareness of the very real political momentum that had pushed the Six originally to build a supranational organisation and the sheer determination with which they each sought to build on the progress that had been achieved since establishing the ECSC. The default to a Commonwealth-centric solution to the Six/Seven split, meanwhile, implied that Labour continued to underestimate the diminishing significance of trade between Britain and its former colonies and in turn overstate the Commonwealth as a basis from which Britain could expect to exert influence on global affairs. Paradoxically, however, the whole logic of Labour's strategy in the weeks after the collapse of the FTA negotiations was still that Britain's future was somehow more deeply engaged with the Six. Regardless of the precise shape of the alternative schemes devised, they each shared an assumption that Britain's best interests were served not by eschewing the integration process but by being part of it, not by challenging the EEC but by working with it. Labour, it seems, had truly discovered that Britain's future would at least in some respects be European.

With this in mind and in the apparent absence of viable alternatives, there was ample scope in the latter part of 1959 and into 1960 to adopt a rather more conciliatory attitude to membership of the EEC itself. Such an approach admittedly developed in incremental stages. At first the Party appeared to support a Danish proposal for 'bridge-building' – a somewhat euphemistic term interpreted as a way of establishing functional links between the Seven and the Six – which implied that EFTA membership was not an end in itself but a step towards a pan-European trade agreement along similar lines to the FTA.⁵⁹ When neither London nor Brussels showed any real interest in reopening negotiations for an FTA-type grouping, the European Cooperation Sub-Committee in turn started to explore association with the EEC as one way to tackle possible

⁵⁹ LHA, Box 16 (4): International Sub-Committee Minutes and Documents 1953-1962, 'Informal discussions among socialist parties of the Six and Seven at Strasbourg, 8 May 1960: Report by Mr J. Clark', 10 May 1960; Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 615, 14 December 1959, 1156-8.

discriminatory action against British exports to the continent.⁶⁰ By this stage a small group of Gaitskellite revisionist MPs – most notably Jenkins and Bottomley – had already formed the Commission on European Integration and Disengagement which began to explore whether Labour ought to support Britain joining the EEC as a way of helping solve the broader Cold War divide.⁶¹ And in January 1960 the NEC itself agreed ‘that the time had come for a more careful study of the Party’s policy towards Europe and European institutions’.⁶²

The upshot of these various developments was that in 1960 pro-Europeans – and pro-Europeanism – appeared on the ascendency. If his conversations with *Guardian* editor Alastair Hetherington are anything to go by, Gaitskell himself could easily be included in this category.⁶³ In one conversation in July, Gaitskell even claimed his interest in joining the Six was ‘growing’, although the long-term political aims of the Six would need to be clarified in any negotiations.⁶⁴ An even greater display of Labour’s warmth towards the Six came in mid-May when in an interim report members of the Transport House working party presented evidence of the positive impact of Community membership. British exports were already disadvantaged by the progressive removal of intra-EEC tariffs; the Six were now attracting more US and third country investment; and Washington was ‘more and more orientated towards the Six both in matters of trade and defence’. Although it noted downsides – the ‘likely political developments within the Community’ was the most cutting – the report concluded that such ‘drawbacks of membership from the British point of view [are] likely to be balanced in the future by equally serious dangers resulting from non-membership’.⁶⁵ And when the PLP as a whole first debated the prospect of Britain joining the EEC, remarkable was the degree of warmth for possible entry to the Six. Wilson’s own enthusiasm was on full display when he characterized the Community as a ‘dynamic and expanding’ force, likely to attract more capital investment and enjoy a higher standard of living than Britain.⁶⁶ Only on the matter of the Commonwealth did he seem

⁶⁰ LHA, International Department Uncatalogued Files Box 3, ‘Note on the Common Market and the Free Trade Area’, 28 April 1959; *The Times*, 26 July 1960, 10.

⁶¹ LHA, International Department Uncatalogued Files Box 3, ‘Notes for the first meeting of Commission on European Integration and Disengagement’, June 1959.

⁶² LHA, NEC minutes 27 January 1960, Minutes of International Sub-Committee meeting, 12 January 1960, and NEC minutes 24 February 1960, Minutes of International Sub-Committee meeting, 9 February 1960.

⁶³ British Library of Political and Economic Science, London [henceforth BLPES], Alistair Hetherington papers, File 2/25, ‘Note of meeting with Gaitskell’, 22 June 1960.

⁶⁴ BLPES, Hetherington Papers, File 2/24, ‘Note of meeting with Gaitskell’, 14 July 1960.

⁶⁵ LHA, International Department Uncatalogued Files Box 3, ‘Problems of European Unity’, 25 May 1960.

⁶⁶ LHA, PLP minutes 1959-60, Minutes of meeting, 20 July 1960.

to agree with sceptics that British entry might cause problems.⁶⁷ But with the PLP rather indolent about the whole issue, the way was cleared for Wilson to take the lead in a Commons debate on the EEC just a month later. There were, Wilson made clear, both ‘advantages and costs’ that precluded any set policy being adopted in the immediate future, but the case for joining the Six was also ‘formidable’ and that the split between EFTA and the EEC was ‘a regrettable temporary phase’ that ought to be surmounted by ‘a single united economic community for Western Europe’.⁶⁸ For a group known for its reluctance towards European integration, the degree of its seeming enthusiasm for EEC membership in 1960 was indeed astounding.

Policy rooted in the 1950s

Simply to stop here and conclude that from 1960 Labour was fully committed to a future with Britain in the EEC would of course be deceptive. After all, Wilson’s own view of Community membership soon shifted against entry.⁶⁹ This ‘turn’ was also symptomatic of a much broader anti-Europeanism that took hold of the Party from 1961 as the question of whether Britain ought to fully accede to the EEC became more widely debated by the Party rank-and-file and affiliated trade unions.⁷⁰ A still more crucial indication that Labour’s pro-European conversion was by no means absolute came a year later with Gaitskell’s infamous ‘thousand years of history’ speech at Annual Conference.⁷¹ And when Wilson followed Gaitskell as leader in February 1963 and entered Downing Street as Prime Minister in October 1964, he did so while continuing to insist that there was little prospect of Britain joining the Community any time soon.⁷²

Nevertheless, it is beyond dispute that the decade preceding these events was of profound importance for Labour European policymaking. For a study of the 1950s does not just demonstrate that Labour did ‘discover’ European integration and at various levels systematically talk about the subject in a way few scholars have previously recognized. It also reveals the decade to have been a formative moment that would come to define the major themes of Labour thinking towards European integration well

⁶⁷ University College London Special Collections, Hugh Gaitskell papers, Box C/211, ‘Britain’s Relations with Europe by Harold Wilson’, 15 June 1960, and ‘Britain’s relations with Europe by Denis Healey’, June 1960.

⁶⁸ Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 628, 25 July 1960, 1109-27; LPACR, 1960, 75.

⁶⁹ LHA, Box 16 (4): International Sub-Committee Minutes and Documents 1953-1962, ‘Socialist International contact committee between countries of EEC and EFTA: Report by H. Wilson’, 25 July 1960.

⁷⁰ For this debate see BROAD, *Harold Wilson*, 64-71.

⁷¹ On the speech and its consequences, M. BROAD and O. DADDOW, ‘Half-remembered quotations from mostly forgotten speeches: The limits of Labour’s European policy discourse’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 12 (2010), 205-222.

⁷² BROAD, *Harold Wilson*, 90-4.

beyond 1960. Most obviously, the political and economic realities of the post-war world were such that Labour came to accept Britain required a European role of some kind, adapting its own structures to deal with the issue in a more methodical, permanent manner. On the eve of the 1960s, then, a complete disconnect from the continent was never really part of Labour's calculations about how best to respond to the integration process. Moreover, EFTA or any separate, narrower economic grouping was deemed an ineffective long-term response to the emergence of the Six as a political and economic unit. If Britain was to confront the Community, it needed to do so as part of a much broader multilateral framework which brought the UK and the Six together under one institutional roof. Already before 1960, however, Labour had arrived at a preferred solution to this enigma: the FTA. Its failure was in the short-term a highly disconcerting turn for Labour which quickly forced the Party to come up with alternatives to help overcome the economic and political division of Western Europe. Over time, though, this would transform into a debate – not whether Britain should seek closer relations with the Six but the method by which this was best done – that would become *the* preoccupation for Labour.

In this sense, the trajectory of Labour European policy was deeply influenced by the emergence in the 1950s of a critical mass of the Party who, having exhausted other options, evidently accepted the merits of EEC membership. This of course does not mean that subsequent strategy was preordained. But it does allow us to better understand the landscape against which future debates took place. The Party's struggle with European integration ought therefore not to be a story primarily associated with the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s – decades that witnessed a prolonged and intractable debate over whether Britain should join and thereafter remain in the EEC – but one seen as being very much rooted in the 1950s.

Character count: 54,832