Reviews in History

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Britain's Policy Towards the European Community: Harold Wilson and Britain's World Role, 1964?1967

Review Number:
544
Publish date:
Tuesday, 1 August, 2006
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ISBN:
9780714656144
Date of Publication:
2005
Price:
£75.00
Pages:
231pp.
Publisher:
Routledge
Place of Publication:
Abingdon
Reviewer:
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Every prime minister's reputation combines a mixture of image and reality, and that of Wilson has all too often been the image of the wily, pipe-smoking fixer. However, there is a growing school of revisionist thinking about Wilson that is more nuanced and sympathetic, seen in recent publications such as those edited by Oliver Daddow and Peter Dorey (1). This excellent book forms part of this revisionist assessment. Based on detailed archival research and on extensive interviews, it creates a subtle and complex assessment of Wilson the pragmatic politician. The book succeeds in its aim of recreating British government decision making on European integration during the mid-1960s, and of analysing the resulting effort to achieve membership of the European Communities (EC). Parr both elucidates and critiques Wilson's motivation and strategy in deciding to launch a second British application for membership, in the context of domestic and international constraints. She has produced a well-written and compelling analysis.

The structure of the book is logical and clearly set out, moving through the period 1964?1967 chronologically but with attention to the key arguments throughout. The introduction sets out the context of British foreign and European policy in the 1960s and illustrates the current debates surrounding Harold Wilson in the literature. Parr gives a clear rationale for a reassessment of Wilson, and of his handling of the domestic environment in the arena of European policy. The introduction also notes the important

developments within the European Community during the 1960s, and highlights the significance of the British application for membership for those developments. The introduction finishes with a useful overview of the structure of the book.

To start, the book sets out the flaws in the existing historiographical assessment of Wilson's European policy, arguing that it was more consistent and more thoroughly based on strategic concerns than has been recognised. Wilson's thinking developed during the first, Conservative, application to the EC, when he acknowledged the attraction of 'the right sort of Europe' (p. 19)?outward-looking, Atlanticist, intergovernmental and facilitating of technological progress. However, he remained focused on the Commonwealth and on modernization in Britain itself. At the same time, the desire to maintain a strategic world role and thus partnership with the United States meant a focus outside Europe. These priorities, combined with difficulties within the EC itself, meant that despite Whitehall pressure, there was no urgent need to revisit European policy during the early months of the Labour government.

Diplomacy therefore concentrated, as the second chapter explores, on 'bridge building' between the EC and the British-formed European Free Trade Association (EFTA). The need to assuage EFTA anger at the British imposition of an import surcharge tied in neatly with Wilson's desire to seek technological collaboration and greater free trade more widely in Europe. However, Foreign Office pressure for a reassessment of the membership question contributed to Wilson's decision to raise the issue in Cabinet. At this stage, Parr demonstrates, Wilson's policy was both reactive and inadequate; he was responding to EFTA discontent, to efforts at resolving the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the EC, to the increasing fragmentation of the Commonwealth, and to the 1965-66 crisis in the Community itself. He had not yet grasped the impossibility of creating 'the right sort of Europe', but increasingly felt the constraints of the weakening of Britain's international position.

The work goes on to explore the transition from this amorphous trend of seeing Britain's future in Europe, to the decision to apply, unconditionally, for full membership of the EC. International developments such as the French decision to withdraw from the Integrated Military Command of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and American rage at Wilson's policy on Vietnam shook the Atlantic Alliance and made the need for consolidation in Europe more apparent. Economic realities, including the failure of the National Plan and consequent need for massive cuts in the defence budget, contributed to the narrowing of options. The sterling crisis of July 1966 was the proximate cause for Wilson's shift to a policy of seeking membership and his suggestion that he and Foreign Secretary George Brown should tour European capitals to explore the likely continental response to a British application. No single moment of conversion is pinpointed; rather, at some point between the sterling crisis and the Cabinet meeting held in Chequers a few months later in October, Wilson made up his mind that an application to the EC was the best option for Britain. From this point, Parr argues, 'backsliding from some kind of approach to the EEC was extremely unlikely' (p. 95).

The rest of the book is therefore concerned less with Wilson's own decision making and more with his domestic and international efforts to bring the policy to fruition. Chapter Four describes and analyses the aforementioned tour, during which Wilson accepted that only a full and unconditional application for membership, rather than a conditional one or a request for exploratory talks, could have any chance of success. The centrality of the French role was clear from the outset. As Wilson saw it, the only possible way to pre-empt French criticism and likely veto was to take a clear step away from previous British hesitations and conditions, and to 'state willingness to enter the EEC almost at any price' (p. 124). However, it was not only the Six whom Wilson had to convince.

Wilson still had to bring his Cabinet to accept the notion of an unconditional application, a problem covered in the fifth chapter. He did so by making the political case for entry, arguing that in both the short and long term, entry into the EC was Britain's only option; Britain had no choice but to keep trying until successful. Ministers did not come to agreement on terms of entry?indeed, Wilson forced them to address only the broader political case. That is not to say that problematic issues like CAP, capital movements, New Zealand and the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement were not discussed, but that they were not permitted to obscure or

take priority over the fact that Wilson saw entry as the only possible choice for Britain. He spun this decision in a positive light, arguing that membership and leadership in Europe would enable Britain to play a greater, not lesser, role in the world. Resolution of some Commonwealth issues, the decision to withdraw fully from East of Suez, and ongoing economic problems only made the outcome more certain, and ministers ultimately acquiesced in Wilson's desire for a full and unconditional application.

The final chapter charts the period from the publication of Britain's application to the EC to French President de Gaulle's veto of the same. Despite the likelihood of a French veto, Wilson and Brown genuinely believed that entry in the short term was possible, and they directed their attention both to negotiating with de Gaulle and to demonstrating Britain's ability to accept the Treaty of Rome in order to undermine potential French criticism and to bolster the support of the Five. Wilson sought to win de Gaulle over through offering technological and political collaboration. When he could not overcome what he saw as de Gaulle's 'irrationality' (p. 160) he made a tactical shift toward wooing the Five instead, returning to his earlier idea of a technological community. Continued British economic weakness, culminating with the devaluation of sterling in November, gave de Gaulle the opportunity decisively to block the opening of negotiations with Britain, first in a press conference and then within the formal structures of the EC. Nevertheless, the firm nature of Wilson's pragmatic conversion to a future in the EC was underlined when he, Brown and the Cabinet insisted that the application remained live.

The conclusion coherently draws the several arguments of the book together. Parr restates the point that Britain's turn to the EEC under Wilson was not in any way inevitable (p. 185). Instead, reacting both to domestic constraints and international developments, Wilson became a strong advocate of British entry to the EC. Events culminating in the July 1966 sterling crisis forced him to make a pragmatic choice in order to rebuild domestic strength and to safeguard a future role for Britain in the world. In a similarly pragmatic manner, he accepted that only an unconditional application had any chance of success. He forced his Cabinet into a position where they had little option but to back the application, whatever ministers' misgivings over possible terms. Finally, although the application was unsuccessful in the short term, it compelled an acknowledgement that 'Europe' could not be confined to 'the Six' in the long term. Nevertheless, Wilson's pursuit of European policy was flawed both domestically and internationally, leaving crucial questions open for the future.

The book is based upon extensive and detailed archival research, in multiple British archives: The National Archives in Kew; the Labour Party Archives in Manchester; the Bank of England Archives in London; and collections of private papers held in several libraries. The National Archives research alone involved the papers of a number of different departments, illustrating that European policy was capable of dominating government attention, and that the application for membership required a truly cross-departmental approach. The private papers consulted included all those available from relevant ministers and officials, although the papers of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx are only recently open and may well merit deeper examination (2). No non-British archives have been used in this research?a criticism directed at other recent works (3). However, the central aim of this book is to reconstruct *British* decision-making and *British* diplomacy on the European continent; therefore, the British nature of the research is wholly justified. Moreover, Parr handles the mass of documentary evidence with great clarity and assurance.

Archival sources are supplemented by a number of interviews or written correspondence with key officials and two former Cabinet ministers. Some key Cabinet ministers alive at the time of writing are missing from the list?Barbara Castle, Denis Healey and Roy Jenkins come to mind immediately?but of course it is impossible to assess whether these or other ministers declined an invitation to be interviewed.

Parr also makes use of the many published diaries and memoirs produced by Wilson himself, by his Cabinet ministers and acquaintances, and by other leading European statesmen. The book is further grounded in a wide and up to date reading of relevant secondary literature, detailed in the extensive bibliography. Cutting edge research was harvested from unpublished sources including conference papers and PhD theses. As Sir Michael Palliser comments in the foreword, Parr has produced a work of 'meticulous research and real scholarship' (p. x).

The book therefore asks and answers clear research questions with no overt omissions. European policy is considered in the context of broader foreign policy and of domestic economic concerns. No attention is paid to other areas of domestic policy, perhaps because it had little or no impact on the core themes of the book. There are two mutually connected areas where further discussion and analysis would be interesting, given time and space. First, there is little reference to the internal dynamics of the Labour Party itself on the question of European policy outside the first chapter; this omission may simply reflect the lack of importance of the Party in the making of European policy. Second, Parr argues in the introduction that '1967 emerges as the moment at which the domestic political consensus in Britain shifted decisively in favour of a British future in Europe' (p. 7). She clearly illustrates this assertion in terms of the two main political parties, but there is little reference to public opinion and any role it may have played in shaping the change in policy. As with the Labour Party, public opinion may simply prove to be irrelevant in the formation of European policy, particularly after the consolidation of Wilson's governing strength in the 1966 election.

Parr's scholarship in *Britain's Policy Towards the European Community* is convincing. It provides a persuasive revision of Harold Wilson the politician in general and of his European policy in particular. It is not a hagiography: there is no effort to present Wilson as driven by principle or as an idealist, and the weaknesses and flaws in his decision-making, his world-view and his statesmanship are laid bare. However, the book convincingly undoes the still popular image of Wilson the wily politician, driven only by power politics and the necessities of party management. It presents Wilson as a leader confronted with tremendous domestic economic difficulties and, at the same time, narrowing international options for a state used to playing a large role in the world.

Notes

1. *Harold Wilson and European Integration: Britain's Second Application to join the EEC*, ed. O. Daddow (2003); *The Labour Governments 1964-1970*, ed. P. Dorey (Abingdon, 2006). Back to (1)
2. Ben Pimlott had access to the Wilson papers for his biography, as did Philip Ziegler, but few other historians have yet had access to this enormous and under-catalogued resource (Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (Glasgow, 1992); Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Lifeof Lord Wilson of Rievaulx* (1993). Back to (2)
3. See N. Piers Ludlow, 'The making of the CAP: towards a historical analysis of the EU's first major policy', *Contemporary European History*, 14.3 (2005), 348. Back to (3)

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