

## EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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**M**ORE THAN FORTY years separates David Cameron's referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union and that held by Harold Wilson on the same issue in 1975. Much has, of course, changed between the two referendums. A national referendum was a constitutional novelty in 1975, its use itself provoking extensive controversy. By 2016, the United Kingdom had acquired substantial experience of these devices, including two highly significant ones (on the electoral system and the union with Scotland) under the 2010–15 coalition government. Both major parties have experienced a series of serious internal ruptures and the party system itself has fragmented as a result of the emergence of third parties. And the European project has gone through transformations and crises so that its future looks much less certain than it did in 1975.

In revisiting Harold Wilson's approach to Europe, the parallels and similarities between Cameron's contemporary dilemma and Wilson's are striking, although there are evident and stark dissimilarities. Wilson's handling of European policy, from his first administration in 1964 until his successful

delivery of a 'yes' vote in 1975, was shaped by a tension between maintaining party unity and his perception of the wider national interest of the United Kingdom. At the stage at which Wilson began to address the European issue, the Common Market was a relatively recent item on the country's political agenda. David Cameron, by contrast, has lived through a period in which division over Europe has plagued the Conservative Party and created a body of internal opposition to his leadership as well as fuelling support for a potentially influential third party in the form of UKIP. And, just as the outcome of the referendum vote in the early twenty-first century will be likely to have a powerful impact on Cameron's historical reputation, so too Wilson's handling of the United Kingdom's relationship with Europe is an important factor in any reassessment of his overall legacy and historical achievement.

#### WILSON'S EUROPEAN ODYSSEY

Bernard Donoghue, writing in a 2007 volume about the experience of the 1975 referendum, noted that for over a decade Wilson had coolly taken many positions on the EEC.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Wilson's attitude towards the European Union has puzzled observers and many, especially ardent pro-Europeans such as Roy Jenkins, would see his twists and turns over European policy as opportunistic and tactical, reflecting a political style that was wily and cunning rather than ideological or principled. This focus on short-term political tactics rather than any overriding vision became a familiar criticism of Wilson's political style, generating distrust on all sides of the Labour Party. Philip Ziegler, Wilson's authorised biographer, quotes interviews with Peter Shore and Gerald Kaufman that underline the extent to which Wilson, even in the early years of his first government, was neglectful of strategic planning and unwilling to focus on long-term issues.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, Wilson, like his predecessor Hugh Gaitskell, was hostile to the Common Market that Harold Macmillan had applied to join in 1961. Gaitskell and Wilson disliked and distrusted each other but on this they seemed in agreement. Gaitskell's speech to Labour conference in 1962 famously argued that membership of the Common Market would mean 'the end of Britain as an independent European state' and the end of 'a thousand years of history'. It would also mean the end of the Commonwealth. The emphasis on the Commonwealth was one important factor shaping the attitudes of many in the Labour Party about Europe; but so too was the suspicion that the Common Market was not only a threat to British economic autonomy but also inherently at odds with the socialist vision. It was, in short, a capitalist club. Wilson himself, unlike the Europhile Ted Heath, had little natural sympathy for the European vision. Wilson had been taken as a child for a six-month stay in Australia, which Ziegler notes was the foundation for his future enthusiasm for the Commonwealth.<sup>3</sup> At the stage of Wilson's childhood visit, the Commonwealth was a very different entity from what it was to become later and romantic attachment was, by the 1964-70 period, tempered by a series of problems within it, especially Rhodesia. Wilson's background, values and personal tastes inclined him towards the Commonwealth and the United States rather than continental Europe. As Anthony King noted in his authoritative study *Britain Says Yes*, Wilson embodied a range of provincial British values. These values, as caricatured in *Private Eye*, were hardly cosmopolitan or sophisticated and ranged from football and golf to Worcestershire sauce. Wilson's natural holiday preference was the Isles of Scilly, not the Continent. Although there were some strong pro-Europeans inside the Labour Party, including George Brown, one of Wilson's rivals for the leadership, Wilson was certainly not one of them. Brown's erratic behaviour perhaps made his championing of the European cause less effective but, from 1966 onwards, the pro-Europeans had increasingly influential spokesmen in a younger generation

of political heavyweights, especially Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams. The Labour Party generally, including the National Executive Committee, was negative about the Common Market and wanted to see a series of prior conditions imposed before membership could be agreed. These prior conditions included, importantly, the protection of Commonwealth interests and British agriculture and the maintenance of sovereignty – Britain’s right to control its own economy and foreign policy. The Labour manifesto of 1964, while emphasising the desirability of closer links with Europe, stressed that the United Kingdom’s primary responsibility was to the Commonwealth.<sup>4</sup> Ziegler notes that, while in 1964 Wilson’s concern was to ‘take up a position which almost everyone could accept, if not actually share, on Europe he came closest to taking up an identifiable position’.<sup>5</sup> It was a position that was sufficiently opposed to membership of the European Community that Arthur Bryant wrote to congratulate him on saving the country.

Wilson’s attitude to Europe changed markedly, however, as a result of being in government. Between 1964 and 1970, he moved from being an opponent of entry (at least on the terms suggested by Macmillan in 1961–62) to being a convert to the British membership. It is difficult to chart the cause of that conversion. There was pressure from the United States to bring the United Kingdom into Europe. There was pressure from the Foreign Office, reflecting a changing vision of the United Kingdom’s role in the world. Powerful individuals also exercised influence on Wilson. These individuals included strong pro-Europeanists such as Sir Michael Palliser, who served as Wilson’s private secretary between 1966 and 1969, and Michael Stewart, a committed pro-Europeanist who took over as Foreign Secretary in 1965 and again in 1968–70. The *Daily Mirror* magnate Cecil King may also have been an influential voice, although King was to launch a bizarre attack on Wilson in 1968.

More generally, Wilson in government was increasingly sensitive to the rapidly changing nature of Britain’s position in the world and the changing

nature of its relationship both with the Commonwealth and with the United States. Wilson's position as Prime Minister afforded him greater authority over colleagues in Cabinet (which he was skilled at manipulating) and more confidence in relation to party management, although he was still very aware of the constraints imposed by the party. Wilson's government made Britain's second application to join the Common Market in 1967. Although the aging de Gaulle vetoed it, the stage was set for Wilson to commit to British membership of the EEC and a radical restructuring of the United Kingdom's trading and diplomatic orientation. The second application perhaps created less internal opposition than might have been expected because strong Cabinet opponents, such as the left-of-centre Barbara Castle and Richard Crossman, were content to accept the initiative because they, correctly, anticipated a French veto. Wilson himself had also grown subtle and confident in his handling of the issue in government. His conversion to the European cause may have been of the 'head not the heart', in Sir Michael Palliser's words, and it underlined his inherent pragmatism. But his willingness to evaluate the arguments for and against entry dispassionately and his strategic handling of Cabinet provided increasingly firm direction for a pro-entry policy. Equally importantly – as recent scholarship has underlined – Wilson's government did not retreat from its application after the de Gaulle veto. Rather, it maintained its commitment to eventual membership anticipating that, once de Gaulle had passed from the scene, the major impediments to British membership would be overcome. The government took advantage of the opportunity afforded by de Gaulle's 'non' to build foundations for eventual entry, using diplomatic means to build alliances within Europe and to reorient the priorities of British foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> How important this period of consolidation was for securing Britain's eventual participation in Europe is a contested issue. As Melissa Pine suggested, Heath would have found his task in 1970 much harder had Britain withdrawn its application after de Gaulle's veto, although

Edward Heath was hardly swift to acknowledge his debt to his predecessor. And she quotes Uwe Kitzinger's judgment that, without Wilson, the United Kingdom could not have entered the European Union.<sup>7</sup> Pine is one of the few to acknowledge Wilson's role through a range of domestic and overseas strategies, including the placement and support of key pro-Europeans in the Foreign Office (at various stages George Brown, Michael Stewart and Alun Chalfont), the promotion of figures such as George Thomson and the marginalisation of fierce critics of the European enterprise such as Peter Shore.<sup>8</sup> Pine notes that Wilson's use of Cabinet committees and sub-committees to obtain authority for a British initiative in 1968 was masterly, echoing the judgment of Peter Hennessy that Wilson's tactic was to remove key strategic decisions from the purview of full Cabinet.<sup>9</sup>

The saga of Wilson's management of European policy did not end with the loss of the general election in 1970. With the surprise Conservative victory it was Edward Heath who was able to conclude successful negotiations for British entry to the Common Market. As John Campbell has commented, had Wilson been re-elected in 1970, a Labour government with Roy Jenkins as Foreign Secretary and George Thomson as chief negotiator would have represented its application and 'Wilson as Prime Minister would have remained committed to its success'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Campbell quotes Wilson's assurance to Jenkins that he was not just committed but 'dedicated' to European membership. And there is also evidence cited by Campbell that both Jenkins and Wilson wanted to move towards a single currency.<sup>11</sup>

It was not to be, however. The application that had been so carefully prepared by Labour was swiftly picked up by Heath and Tony Barber, the Minister for Europe, 'within days' and, almost as quickly, Labour began to backtrack. As Campbell writes, all of Labour's 'old suspicion of Europe was fanned back to life by the election and by its loathing of Heath; and in the interest of party unity and the doctrine that the opposition's job is to oppose, Wilson began to

equivocate about what terms of entry Labour would find acceptable'.<sup>12</sup> The internal politics of the party became increasingly bitter as the debate over Europe reopened the old fault lines between right and left in the party but also foreshadowed new ones about the character of the Labour Party, especially the role of the unions and its commitment to socialism. Despite public endorsement of the terms of entry secured by Heath by Labour's chief negotiators, the debate had taken on a life of its own. During 1971, the Labour Party moved to the left and in opposition to European membership. Following a special NEC conference in July 1971, the annual conference voted overwhelmingly to reject the terms of entry, thereby increasingly isolating the pro-Europeans. As the divisions became deeper, the position of the pro-Europeans in the party became more difficult. Wilson, although urged by Jenkins and others to allow a free vote when the issue of the principle of European membership came before Parliament, imposed a three-line whip on the vote in October 1971. The tactic was an effort to maintain party unity but it failed. Sixty-eight Labour MPs, led by Roy Jenkins, voted against their own party and a further twenty abstained. This vote was ultimately to lead to the resignation of Jenkins as deputy leader of the party in the wake of its increasingly anti-European stance and its decision to pledge itself to renegotiation of the terms of membership and submit them to a referendum. Ultimately, of course, Jenkins, following a period as president of the European Commission, was to lead a formal breakaway from Labour in the form of the SDP.

Party considerations usually play a greater role in opposition than in government and the decision to hold a referendum of renegotiated terms of entry reflected Wilson's sense of the direction of Labour opinion and his determination, despite his own somewhat demoralised state after 1970, that the party must be held together at all costs. The referendum idea had initially been opposed by Wilson but, by 1973, he saw it as a mechanism for maintaining unity. Wilson's fragile majorities in the two elections of 1974 changed

the context again, but he saw quickly how he could secure acceptable terms from Europe without antagonising opinion at home. By March 1975, the Cabinet had been persuaded to accept the terms of entry, which included concession to the Commonwealth. For those opponents who wished to oppose membership, there was an agreement to differ for the duration of the campaign. Keeping the campaign in the referendum low key was an important part of his strategy, but with the government effectively backing a 'yes' vote there was little doubt about the outcome, though perhaps about the level of victory. Throughout, Wilson seemed less than totally enthusiastic about the campaign. As Bernard Donoughue wrote, Wilson saw the issue not as one of principle as both the Jenkinsites and the left did but as a question of party management. His twin goal was to prevent Labour inescapably committing itself to withdrawal and to maintain Labour unity.<sup>13</sup> But, and this is the important point, Wilson had almost certainly made up his mind by 1974 that the United Kingdom needed to retain its membership. This was not a ringing endorsement, for Wilson's own political position was agnostic, accepting the arguments that it was, on balance, better to stay in. Donoughue shows how Wilson's skill at Cabinet management endorsed a 'yes' vote and he underlines the role of the referendum unit in the Foreign Office in energising the campaign. Tellingly, he paints Wilson as unenthusiastic in the campaign itself and notes that he did not seem to enjoy the victory he had secured.

## CONCLUSIONS

So how should we rate Wilson's handling of European issues? Donoughue's view is that Wilson never warmed to Europe and, as noted earlier, that he would 'probably have preferred that the EEC did not exist'.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Donoughue, like most commentators, acknowledged Wilson's ability

to grasp political reality and to adapt to it. Given that it did exist, Wilson accepted the need to be in and to stay in once the United Kingdom's bid for membership had succeeded. Overwhelmingly, however, his priority was to keep the Labour Party together. This goal had guided his handling of the Gaitskellite/left split through the period of opposition in 1963–64 and in government from 1964–70. But the task had become increasingly challenging as a result of changing dynamics within the Labour Party, inside the unions and the constituency parties, as well as in the parliamentary party, rendering the kind of compromises over doctrine and policy at which Wilson excelled, redundant. After 1970, Wilson's long period as leader and premier meant that he was at the very least weary and losing some of his technique, and that a series of short-term tactical gambits would be increasingly inadequate to heal Labour's divisions. As it happened, the formal breach in Labour's ranks did not occur until the 1980s, although when it came the split was bitter and the fissures within the movement have remained.

What Wilson did achieve, however, was the promotion of the entry of the United Kingdom into Europe and, more surprisingly, sustaining membership against the odds given the volatile politics of the 1960s and '70s. Wilson's achievement in preparing the ground for the eventual success of the negotiations and by keeping the application on the table in his second administration, despite the disappointment of the veto, have been acknowledged. His achievement in keeping Britain in Europe after the intense urge to reject Heath and all his works in Labour ranks should also be recognised. Wilson's style was perhaps inherently obfuscatory, but it usually achieved its ends – at least in the short term. Whether the circumstances of the current referendum or the skills of David Cameron and his team will allow a similar outcome for a second referendum on the issue of Britain's role in Europe remains to be seen. Politicians have to live with their party constraints and Cameron would probably be delighted to achieve the kind of result Wilson

secured in 1975, unheroic though it may have seemed then. The referendum of 1975 did not close the issue of British membership and it is unlikely also that a referendum called on the issue in 2017 or before will end debate. The interesting, key question facing David Cameron is whether and when that debate will further split his party.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. P. Ziegler, *Wilson*, p. 183
3. *Ibid.*, p. 9
4. M. Pine, *Harold Wilson and Europe: Pursuing Britain's Membership of the European Community* (London: Tauris Academic, 2007), p. 16
5. P. Ziegler, *Wilson*, pp 140–41
6. M. Pine, *Harold Wilson and Europe*
7. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 175
8. *Ibid.*, pp 175–6
9. P. Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: Office and Powers* (London: Penguin, 2000); M. Pine, *Harold Wilson and Europe*, p. 176
10. J. Campbell, *Roy Jenkins*, p. 370
11. *Ibid.*, p. 370
12. *Ibid.*, p. 371
13. B. Donoghue, 'The Inside View from No. 10', p. 28
14. *Ibid.*, p. 132