

Destined to Brexit?

British Pathways to Membership in the European Communities 1945-73

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Abstract: This article explores whether and how the United Kingdom was destined to Brexit before it even joined the European Communities in 1973. Drawing on archival sources, media reports and literature about Britain's arduous relationship with 'Europe', it argues that four features made the Brexit outcome more likely. They were the accession to the EC as a measure of last resort which prevented the construction of a new sustainable narrative about a brighter future in 'Europe'; the political elites' use of the issue of EC membership or further integration for short term party gains; highly exaggerated hopes that membership in and by itself would cure Britain's economic ills or give it a new global leadership role; and a colonial style diplomacy that severely underestimated Britain's growing dependency on its continental European neighbours. In conclusion, the article argues that it nevertheless required the formation of a parochial political elite of little Englanders to achieve the extreme outcome of Brexit.

Introduction

Was Brexit 'a death foretold' (Conway 2018, p. 8)? In other words, was the United Kingdom possibly destined to Brexit before it even joined the then European Communities (EC) in 1973? After all, as historians have repeatedly pointed out (e.g. Crowson, 2011; Milward, 2002), the UK had different commitments from those of the continental Western European countries that first formed the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951-52 and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957-58. After the Second World War, 50% of the UK's trade was with the Commonwealth, and 90% of its foreign direct investment outside of Europe. The UK also had a seat on the United Nations' Security Council, became a nuclear power, and remained militarily engaged east of Suez until the late 1960s. For the time after EC accession, moreover, political scientists have often conceptualised the country as an 'awkward partner' (George, 1990) that lacked commitment to the EC's long term political objectives and negotiated multiple opt-outs.

At the same time, from a historical-institutionalist perspective applied to European integration and the European Union (e.g. Pierson, 2004), Brexit should never have happened. After all, membership in the EC created strong path dependencies in the form of full integration in a complex set of formal institutions and binding legal commitments in a treaty framework that until the 2009 Lisbon Treaty did not even allow for the possibility of secession. Membership also strongly shaped UK policymaking institutions and processes. As the new British government found out after the 2016 Brexit referendum, in fields like trade, where the EU had sole competence from the start, the member states no longer had significant resources and expertise. Even in fields with subsidiary or no EU competence, member states' policymaking had become entangled over time in horizontal networks and practices of cooperation, learning, and transfer. In these circumstances, from a historical-institutionalist perspective, Brexit should only have happened following a major external shock. Instead, it resulted from a creeping process of domestic political corrosion fostered by purposeful populist entrepreneurs.

Drawing on the more flexible concept of pathways (e.g. Freistein et al., 2021), this article argues that key features of the UK's attitudes towards and policies on European integration between 1945 and 1973 did create legacies that greatly facilitated this domestic political corrosion much later. Pathways here are understood as covering informal (attitudes, perceptions, narratives, etc.) as well as formal institutions, with deeper historical roots rather than specific starting points of formal institutionalisation, which according to historical institutionalism create 'corridors' for political and institutional developments. Pathways in this sense amplify what historians conceptualise as long term background influences on politics and policymaking. Crucially, such background influences do not *determine* political outcomes like Brexit, which remains a contingent process that started after the end of the Cold War. Decisionmakers could have identified, addressed and minimised such influences to change the course of the UK in 'Europe'. However, large sections of the British political elite – especially, but not only in the Conservative Party – had a stake in maintaining historical pathways to protect their own place in the UK's social fabric and governance structures – something that in turn created space for populist entrepreneurs to shape the particular path to Brexit.

Based on archival research, publicly accessible sources and the extensive literature about the UK and 'Europe' after 1945, this article explores four features that arguably shaped British attitudes and policies until EC accession and beyond. The first is the profound experience of the British political elite of ever narrowing policy options. For most Conservatives and Socialists, EC membership was only ever a measure of last resort in desperate circumstances

after all other foreign policy options had been exhausted. For most it was not a positive choice for a different, European future.

Second, when the Macmillan and Wilson governments applied for EEC membership in 1961 and 1967 respectively, their expectations of membership dividends were grotesquely inflated. EC accession alone was never going to address the UK's structural economic problems nor was it ever likely to restore its political leadership and great power status.

Moreover, third, facilitated by the first past the post electoral system and confrontational nature of the political system, neither the Macmillan nor the Wilson government made any effort to create a cross-party consensus on the desirability of EC membership, let alone further integration. The British political elite never tried to develop a future oriented positive narrative of European integration to create stable voter support for EC membership.

Fourth, the British political elite, despite the desperate need to cultivate the goodwill of their continental European partners, frequently fell back on a colonial diplomatic style. Wild threats combined with disregard for the UK's legal obligations in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) both disillusioned and antagonised even the UK's closest allies in Europe. Their repeated experiences with erratic British behaviour over 'Europe' reinforced long established notions of 'perfidious Albion' which some, like the French President Charles de Gaulle, used for their own political purposes.

Joining 'Europe': a measure of last resort

When continental European governments began to push for 'supranational' institutions and greater Western European economic integration after 1947-48, Labour and the Conservatives were broadly united in the belief that the UK's participation in such ventures was neither possible nor desirable (Young, 1984). The foreign policy compass for the Conservatives was Churchill's three circles doctrine: the belief that the UK still had a special global role to play at the intersection of three circles of relations with the US, the Commonwealth, and Western Europe. Prioritising the least important, Western Europe, over the others would undermine this global role, especially by destroying the Commonwealth preference system.

While the Labour governments until 1951 broadly shared these concerns, they also saw ECSC-type integration as clashing with their policy of nationalisation for the coal and steel sectors and more generally, their vision of socialism in one country (Dell, 1995). The failure of the European Defence Community in 1954 combined with its replacement solution of Germany's

accession to NATO and the creation of the Western European Union subsequently appeared to confirm the complacent consensus among the two larger parties and in Whitehall that the continental Europeans would never succeed at deepening integration without UK participation (Kaiser, 1999, pp. 22-27).

From the Messina conference of ECSC foreign ministers in the spring of 1955 onwards, however, the Conservative governments' foreign policy options narrowed so much that an application for EEC membership seemed inevitable by 1961. In 1955-56, the Board of Trade already concluded that the setting up of an industrial customs union among the ECSC member states would have strong adverse impact on the UK's external trade. Whereas German and other producers would have tariff-free access to the new larger market, UK exporters would have to pay the future common external tariff. As a result, with the support of Peter Thorneycroft, the President of the Board of Trade, its Permanent Secretary Peter Lee already advocated UK participation in a customs union in interministerial discussions in November 1955 *if* the ECSC member states looked likely to succeed with their plan (The National Archives (TNA): CAB 134/889/8th). Lee, like Thorneycroft in the Cabinet, was still isolated with this position, however. At this point, the Foreign Office still argued strongly that such a move would be incompatible with the three circles doctrine. As Ivone Kirkpatrick, the Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, remarked laconically in a letter to Frederick Hoyer Millar, the British ambassador to Germany, 'there are in Whitehall economists who will undertake to prove that the United Kingdom ought to join in setting up a European Common Market! It was left ... to the Foreign Office to supply the spectacles of political reality' (TNA: FO 371/116056/369).

When it became clearer in the spring of 1956 that the ECSC countries were indeed likely to set up an industrial customs union, the British government frantically started to search for a solution that could avoid the UK's exclusion from it. It eventually came up with the so-called Plan G for a wider Western European free trade area which would have comprised the future EEC and the other Western European member states of the Organization of European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), including the UK. Such a free trade area would have given British producers tariff-free access to a large market while allowing the UK to retain an independent trade policy and maintain Commonwealth preferences. The plan also foresaw the exclusion of agricultural trade, which promised the best of all worlds. It offered nothing by way of economic or political advantages to several of the UK's partners, however, especially France. This, combined with the EEC's heavy emphasis on fostering its internal cohesion after

the treaty came into force in January 1958, greatly facilitated de Gaulle's veto against the plan at the end of 1958 (Kaiser, 1999, pp. 88-100; Ellison, 2000).

The British government now proceeded to create EFTA in 1958-59, which initially comprised Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, and Portugal alongside the UK (Kaiser, 1997). Under pressure from the Federation of British Industries and its Swiss and Swedish counterparts, it concluded that it had no other option, despite the group's geographical disparity and limited economic value (TNA: PREM 11/2532). If the UK were to surrender to de Gaulle's veto it would be seen as a sign of weakness by other OEEC states and further reduce the UK's influence and prestige in Western Europe (TNA: CAB 130/123/GEN 580/4th). As Macmillan put it, 'if we cannot successfully organise the opposition group ... then we shall undoubtedly be eaten up, one by one, by the Six' (Macmillan, 1959). Lee, at this point Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, doubted however 'whether a heterogeneous and scattered grouping – brought together by the ties of common funk, rather than by any deeper purpose or by geographical contiguity – can develop a real cohesion or even continuity' (TNA: CAB 134/1852).

During talks with the EEC about a possible rapprochement between the 'Six' and the 'Seven' in 1960, EFTA already turned out to be a diplomatic liability for the UK. Crucially, the US government consistently supported the EEC while regarding EFTA as a discriminatory bloc without the political benefits (Kaiser, 2001; Winand, 1993). With the EEC countries enjoying much higher domestic and dynamic trade growth in anticipation of the EEC tariff reductions, and de Gaulle threatening to turn the organisation into an independent international actor, the Foreign Office now concluded, and Macmillan agreed, that EEC membership was imperative to maintain a UK great power role. In fact, newly elected US President John F. Kennedy and the State Department aggressively pushed for a British EEC application primarily to tame de Gaulle. Following a summit meeting with Kennedy in April 1961, Macmillan realised that the UK had to apply soon or the 'special relationship' with the US and the future of the UK's nuclear deterrent would be in jeopardy (TNA: CAB 128/35.I/24th).

When he became Prime Minister following the 1964 elections, Wilson's economic and foreign policy options similarly dwindled until the 1967 EEC application. He originally planned to base his foreign and trade policy on the Commonwealth. Commonwealth trade stagnated, however, its member states' trade interests diverged increasingly, and the UK continued to be isolated over crucial political issues – after Suez in 1956 and the membership of South Africa in 1960, now over Rhodesia. EFTA brought insufficient economic benefits. At the same time, the US was unlikely to agree to a transatlantic free trade area as proposed by US Senator Jacob

Javits in 1962. Association with the EEC without full membership, even if acceptable to its member states, moreover, would relegate the British to ‘second-class citizens and the effect could even be to frustrate rather than promote the achievement of the type of European policies we want’ (TNA: PREM 13/306).

Economically, moreover, the Wilson government’s policies were in tatters after the demise of the National Plan in the summer of 1966, which led to renewed pressure on Sterling and later its devaluation in 1967. As Burke Trend, the Cabinet Secretary, asked rhetorically, ‘what alternative is open to us?’ (TNA: PREM 13/909). As the Heath government’s White Paper (1971) put it, if the UK did not join the EEC soon, ‘our power to influence the Communities would steadily diminish, while the Communities’ power to affect our future would as steadily increase.’

In this way, British European policy from 1955 through to EC accession in 1973 was never a positive choice for a different European future. Both the Macmillan and Wilson governments only applied for EEC membership after all other options had been exhausted. As William Hayter, a former UK ambassador to the Soviet Union, put it at an *Encounter* symposium in 1971, ‘in 1962 I wrote that “in a few years we shall have to make an unconditional surrender to get in”. ... Now it is not even certain that an unconditional surrender will get us in’ (Encounter, 1971). In other words, the British political elite experienced the EEC applications and EC accession combined with de Gaulle’s three vetoes in 1958, 1963 and 1967 as repetitive national humiliations on an unprecedented scale.

EC membership: economic cure and political salvation?

Accession to the EEC as a measure of last resort nevertheless became linked by successive British governments to expectations of two membership dividends. Economically, the EEC member states outperformed the British economy. At the microeconomic level, British companies were over-reliant on softer Commonwealth markets. They also lagged competitors from the EEC in technological innovation and productivity growth (Georgiou, 2017). Moreover, the unions began to overstretch their power on the shop floor level. By the early 1970s, faced with repetitive strike waves, the Heath government declared several national emergencies. At the macroeconomic level, moreover, the UK experienced significantly lower growth rates than the EEC. Providing capital to the Sterling Area required large balance of

payments surpluses which the UK was no longer able to generate due to its deteriorating trade balance.

At the start of the 1960s, the Macmillan government already began to think of EEC accession as an economic cure for all British ills. As Conservative MP Nigel Birch put it in the House of Commons in June 1961, the UK needed ‘an economic stimulus. What we want here is a good shake-up’ (HC Deb 28 June 1961). For the Wilson government, the failure of the National Plan similarly seemed to make access to the EEC market necessary, to be combined with Wilson’s idea of a technological and scientific revolution. By the early 1970s, supporters of EC membership emphasised its economic benefits even more. During ten days of debate in the House of Commons in July and October 1971, one in two Conservative MPs listed a ‘growth dividend’ as the greatest advantage of joining the EC (Lord, 1992, pp. 420-421).

Not only were most of the British economic woes home-grown, however, and needed to be tackled domestically, but the UK’s accession to the EC also coincided with the first oil crisis in 1973. Far from providing an economic cure, the EC had to address major structural crises in the steel, shipbuilding and textile industries, rising unemployment, high inflation and growing budget and state deficits (Warlouzet, 2018). Moreover, the British government had to pay a high price for membership. The EC budget structure disadvantaged agricultural import countries, chiefly Germany and the UK. While Germany accepted this outcome as an informal quid pro quo for access to the larger market for its industrial products, the UK was in a much weaker economic position. Moreover, it was also in a terrible negotiation position. As Lord Crowther put it in the House of Lords in July 1971 (O’Neill, 2000, p. 355), ‘It has always been clear ... that we should have to pay a price to get in. ... But ... you do not haggle over the subscription when you are invited to climb into a lifeboat. You scramble aboard while there is still a seat for you.’

In foreign policy terms, successive British governments expected EEC membership to restore British leadership of Europe. As early as 1959, its planning section began to prepare the Foreign Office’s volte-face on the issue of EEC membership. Due to strong US support for the EEC it concluded that the UK, without joining the EEC, would at best ‘remain a minor power in an alliance dominated by the United States and the countries of the E.E.C.; at the worst we should sit helplessly in the middle while the two power blocs drifted gradually apart’ (TNA: PREM 11/2985). Subsequently, the Foreign Office became the strongest advocate within Whitehall of EEC accession as the best means to maintain the ‘special relationship’ with the US through the leadership of Western Europe, and thus, the UK’s great power role. In 1966, Wilson’s Advisor

on Economic Affairs, Tom Balogh, warned that following this rationale, Foreign Office support for another application was ‘bordering on the fanatical’ (TNA: PREM 13/905).

Political decisionmakers increasingly believed as well that only EEC membership could restore the UK’s status in the world. When he took over from Michael Stewart at the helm of the Foreign Office in 1966, George Brown, a fervent advocate of a second EEC application, already believed that the UK was ‘destined to become *the* leader of Europe’ [his italics], of ‘a new European bloc which would have the same power and influence in the world as the old British Commonwealth had in the days gone by’ (Brown, 1971, pp. 209-211). Just as Macmillan had concluded in 1961, moreover, an interministerial group of officials claimed in 1966 that only EEC membership would allow the UK ‘the maintenance of maximum influence with the United States’ (TNA: PREM 13/905). Although more at ease in the Commonwealth than in Europe, Wilson eventually reached the same conclusion (Parr, 2006).

Even in 1961 Macmillan’s belief that once inside, the UK would automatically take over the political leadership of the EEC, was grotesque. Its founding member states had devised an institutional system and developed governing practices that suited them. They were also in the process of shaping policies in crucial fields like trade, competition and agriculture, which naturally reflected their preferences, not those of the UK political parties. Moreover, the Franco-German relationship remained close. Thus, when Brown told Willy Brandt in 1966 that the Germans had to allow the UK to join to take the lead, the social democratic German Foreign Minister noted with British understatement that this notion was a ‘misunderstanding’ (Brandt, 1989, p. 453). When the UK did enter in 1973, the election of Giscard d’Estaing as French president and of Helmut Schmidt as German chancellor in 1974 destroyed any British hopes that German Ostpolitik could frighten French policymakers into inviting the UK to create a new balance of power in the EC. Moreover, when Wilson became Prime Minister again later in the same year, he presided over a Labour government that was split down the middle over EC membership and that showed no leadership whatsoever on any policy issue within the EC.

Whenever British governments had the opportunity to commit more fully to a future in a more integrated Europe in the 1960s, they refused to do so. Most strikingly, this was the case when de Gaulle and the French government engaged Macmillan and Defence Minister Peter Thorneycroft in discussions in 1962 about close Franco-British collaboration in the joint development of nuclear weapons (Moore, 2010, p. 159). According to the French side, each country would have retained full national control over the use of the future weapons system. The French indicated on several occasions that the UK exchanging its dependence on the US

for bilateral cooperation with France could be the quid pro quo for membership of the EEC (Kaiser, 1995).

Importantly, however, while Thorneycroft was openminded about this option, Macmillan rejected it out of hand. For him, transatlantic relations had top priority and he did not mind de facto dependence on the US for the missile technology. As an alternative approach he had asked Kennedy in 1961 whether the US could help the French to develop their *force de frappe* to facilitate his approach to the EEC. Kennedy instead offered to cede the top NATO position of Supreme Allied Commander Europe permanently to a French general. This counter proposal in turn shocked Macmillan, who adamantly opposed it, as it would have symbolically downgraded the UK to third rank in NATO (TNA: PREM 11/3355).

As the British government, with the exception of Thorneycroft, rejected nuclear collaboration with the French to obtain EEC membership, the UK's European conundrum was 'obviously insoluble' as Macmillan noted in his diary (Macmillan, 1972, p. 374). Among others, Reginald Maudling, President of the Board of Trade, also believed that apart from the nuclear issue, de Gaulle would not 'meet Britain's conditions of entry' (Bennett, 2013, p. 83). Submitting the EEC application to be vetoed by de Gaulle nevertheless served a purpose for Macmillan. It complied with the strong preference of the Kennedy Administration and helped secure the Polaris deal at the end of 1962. As early as June 1961, Macmillan noted with relief that his willingness to apply had secured 'a completely new American attitude to our effort and a new understanding' (Macmillan, 1961). When de Gaulle vetoed the application in January 1963, moreover, Macmillan was able to put the blame on him in his relations with Kennedy (Wall, 2013).

Similarly, the Wilson government applied for EEC membership aware that it was certain to be vetoed by de Gaulle. Wilson and Brown's interlocutors from EEC and EFTA member states, including the German Foreign Minister Gerhard Schröder, the Dutch Foreign Minister Joseph Luns and the Danish Prime Minister Jens-Otto Krag, repeatedly confirmed that de Gaulle had not changed his mind (Kaiser, 2001, pp. 68-71). Wilson himself concluded that 'the General has not changed one iota in his general view of the world or of our own relationship with [the United States]' (TNA: PREM 11/910). Michael Palliser, Wilson's Private Secretary for Overseas Affairs, nonetheless advised Wilson to make 'life thoroughly difficult for the General by explaining to all and sundry how thoroughly willing we are to go in and thereby forcing de Gaulle to find much more explicit reasons than hitherto for keeping us out' (TNA: PREM

13/897). The pro-European *Economist* also believed that isolating de Gaulle was ‘a sound diplomatic investment’ (*Economist*, 1966).

The EEC applications and EC accession were thus not merely desperate measures of last resort. They were also connected to exaggerated expectations of membership dividends which derived from British governments’ inability to address the UK’s structural economic weaknesses domestically and from grave miscalculations about its political importance for the EC member states. While Denmark was always likely to protect its agricultural interests in the EC and the Republic of Ireland to gain an independent voice in European institutions, the UK was extremely unlikely to experience an economic miracle or to rescue great power status following EC accession. Moreover, the Macmillan and Wilson governments submitted applications that they believed were likely or certain to fail, for purely tactical foreign policy (as well as domestic) political reasons – thus creating a second pathway to becoming an ‘awkward partner’ within the EC from 1973 onwards.

Domestic cleavages: using Europe

Using ‘Europe’ for juggling the preferences and pressures of different party factions and for gaining an advantage in party competition constituted the third feature. Arguably, the adversarial political system (Finer, 1975) structurally made it less likely for a broader consensus on EC membership to emerge, but it nonetheless required purposeful political entrepreneurs to ensure and consolidate this divisive outcome. By 1961, Macmillan’s 1959 election slogan ‘You have never had it so good’ began to sound hollow. As economic problems and foreign policy challenges continued to mount and Macmillan increasingly appeared as an ageing leader running out of steam, the EEC application, in the words of a senior Conservative Party official, became the party’s ‘deus ex machina’ (Butler and King, 1965, p. 79). It could provide the party with a modern image and help it attract young and upwardly mobile middle class voters. With Commonwealth trade stagnating and the UK isolated over the membership of South Africa, the Tories’ Empire wing was losing influence. At the same time, the 1955 and 1959 intake of young Conservative MPs were more pro-European and informed opinion including business groups was shifting rapidly towards EEC membership (Rollings, 2007; Wallace, 1975, p. 100). From this perspective, his 1961 volte-face over EEC membership seemed to hand Macmillan a political lifeline.

Moreover, the Labour Party was more split over the issue than the Conservatives. Its leader Hugh Gaitskell initially showed nothing but ‘elaborate public agnosticism’ (Young, 1999, pp. 148-149) over ‘Europe’. While a section of the parliamentary party around Roy Jenkins increasingly favoured EEC membership, many on the party’s left feared that it would undermine their plans for socialism in one country. In the end Gaitskell laid down several conditions for supporting EEC membership at the 1962 Labour Party conference, which seemed certain not to be fulfilled. He went beyond that, however, by claiming that a greater European role was incompatible with ‘1,000 years of history’ – a desperate attempt to steal the Tories’ patriotic party mantle which Rab Butler countered at the subsequent Conservative Party conference: ‘For them 1,000 years of history books. For us the future’ (Butler, 1962).

By 1966-67, Wilson was still grappling with the deepening divisions within the Labour Party over ‘Europe’. Facing pressure from the likes of Jenkins and Brown in the Cabinet to apply for EEC membership, which was at that point endorsed by the majority of trade unions, he also needed the support of the Labour left around Barbara Castle and Tony Benn. In this situation the 1967 EEC application seemed an easy way out. He signalled not just to de Gaulle’s partners in the EEC, but also to the pro-Europeans in his own party, that he was prepared to apply for EEC membership. As the application was certain to be vetoed by de Gaulle, it created no danger for the internal cohesion of his party. The Conservative Heath government having to negotiate membership terms at the start of the 1970s then allowed Wilson to continue sitting on the fence by arguing that the terms were not quite right. His subsequent so-called renegotiation, which changed the membership conditions only slightly, then allowed him to deflect the issue by putting it to the 1975 referendum (Saunders, 2018, pp. 67-72).

Shaped by their patriarchal political culture and style, moreover, the Conservative and Labour leaders believed that they could bore their way into Europe, as Castle (1984, p. 242) called Wilson’s approach in 1966-67. Public opinion on EEC membership remained highly volatile (Jowell and Hoinville, 1976) and the issue never dominated elections. As a result, British governments believed that propaganda campaigns would in time convince voters to accept what they still made appear as a foreign policy choice with limited domestic repercussions. As Heath put it in a typically condescending tone in a note for Macmillan in February 1961, it might be necessary to ‘re-educate’ the British (TNA: FO 371/158264/12).

Moreover, most advocates of EEC membership, but also many opponents, did not care much for constitutional traditions that at best featured as symbols of British identity for public consumption. This was especially the case for the notion of parliamentary sovereignty. As early

as November 1960, Heath, who was already responsible for European affairs, was reconciled to supranational institutions and shared sovereignty. In a letter to Viscount Kilmuir, the Lord Chancellor (Gowland and Turner, 2000, doc. 5.7A), he argued that it was unproblematic ‘in the modern world’ to ‘accept ... further limitations of sovereignty as would follow from the Treaty of Rome’. Although EC membership was bound to challenge the English common law-based legal traditions, as Robert Schütze also shows in his article in this special issue, no controversy ensued when Butler made it clear in the Cabinet in April 1961 that the EEC would subordinate the British legal system. Similarly, British governments were not opposed to qualified majority voting when it promised to foster their interests. It was the Macmillan government that propagated the use of majority voting by the member states on the question of the legally correct implementation of the treaty in the negotiations about Plan G and made sure that such a provision was later included in the EFTA Convention – this for fear that protectionist-minded countries would otherwise use their veto to subvert economic liberalisation. In fact, the UK’s insistence on this point prefigured the Thatcher government’s support in the 1980s for majority voting for single market legislation.

Such creative reinterpretations of British constitutional traditions were not communicated openly to the public, however. Instead, in selling EC membership to the people, British governments by and large pretended that it would not significantly impinge on the UK’s independence to act and require only limited domestic changes (Aqui, 2020). This was in addition to promising much greater economic growth and enhanced international status through the leadership of the Communities. Instead of devising and cultivating a positive, consistent as well as realistic narrative about the benefits of EC membership to create cross-party consensus and public support for the required immediate or likely future changes, the British political elite tried to use the EEC applications to deflect from domestic political failure and EC accession to shift political responsibility to ‘Brussels’. Meanwhile, despite media debates in 1972-73 and the 1975 referendum, the British public was maximally unprepared for any future impact of economic, legal, and political integration in the EC. As the self-confessed little Englander historian A.J.P. Taylor said about EC membership in 1971, ‘No one understands it. No one cares about it, for or against. ... Maybe it is the most decisive moment in British history since the Norman conquest or the loss of America. No one takes any notice all the same. Entry into Europe is the greatest non-question of all time’ (Encounter, 1971).

Accession diplomacy: abusing the Europeans

Abusing the Europeans is the fourth feature of Britain and ‘Europe’ until EC accession – a practice that significantly curtailed British influence after 1973. This practice was motivated by a pronounced ignorance regarding the motivations among continental Europeans for the integration process and the ideological traditions and governance practices as they were developing in the ECSC and the EEC. To begin with, the prevailing attitude of most Foreign Office diplomats was still influenced for a long time by the colonial notion of their superior diplomacy. As a result, British embassies often failed to pick up on crucial local political developments that could impact the UK’s position in Europe. In 1955, for example, the British embassy in Paris was slow in relaying back to London how the renewed forging in an informal manner of the former formal centrist coalition over ‘Europe’ until 1952 was making it far more likely that the French government would opt for further economic integration. Despite the French veto power over EEC enlargement, Pierson Dixon, British ambassador to France believed in May 1962 that British negotiators could ‘still outwit’ de Gaulle (Macmillan, 1962). In an internal memorandum, Paul Gore Booth, head of the Foreign Office’s Economic Relations Department, criticised in July 1960 that no one in Whitehall was prepared to create goodwill among the EEC member states by intimating, ‘OK we’re wrong and will do it your way’. From his perspective, British policy on ‘Europe’ was characterised by the paradigm ‘never apologize, never explain’ (TNA: FO 371/150363).

At the political level, moreover, few British decisionmakers had networks in continental Europe, and even fewer spoke foreign languages. The Labour Party’s relations were mostly limited to Northern European parties and the German Social Democrats (Steinnes, 2014). Few connections existed with strongly federalist socialist parties like those in Belgium and Italy. The Conservative Party had no links with continental European Christian Democrats, who were the main driving force behind the formation of the of the ECSC and the EEC (Kaiser, 2007). It was only in the mid-1960s that the Conservatives’ International Office slowly began to forge relations with the German Christian Democrats in the first instance (Kaiser, 2013), and it only joined a European party organisation, the European Democratic Union, when it was created in 1978 (Gehler et al., 2018).

In their relative isolation from political networks below the intergovernmental level, British decisionmakers did not realise, for example, that their internal cohesion mattered much more to the EEC member states during the negotiations about Plan G in 1958 than any interest in facilitating trade with the UK; or that Wilson and Brown’s idea in 1966-67 that the other EEC member states might be tempted to replace France with the UK in a newly reconfigured EEC

was outright absurd. British decisionmakers continued to have a grossly inflated view of the political importance of the UK as a balancer or mediator in continental European politics – a traditional foreign policy conception dating back to the nineteenth century that was no longer fit for purpose in times of highly institutionalised multilateral politics in the EC and the strong Franco-German bilateralism.

The widespread anxiety among the British political elite about the UK's loss of status and influence made matters worse. In July 1964, Dixon expressed these at times apocalyptic fears succinctly in a memo for Butler, at that time Foreign Minister: 'We shall not have enough strength to prevent the world being organised in a way which eventually may reduce us to the status of Portugal, though not, one may hope, to the extinction which overtook the Venetian Republic' (TNA: PREM 11/4810). The resulting policymaking climate was characterised by a mixture of condescension towards France and smaller EEC states combined with growing feelings of economic inferiority in relation to Germany that in the light of its strong economic and export growth seemed to have lost the war, but won the peace.

In this climate, historical analogies frequently impacted British perceptions and attitudes. Macmillan constantly thought in such analogies. As early as November 1950 he believed that the Labour government's European policy 'hands Europe on a plate to Germany, and destroys in a day the fruits of our hard-won victory in two wars' (Macmillan, 1950). As Minister of Housing, he insisted in a Cabinet meeting in December 1951 that '[in ten years] there [will] be a European community which [will] dominate Europe and [will] be roughly equal to Hitler's Europe of 1940. If we stay out, we risk that German domination of Europe which we have fought two wars to prevent' (Macmillan, 1951)¹. When Prime Minister, Macmillan claimed in a meeting with Cabinet ministers in November 1959 that 'the position in Europe [is] the same as after the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805' (TNA: PREM 11/2679). And in spring 1963 he finished re-reading *Nemesis of Power* – a book on Nazi Germany by John Wheeler-Bennett (1953) written in anticipation of a new war guilt debate: 'It is a terrifying book and everyone in politics and the Foreign Office ought to read it again every year. Will the Germans be democratic for long? Will OKW [Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, the High Command in Nazi Germany] and the generals return?' (Macmillan, 1963).

In these circumstances, British decisionmakers repeatedly committed diplomatic blunders that severely damaged the UK's credibility, reputation and influence in European politics. While the Labour government benevolently ignored the formation of the ECSC in 1950-52, Macmillan as Foreign Minister in November 1955 tried to destroy the Messina initiative that

led to the creation of the EEC (Kaiser, 1999, pp. 48-54). In letters to German Foreign Minister Heinrich von Brentano and US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles he claimed that the creation of a customs union would be detrimental to the cohesion of the Western world and should be abandoned immediately. Both governments reacted with incredulity and shared information about the UK's sabotage attempt with the other five ECSC governments. At the NATO Council meeting in December 1955 the Dutch and Belgian foreign ministers, longtime supporters of a more active UK role in European integration, criticised Macmillan especially harshly for what they saw as his duplicity.

As Prime Minister, Macmillan similarly tried to bully the EEC member states into agreeing to a trade deal. Anticipating a French veto over Plan G, he internally demanded aggressive diplomatic action as early as June 1958: 'We would take our troops out of Europe. We would withdraw from NATO. We would adopt a policy of isolationism' (TNA: PREM 11/2315). When Macmillan continued to advocate a policy of threats, Evelyn Shuckburgh, Deputy Secretary of State in the Foreign Office, commented laconically: 'No NATO, no American participation in our defence. ... No American participation, no defence. Consequently, the need to preserve NATO ... overrides any considerations of tactics vis-à-vis France and Germany' (TNA: PREM 11/3334). Contrary to the clear advice from the Foreign Office, however, Macmillan made these threats – including withdrawing all British troops from Germany – in only slightly disguised form several times verbally and in writing. At their meeting in August 1960, Adenauer told Macmillan head-on, however, that 'the British people knew quite well that the troops in Germany were for the defence of the United Kingdom and not for that of Germany' (TNA: PREM 11/2993).

British decisionmakers did not treat their closest allies any better. Thus, in 1964 the newly elected Wilson government nearly managed to destroy EFTA. To stabilise the UK's balance of payments it imposed a 15% import surcharge on all tariffs without considering that this measure was the only option of several that was blatantly illegal under the EFTA Convention, let alone discussing it with EFTA governments in advance. This foreign policy behaviour as much as the substance of the decision hugely upset the UK's EFTA partners, who demanded to be exempted from the surcharge to maintain EFTA's legal and political integrity. After first agreeing to this exemption, the Wilson government then retracted its promise immediately when the French, German and US governments made it clear that the nonexemption of EFTA member states was their absolute condition for agreeing to a loan by the International Monetary Fund, which the UK desperately needed. Although the other EFTA member states did not take

retaliatory measures against the UK, to which they would have been entitled, the surcharge crisis severely undermined both the organisation and any residual British leadership.

In these ways, by 1973 British decisionmakers had gained the UK a reputation for lack of long term policy orientation and condescending colonialist behaviour informed by historical analogies and panic reactions in crisis situations (Gowland, Turner and Wright, 2010, p. 51). While some political actors elsewhere in the enlarged EC might have shared some British policy preferences, in as much as those were clearly defined and articulated, no-one expected UK governments after 1973 to provide consistent leadership in European politics.

Conclusion

This article has identified four features of Britain's relations with and policies on 'Europe' that arguably created pathways to Brexit before the UK even joined the EC in 1973. They include the experience by British decisionmakers and the general public of the EEC applications and EC accession as a measure of last resort when all other preferable options were exhausted. In this way EC accession could appear as the UK's imprisonment by foreign governments and institutions, which on top of everything else seemed blatantly unjust in view of Britain's apparently great heritage as a colonial power and its role as liberator of Europe in 1945.

Despite only being a measure of last resort, moreover, decisionmakers from both larger political parties burdened EC accession with grossly exaggerated and publicly articulated expectations of economic and political membership dividends. While the expectation of economic benefits from integration into the larger market collided with the realities following the 1973 oil crisis, the British elites' obsession with *sole* political leadership of the EC were grotesque even in the mid-1950s, let alone in 1973. These exaggerated expectations led to severe disappointment when EC accession did not lead to an economic miracle or a new phase of Britannia ruling.

The British political elite also never sought to create a cross-party consensus on 'Europe'. Instead, they pulled 'Europe' into party conflict from the beginning. They were either preoccupied with maintaining relative internal cohesion, if necessary, with purely tactical decisions like the 1967 EEC application to placate the pro-Europeans in the Labour Party, or they sought to weaken the more deeply divided political opposition as Macmillan tried in 1961. This elite had no clear view of the future of the EC nor were they ever willing or able to

communicate its benefits in a consistent manner, creating a durable narrative about Britain in Europe.

Finally, despite occasional internal warnings by Foreign Office officials, British decisionmakers repeatedly antagonised their continental European counterparts, either by threatening them with unrealistic sanctions like the destruction of NATO in 1960, or by ignoring them and the UK's legal commitments as in the case of the EFTA surcharge crisis in 1964. In this way they ensured that even governments like the Dutch and Norwegian, which were initially strongly oriented towards the UK after 1945, became thoroughly exasperated with British politics, which severely limited the scope for any British (co) leadership in the EC.

Arguably, all four features identified here also characterised the Brexit referendum debate and the subsequent negotiations with the EU 27 in different ways: the notion of continued EU membership as an imposed solution, with the official Remain campaign only highlighting – as in the 1975 referendum (Saunders, 2018, pp. 122-124) – the alleged economic dangers of leaving; misplaced expectations, this time among leavers, that a 'liberated' UK could become a European Singapore or the centre of an 'Empire 2.0'; no sustained and coordinated attempt by the opposition parties to create a positive narrative about the EU or to make continued EU membership their top priority in the 2019 elections; and ludicrous threats by ministers in the May and Johnson governments that only hardened the resolve of the EU 27 not to cross their 'red lines' in negotiations.

In 1973, however, none of the four features discussed here, and the pathways they created, meant that the UK was *inevitably* bound for Brexit. As Fintan O'Toole (2018, p. 198) has argued in his brilliant essay on Brexit, this extreme outcome required the formation of a parochial political elite of little Englanders who combine 'clownish absurdity and self-centred recklessness' in a hitherto unprecedented manner – an elite that continued to be shaped at the same time by the memory of British Empire and the experience of private elite schools; that is proudly ignorant of foreign lands and obsessed with its own importance; and happy for their personal advancement to scapegoat the EC/EU and undermine its legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. Brexit, in other words, is the crowning achievement of a new English political elite, comprising nominally 'pro-Europeans' like David Cameron or apparently 'pro-Remainers' like Jeremy Corbyn as well as radical Brexiters alike.

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ⁱ See also Macmillan's Cabinet memorandum in Duncan-Sandys's Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, 9/3/22, 29 January 1952, as well as his remarks on the 1955 Messina initiative in NA T 234/100, 1 February 1956.