Chapter 8

Britain, France and the Integration of Western Europe, 1957-1961*

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Introduction

Britain's decision in 1961 to open negotiations for membership of the European Economic Community reflected a number of considerations. The collapse of the Paris summit in May 1960 had left prime minister Harold Macmillan's diplomacy in ruins. In April 1961 the new Kennedy administration made it clear that it wanted to see British membership of the EEC in order to counter French nationalism and offset German economic power. Moreover, the consolidation of the Community since the 1957 Treaty of Rome left Britain with no option but to apply for membership. Efforts since 1956 to promote alternative schemes, the European Free Trade Area and the European Free Trade Association, had foundered. British leaders consistently followed the logic of the Special Relationship. By 1961 it was evident that commitment to the Relationship required adhesion to the Treaty of Rome. Indeed, Whitehall had for some time recognized that if a credible alternative to the Community could not be devised it would be necessary to join the Six.

Accounts of the early development of the EEC highlight the negative features of Britain's stance on Europe, implying that the Community's evolution was an inevitable triumph of progress and light over national and sectarian interests. I argue that this interpretation neglects an important feature of the story. In the Franco-British duel for leadership in Europe, Britain was outsmarted. Given better planning, Britain might have won the contest.

Premier Macmillan initiated in 1959 a planning exercise called the Future Policy Committee. This think tank undertook the most comprehensive review of British policy since 1945 but it did not report until 1960, too late to shape British policy in the immediate aftermath of the Treaty of Rome.

Britain and France were at sixes and sevens over the future of western Europe and the documents confirm the skill with which the British were out-manoeuvred. Official records demonstrate that the attempt to join the Community was dictated by fears that a united Europe under French leadership would wield more power than Britain. Macmillan regarded France as the main obstacle to British membership, although acknowledging that pressure from his

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own backbenchers and Commonwealth members would also be hurdles. He told his Cabinet, "General de Gaulle has not wished us to join. He wants to retain leadership of the market."[1] Britain's mission, ministers were told, was to bind Europe within the wider Atlantic Community, with the United Kingdom as a bridge between the EEC and the United States. The *mésentente cordiale* had a decisive impact on events. De Gaulle's vetoes of 1963 and 1967 excluded Britain from the Community for over 12 years. Thus Britain had no say in the crucial formative years. The vetoes marked the culmination of a very skilful diplomacy. France torpedoed Britain's European Free Trade Area proposal in November 1958 and then blocked negotiations to link the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) of seven nations with the six EEC states. Consequently, Britain was left with no alternative but to knock on the Community's door, a door which de Gaulle was determined to keep closed. In 1961 the French foreign ministry was reported to have set up a special committee to think up ways and means of keeping the British out.

How Marianne outsmarts John Bull

After the Suez crisis of 1956 Britain rushed to mend fences with the United States, leaving France on one side. The French tried hard to be conciliatory; in early March 1957 they went out of their way to make the Queen's visit a great success. In the Louvre after dinner the Queen confessed that she had never seen the Mona Lisa. At a signal from President René Coty two attendants staggered into the room with the painting which they displayed on bended knee. All to no avail. At Bermuda in March Macmillan restored friendly relations with President Eisenhower, gaining American help for a British nuclear deterrent. The Bermuda meeting was a parting of the ways in Franco-British relations. Macmillan confided to his diary: Bermuda "makes all the difference to us. But I was afraid that the French would be hurt; or, worse still, want to make it a Tripartite meeting. However, they too have behaved very well, and agreed to go on their own to Washington...."[2]

Relations between London and Paris went from bad to worse. Appeals for help in the Middle East went unanswered. In June 1957 premier Bourgès Maunoury pleaded "times had changed very much recently and old fashioned rivalries which still seemed to preoccupy our representatives on the spot were entirely out of date."[3] He hinted at support for a British Free Trade Area: "the additional constitution of a Free Trade Area on the lines suggested by London

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[1] Cab (Conc) 128/35, PRO 30 May 1961.

[2] Alistair Horne, *Macmillan 1957-1986* (London 1989), 22.

[3] Prem II, 1850, PRO, 15 June 1957.

was vital." In July the French tried again, insisting that Suez was a "completely closed chapter" and requesting co-operation in the Middle East. In short, support for France's Algerian war. Downing Street commented:

> *"It would seem that the French believe that we are staging a successful comeback in the Middle East and are anxious to improve their own relations with the Arab states by sheltering behind our coat tails. For us, of course, it is far more important to achieve a meeting of minds with the Americans."*[4]

The French were regarded as a main obstacle to the British plan for a European Free Trade Area. In the Cabinet it was agreed that the Treaty of Rome "derived basically from political considerations and that its real objective was the creation of an integrated European Community." If the EC succeeded without British association in some form "our existing European policy would be undermined and our Special Relationship with the United States would be endangered if the United States believed that our influence would be less than that of the EC."[5] Macmillan decided to pressure West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer by warning him that if the Free Trade Area was not accepted NATO might collapse and the whole of Western defence.

British distrust of France was re-enforced by the Fourth Republic's political instability. Both London and Washington were alarmed by the French scene. The condescending tone of British reporting on France makes it easy to understand why de Gaulle said no to British membership:

> *"The French are obsessed with their own problems, domestic and North Africa .... at the same time they are sensitive about their standing in the world. They consider that the Americans want to push them about and resent it. They are jealous of us and annoyed with us for appearing to side with the Americans against them. But there is no immediate danger of the overthrow of democracy. France is not in a pre-revolutionary situation. The political extremists are not organized for anything like a seizure of power. The population as a whole in spite of its wrong headedness in so many matters is virtuous, industrious and intelligent. The best thing we can do is to refrain from giving France unmerited economic*

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[4] Prem II, 1946, PRO, 11 July 1957.

[5] Cab 128/31, PRO, 2 May 1957.

> *help and making concessions to unreasonable political demands eg. over North Africa. Hard times must be given a chance of effecting a cure. Monsieur Gaillard is probably not a man of high principle or lofty moral stature. He and his team have not had much to do with the world outside France and their outlook is correspondingly limited."*[6]

In the meantime the British were as far away as ever from winning French support for a European Free Trade Area. Macmillan's frustration can be gauged from a secret note which he sent to foreign secretary Selwyn Lloyd in June 1958:

> *"I think sometimes our difficulties with our friends abroad result from our natural good manners and reticence .... if little Europe is formed without a parallel development of the Free trade area we will have to reconsider the whole of our political and economic attitude towards Europe. I doubt if we could remain in NATO. We should certainly put on highly protective tariffs and quotas to counteract what Little Europe was doing to us ... we would adopt a policy of isolationism. We would surround ourselves with rockets and we would say to the Germans, the French and all the rest of them: 'Look after yourselves with your own forces. Look after yourselves when the Russians overrun your countries.'"*[7]

Following de Gaulle's return to power in June 1958 Macmillan wasted no time arranging a visit to Paris. He delivered a stern warning that if free trade talks broke down it would be:

> *"... a great effort for us to keep four divisions on the Continent. If we were to be threatened by a trade war we would be driven back on ourselves and would have to seek our friends elsewhere ..... Europe would break up."*[8]

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[6] Prem II, 1849, PRO, 25 November 1957.

[7] Prem II, 2315, PRO, 24 June 1958.

[8] Prem II, 2326, PRO.

De Gaulle's reply that France could not go faster because of Treaty of Rome obligations was met by a further warning - failure to reach agreement by 1 January 1959 "might even spell the end of NATO." Overall the Paris meeting was a success, at least for the French. Macmillan believed that a wiser, mellowed de Gaulle had replaced Old Ramrod as the British had called the general in World War II - all the rigidity of a poker without its warmth - afterwards Macmillan wrote:

> *"All the old conceits and prejudices seem to have gone. One felt the same kind of confidence in him as one might feel in talking to a priest. He spoke ... of his affection for Britain ... said the reason he had been so tiresome during the war was that he was representing a country that was ruined and dishonoured beyond anything he could have believed possible."*

This personal rapport was not translated into a political understanding. In early November 1958 Macmillan intensified efforts to mobilize American support for Britain's Free Trade Area plan: "We could point to the damage that a Common Market organized on French protectionist lines would do to American economic interests. More important if the six establish a Common Market without a free trade area the United Kingdom would have to reassess its position on European organisations."[9] De Gaulle's veto on the Free Trade Area left London with the lingering hope that the general's dislike of supranational institutions would prevent the full implementation of the Treaty of Rome. If this happened "we should avoid being manoeuvred into a position in which we could be accused of being primarily responsible for this development."[10]

From November 1959 Britain's second line of defence against the Community, EFTA was in place. Yet another disappointment awaited the British. The United States now revealed that it fully supported the Six and did not regard a Six Seven agreement as necessary or desirable. London was fast running out of options. The cabinet was advised that the only course was to continue the consolidation of EFTA while trying for a wider Six Seven agreement:

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[9] Cab 123/32, PRO, 14 December 1958.

[10] Ibid., 23 December 1958.

> *"It is the Commission and the French who are the stumbling blocks. The longer term outlook had dangers. The EEC might become a magnet tending to attract industry and capital from UK into Europe, leaving us in a backwater. But we should not take a defeatist view..... our economy is changing fast all the time, it has shown itself very adaptable and we would not take a defeatist view."*[11]

The French manoeuvred skilfully, making it clear that Sixes and Sevens were dead while keeping the British guessing as to whether they were wanted in the Community even if they applied. Whitehall found the Delphic utterances of the general and his acolytes difficult to interpret. From Brussels Britain's EC delegation reported: "Fundamentally the French are opposed to any closer involvement of the UK with the six and are greatly relieved that commonwealth trade, agriculture etc. raise genuine obstacles for us."[12] And Bonn ambassador Christopher Steel dismissed any chance of entry: "I note that the Foreign Office consider de Gaulle the key to the present situation. I should have called him the lock .... any idea that de Gaulle can be won over by intellectual persuasion does not seem to me to accord with the known facts. The French have no intention of letting us into their private Europe." But in Paris ambassador Sir Pierson Dixon was reassuring: "the key to the whole business may in fact lie in somehow conveying to de Gaulle that the French are as important to us as the Americans." On 10 January 1961 the Paris embassy reaffirmed its optimism: "the general would welcome our involvement on a basis of equality with France provided France was not expected to pay a price for it."

The elusive, enigmatic gatekeeper of French policy was Oliver Wormser, the Quai D'Orsay's director of economic affairs. The British did not know what to make of him save that he was extremely clever. He was said to be powerful enough to be able to write his own instructions. Edward Heath, who as Lord Privy Seal conducted Britain's negotiations with the Six, complained on 23 January 1961 that Wormser "gave the impression that he was not very interested in reaching any solution and it seemed extraordinary to find that one man, and that an official, should apparently be in a position to be the arbiter of the fate of modern Europe."[13] Part of this process of throwing dust into the eyes of the British was to give conflicting advice both on Wormser's influence

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[11] Cab 129/99, PRO, 14 December 1959.

[12] FO 371/158170, PRO, 6 January 1961.

[13] FO 371/158170, 23 January 1961; FO 371/158172, 26 February 1961; FO 371/158170, 1 February 1961; FO 371/158170, 22 February 1961.

and on how to handle him. Ambassador Jean Chauvel in London told Heath: "we must ask him questions and press him hard with the object of forcing him to take the problem seriously and getting him to agree another meeting in a few weeks. This would be a mark of progress." At Rambouillet in January 1961 Chauvel told Macmillan's secretary that the reason Wormser was so difficult was "that he got his instruction direct from de Gaulle." However, Pierre Maillard, diplomatic counsellor at the Elysée, suggested that the way to deal with Wormser was to confront him with concrete proposals. The Paris embassy commented: "by implication Maillard went very near to saying that the production of concrete proposals by us to Wormser would help the French government to bring him under better control."

A vivid snapshot of Wormser's *modus operandi* comes from Sir Frank Lee, permanent secretary at the Treasury. In February 1961 the French official arrived at the Treasury late in the day for a talk of 60-70 minutes with the Treasury mandarin. Lee recorded:

> *"Monsieur Wormser clearly regarded this as an occasion for an agreeable general talk (the Washington scene; Africa; the general outlook in the UK; the latest work of Madame Simone de Beauvoir) rather than a discussion of the six seven problem. When at last (at about 7:35 p.m.) I got him to speak on this he described to me the general lines of Sir Roderick Barclay's exposition earlier in the day. He said (this was in the closing minutes of our talk in the car) that it would make a great difference if only we would say definitely that we could join the six. But when I said "Yes but does this mean that we can join and get our essential conditions in regard to say the Commonwealth and agriculture? He smiled and said 'that of course is the 64 dollar question.' And by that time we had arrived at our destination. It was an agreeable conversation but I felt that I had rarely seen a more consummate display of playing all the bowling with a dead bat."*[14]

However, the master strategist was of course de Gaulle. For three years he contrived to avoid saying yes or no. Macmillan, relying on patrician charm, believed that he could seduce the general. To this end no expense and trouble was spared. For the general's 1960 state visit to London huge crosses of Lorraine lit by fireworks decorated the facade of Buckingham Palace and de Gaulle received the rare privilege of addressing a joint session of Lords and

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[14] FO 371/158170, 27 February 1961

Commons in the Palace of Westminster. But the general resisted all blandishments. By November 1961 when Macmillan and de Gaulle met at Birchgrove earlier perceptions of a mellowed, malleable general had gone. Macmillan observed that while de Gaulle still possessed great dignity and charm "he does not apparently listen to argument, not only is he not convinced he actually does not listen. He merely repeats over again what he has said before. Sometimes when I am with him I feel I have overcome it (love-hate complex) but he goes back to his dislike and distrust like a dog to his vomit."[15] Fortunately, Franco-British summits as well as their rigors (cold bedrooms and inadequate bedclothes at Rambouillet) also had a lighter side. De Gaulle's way of putting his guests at ease was to start with a pheasant shoot and stand behind his guests (he did not participate) commenting loudly each time they missed. Macmillan found that it was a no host shoot in which he had to pay for his own cartridges. British revenge came at Birchgrove in November 1961. De Gaulle's pontifications were suddenly interrupted by a loud knocking on the library door. Macmillan sent his secretary to investigate. The knocking continued. Finally the premier answered the door. The head gamekeeper had come to complain that the British and French police trampling through the estate were playing havoc with the next day's shooting prospects.

Planning: The Future Policy Committee

Could the British have ordered things better and stopped the French running rings around them? The British for all their pragmatism did give some thought to the future. Post-1945 British governments have been criticized for refusing to recognize the realities of Britain's decline until 1961 in the Macmillan cabinet, driven by American pressure and the collapse of summit hopes, applied for EC membership. Before 1961, it is alleged, no serious thought was given to joining the Community.[16] This is a caricature of British policy. From 1945 British leaders were sharply conscious of diminished and diminishing power. Major reappraisals took place but infrequently and too late. Britain's performance was flawed, not by delusions of grandeur, but by the want of sustained forward thinking. London had so few cards in its hands that it was essential to play them with the utmost skill and deliberation. Unfortunately Britain's first think tank, the permanent under secretary's committee of 1949-50, faded away in the 1950s.[17] Detailed studies of the pros

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[15] Horne, op. cit., 318-9.

[16] Geoffrey Warner, "The Anglo American Special Relationship," *Diplomatic History,* 1989, 489.

[17] Anthony Adamthwaite, "Britain and the World: the view form the Foreign Office,

and cons of common market membership were undertaken in 1955 but only as a one-off operation. A formal Foreign Office planning unit was not established until late 1957 but it was a relatively junior with no responsibility other than forward planning of a most general kind. A new and potentially promising phase opened in 1959 when the prime minister requested the setting up of a major planning group, representing all Whitehall departments, the Future Policy Committee. Its remit was to make an assessment of what Britain's role should be in the 1960s. It was intended that the conclusions would be ready for whatever administration came to power after the 1959 general elections. However, the study took longer than expected and was not completed until well into 1960.

The 1959 planning papers while perceiving the potential strength of the EC still considered that a deal between the Six and the EFTA Seven was negotiable. A major study on Western Europe concluded that by the early 1970s the EC could be "an economic and political unit of the same general order of magnitude in population and GNP as the United States in the mid-1950s. Such a consolidation of west European resources would represent a major change in terms of world power. If we cannot come to terms with a successful EC the likelihood of its developing along anti-British lines will be much increased."[18] But no firm recommendation for membership was made. Within a few months - July 1960 - the planners gave unequivocal advice: "it is apparent that there are strong reasons of foreign policy for our joining the Six."[19] And by December they insisted: "a satisfactory political settlement between the UK and the Six is necessary. It can only be achieved by our joining the Six ... HMG should declare immediately their desire to accede to the Treaty of Rome, subject to economic safeguards."[20]

Conclusion

Firstly, the debates of the 1980s and 1990s about European integration should not colour assessments of the 1950s. The history of European integration was not one of British self-interest versus continental idealism. To be sure, British policy from 1957-1961 was blustering and inept but in the late 1940s Britain had genuinely attempted to lead western Europe through intergovernmental co-operation and the Atlantic alliance. And Britain was not alone in opposing further integration. One of the main reasons for French

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1945-49," *International Affairs*, spring 1985, 224-35.

[18] Cab 134, 1935, PRO, "Development in Western Europe", 12 August 1959.

[19] Cab 129, 102, PRO, 6 July 1960.

[20] FO 371/159685, PRO, "The UK and the Atlantic Alliance," December 1960.

opposition to EDC was that it meant too much military integration. However, from 1955 Britain's negative and at times hostile attitude toward the creation of the Community alienated many of her European allies.

France, despite the defeat of the EDC and severe internal tensions, bounced back and seized the initiative in Europe. This success sprang from a winning combination of people, institutions and national purpose. De Gaulle's determination to exercise the leadership of the Six was underpinned by able advisors Wormser and an effective foreign ministry. In 1962 former United States secretary of state Dean Acheson claimed that Britain had lost an empire and not yet found a role. In fact the truth was that Britain had too many roles and France only one. The post-Suez stocktaking followed by the decision to decolonize Algeria enabled France to concentrate on Western Europe.

Why was Britain out-manoeuvred? Most of the reasons are well-known and need no elucidation: overseas policy was based on three overlapping circles, with the main emphasis on the Special Relationship; national character blended insularity and superiority; the perceived lessons of World War II validated the Special Relationship and semi-detachment from Europe; traditional pragmatism jibbed at supranationalism; a secretive Whitehall establishment resisted external inputs. The political class favoured Washington-Churchill and Macmillan were half-American. Up and coming Labour politician Denis Healey lectured every year in the United States. Foreign secretary Selwyn Lloyd's admission "I do not like foreigners,"[21] neatly encapsulates British attitudes. As Winston Churchill put: "The Almighty in His infinite wisdom did not see fit to create Frenchmen in the image of Englishmen." British pragmatism resisted the idea of planning. When the ECSC began to function in 1952 the British told Jean Monnet: "Not that you are a fact we shall deal with you." But until the late 1950s no harsh facts impelled a review of British strategy. At the time of the Messina conference in 1955 Britain was still by a long chalk western Europe's stongest military and economic power, with a monopoly of nuclear weapons and an advanced research program. Britain chaired the OEEC continuously until 1960. Labour leader Tony Crosland in *The Future of Socialism (1956)* wrote: "we stand in Britain on the threshold of mass abundance ... from 1948 to 1954 British national income rose, in real terms, by 20% - a figure only slightly below that (22%) achieved in the USA. The sixth report of the OEEC shows that with the possible exception of Sweden industrial productivity has risen by more in Britain since before the war than in any other European country."[22]

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21 Quoted in Keith Robbins, "National Identity and History: Past, Present and Future," *History*, 245, October 1990, 386, n.44.

22 Quoted in Leo Pliatzky, *Getting and Spending* (London, 1982), 4.

Two further considerations deserve mention: the Cold War and the boredom factor. Talk of common markets and agricultural quotas of Canadian pig meat did not set the Thames on fire. When former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rab Butler, was asked why in 1955 Britain did not join the Six in the discussions leading to the common market his reply was "boredom."[23] In the climate of a continuing and intensified Cold War the big prize for Macmillan was the bear-hug, the pursuit of a successful East-West summit bringing arms reductions and détente. By comparison the Six seemed small beer. However, to summarize in this way the reasons for British reluctance to join the Six may give a misleading impression of inevitability to the whole process of integration. That integration took the form it did, does not mean that it was written in the stars. What needs stressing is the element of contingency. Without de Gaulle some form of association between the six and seven might have been reached. Similarly, if the Future Policy Committee had reported in 1958-59 instead of 1959-60 the decision to apply for membership might have been taken much sooner. Better still, with timely thought, France's own style of diplomacy might have been anticipated or imitated. The realization came too late. Thus in 1963 Lord Strang, permanent secretary at the Foreign Office in the early 1950s, advised:

> *"It was worth considering whether there was now a case for reverting to the style of diplomacy which we had employed up to the 18th century. This method consisted in essence of a weaker power playing stronger powers off against each other in its own interest .... the French were the leading exponents of this form of self-regarding diplomacy conducted purely for national ends. They were masters at exploiting their own nuisance value..."*[24]

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[23] Quoted in Michael Charlton, *The Price of Victory* (London 1983), 195.

[24] Quoted in Anthony Adamthwaite, "Suez Revisited," *International Affairs,* 64,3, summer 1988, 464.