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The Foreign Policies of the Labour Party

The foreign policies pursued by Labour Governments during the twentieth century were chiefly distinguished by their continuity with those of their rivals, the Conservatives, whose Governments dominated the period. The Labour Party was nevertheless the main channel for left-radical dissent over foreign policy from 1918, and until the Second World War the terms of this dissent dominated Labour's rhetoric both inside and outside Parliament.[1] The Cold War divided the party in the 1950s with the leadership and most of the professional politicians often explicitly committed to 'power politics' and 'realism' against the 'emotionalism' of a dissident minority of MPs.[2] Throughout the decade the 'realists' dominated policy but were continuously attacked at annual conference by critics of the United States, NATO and the arms race. The dissidents stressed their suspicion of power politics, secret treaties, and military alliances much as their pre-war counterparts had done, often using the same language to demand disarmament, open international discussions, neutrality, action through the UN (rather than NATO) and the need for a 'socialist foreign policy'. Foreign and defence policy generated as much controversy and division as any other area of Labour thinking between 1960 and 1990 – particularly during the periods of Labour Government. Since 1990, however, it has had far less capacity to disturb the balance of power within the party.

Formative influences

The Labour Party originates in a period when British imperialism was ascendant internationally and unchallenged domestically. Foreign policy was not high in the party's priorities in the years 1900–1914 partly because it approved of the hegemonic system of free trade imperialism of which the Liberal Party was the foremost active custodian. The party was patriotic and nursed no fundamental argument with the British state. It accepted the legitimacy of the Crown-in-Parliament and aspired to participate in politics within the established rules, subject to reforms such as the democratic franchise. The party largely subscribed to Liberal ideas on foreign policy, as on much else, but this left plenty of scope for internecine strife. Nineteenth century liberalism was perhaps not the best ideology with which to understand the problems of the twentieth century. The stresses and strains generated by the world crisis of 1914–1945 were unable, however, to change the fact that class loyalty was never superior to national loyalty within the coalition of forces which brought the Labour Party into existence.

1 See on this A. J. P. Taylor, *The Troublemakers: Dissent over Foreign Policy, 1792–1939* (London, 1957 and 1985).

2 An example of this explicit commitment to realism was provided by Denis Healey, a future Foreign Secretary, who acted as Ernest Bevin's apologist in the years 1946–1950. See Denis Healey, 'Power Politics' in Richard Crossman (ed.) *New Fabian Essays* (London, 1952).

The party thought in terms of the British nation and state and the defence of British interests abroad. The Empire commanded the loyalty and even affection of the party's leaders. It is true that their thinking on this subject – like that of the working class they sought to represent – was shallow, perfunctory, and ill-informed. But this should be taken as evidence of how much the Empire was taken for granted, not of its irrelevance to the Labour outlook. When occasion demanded, Labour leaders could express their beliefs in the Empire's 'civilising mission', its importance for British living standards, its inevitability and relative benignity in a world of predatory states. Assumptions of racial superiority no doubt underpinned some of these beliefs.[3]

The dominant values, beliefs and ideologies which informed the views of Labour's leading personalities were also shaped by the political process which they entered in 1900. Divisions over foreign affairs have always had the capacity to jeopardize domestic reform opportunities. A radical stance could easily alienate the voters and though it is arguable that electoral calculations became more salient in the second half of the twentieth century, they were inscribed in the party's parliamentary politics from the outset. The parliamentary party was confronted with the fact that its much more successful Conservative rival established its governmental hegemony after 1918 as the protector of the national-imperial interest. On this basis it commanded most working class votes. With no electoral rival on its left flank, Labour competed for votes on ground increasingly dominated by a party which made no secret of its realist assumptions in foreign policy. Yet the party leaders also had to manage the pacifism, liberal Radicalism and socialist internationalism found among Labour's activists – a complex problem in an organization claiming a sovereign annual conference formally dominated by the mass party. Long periods of opposition may have served to blurr these contradictions by allowing the party to indulge in an ethical critique of existing policy which concealed the divisions within its own ranks. But after the advent of the democratic franchise in 1918 the price of opposition was that the Conservative Party set the political agenda by occupying governmental office in 63 of the 82 years remaining in the century.

The Liberal Legacy

Until the Second World War critical ideas on foreign policy were largely derived from the stock of Liberal-Radical arguments which the first cohort of Labour's leaders imbibed in their youth. Much of the most illuminating work on this ideological framework focuses on this liberal or progressivist tradition.[4] The South African War (1899–1902) brought progressivist dissent to the fore. The aristocracy of finance capital, operating secretly, was depicted by the

3 See for example J. M. Winter, 'The Webbs and the non-White world: a case of socialist racialism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 9, 1, 1974; R. C. Reinders, 'Racialism on the Left: E. D. Morel and the "Black Horror on the Rhine"', *International Review of Social History*, 13, 1968; Stuart McIntyre, *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement in the 1920s* (London, 1975).

4 M. Ceadal, *Thinking About Peace and War* (Oxford, 1987); M. Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (Oxford, 1981).

critics as both the prime mover and principal beneficiary of a policy of greed, reckless adventure and national prestige.[5] The critics highlighted the evils of secret diplomacy which allowed this irresponsible faction to corrupt policy. Most of the critics had no argument with the capitalist system itself and accepted that the war had to be won. The misnamed 'pro-Boer' alliance, which united the socialist Independent Labour Party (ILP) with Liberals such as Lloyd George, was genuinely outraged by British bullying and thuggery in South Africa. But it did not oppose British imperialism or demand a British withdrawal or a British defeat. Most Labour socialists supported the idea that British free trade imperialism was, or could become, a progressive influence in the world. The Fabian Society, whose leaders were actually more sympathetic to the protectionist ideas of Joseph Chamberlain, also defended the Empire in 1900 – on both realist and idealist grounds. They pronounced it inevitable in a world of power politics but – as the least offensive imperialism on offer – also insisted that it was desirable as a relatively humane force.[6] Thus both of the home-grown tendencies within British socialism – Fabianism and the ethical socialism of the ILP – accepted many of the ruling assumptions of British imperial policy, as did the trade unions. The image of British imperialism that commanded most support within the Labour Party was that of a free trade area under metropolitan guidance and protection.

More eloquent than Labour's discussion of Britain's world role was its silence. The otherwise seminal *Fabian Essays* (1889) ignored the Empire altogether. Popularisers of socialism forebore to mention it in their books – even Robert Blatchford, who emerged as an enthusiast for military expenditure in defence of the Empire in the 1900s, had nothing to say about it in his best-seller *Merrie England* (1893). Labour's annual conference was similarly reticent in the years 1900–1918 (with rare exceptions as when labour issues affecting white workers arose in relation to Chinese labour on the Rand). When the silence was reluctantly broken during war emergencies it was revealed that Labour accepted the ruling rationale for Empire as both a trusteeship – a moral obligation – and a British interest possessing strategic and economic benefits to the nation. During the inter-war years this was theorized by representatives of the British state as the 'dual mandate', a policy in which the interests of the colonial peoples and those of the British were declared harmonious.[7] 'Native paramountcy' and metropolitan power were thus reconciled. Labour largely accepted this myth and preferred not to notice those who challenged it, even when they did so on Britain's doorstep like the Irish. If the First World War helps to explain why Labour condemned the Easter Rising of 1916 and why it raised no objections against the violent restoration of order in Dublin, the immediate post-war context helps to contextualise the party's declaration for a united Ireland in 1920. Both were deviations from the normal which consisted of ignoring potentially divisive distractions from more important issues of domestic social and economic reform. If Ireland

5 The *locus classicus* was J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism, a Study* (London, 1902 and 1988).

6 George Bernard Shaw, *Fabianism and the Empire* (London, 1900).

7 Sir Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London, 1922). This is the *locus classicus*, composed by a former Governor of Nigeria who became Britain's permanent representative on the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations.

could be ignored it was easier still to be untroubled by nationalist opinion in, say, Egypt or India – geographically and emotionally remote as they were. Labour thus generally accepted the official ideal of colonial trusteeship as an accurate account of the purposes of the British Empire and confined its criticisms of policy to some of its more obvious contradictions.

The crisis of 1914–1918 demonstrated the depth of Labour's commitment to the institutional and ideological status quo. Only a tiny minority of conscientious objectors opposed the war and nearly all of these did so on pacifist, rather than revolutionary defeatist grounds. The party and the unions not only supported the war, they acquired representation in the coalition Cabinets formed in May 1915 and December 1916. In so doing they helped to legitimate the conduct of the conflict as well. By the armistice the non-socialist trade unions were even stronger within the party than they had been in 1914. They also seemed even more alienated from the socialist minority which had supplied some of the best known conscientious objectors. But it is also important to note that the Radical critique of foreign policy – given periodic stimulus since 1900 by events such as the Entente with Russia in 1907 and the Agadir crisis in 1911 – moved from the margins to the centre of the party's rhetoric in the war's aftermath. In August 1914 the dissident, *ad hoc* Union of Democratic Control (UDC) had taken its unpopular stand against the war by employing the critique of secret diplomacy associated with the Radical tradition. It indicted forces hostile to democracy which had been guilty of pursuing iniquitous balance of power strategies, rearmament policies and secret alliances which had brought the war in 1914. The UDC leaders were Liberals – many of whom would join the Labour Party after the war – as well as Labour socialists such as Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden and Fred Jowett.[8] From 1918 Labour found rhetorical distinction on international issues affecting the Great Powers by embracing much of the UDC's programme. For much of the inter-war years the party stood for open, democratic diplomacy, arms reductions, nationalization of the arms traffic and rejection of the balance of power. War-weariness and President Woodrow Wilson's diplomacy undoubtedly strengthened this tendency within the party. The League of Nations was to become its focus and the custodian of its aspirations in the inter-war years.

Wilson entered a propaganda war with Lenin in 1917.[9] Even in Britain, Labour leaders such as Arthur Henderson were conscious that they had to find an alternative to the Siren voices of Bolshevism. They played a notable role in delegitimizing it by denying its socialist and democratic credentials, as at Berne in 1919 where steps were taken to reconstitute the Socialist International.[10] They not only endorsed the League of Nations but accepted the arrangements (such as the Sykes-Picot deal) by which Britain acquired a new empire in the Middle East. MacDonald and Snowden also called for recognition of the Bolshevik Government. When the war ended they could no longer justify the military intervention in Russia. They also be-

8 The Liberals included E. D.Morel, Charles Trevelyan, Arthur Ponsonby, J. A. Hobson, Leonard Woolf, Bertrand Russell, H. N. Brailsford and Charles and Royden Buxton.

9 Arno J. Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918* (New Haven, 1959).

10 J. Riddell (ed.), *The Communist International in Lenin's Time: The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power: Documents 1918–1919* (New York, 1986), p. 412.

lieved that the expansion of trade with Russia would exercise a civilizing and moderating influence on the regime. Considerable alarm was generated by the British Government's support for Poland in the spring of 1920, when it attacked Bolshevik Russia. But it was not revolutionary sentiment which led the unions to make threats of industrial action to prevent an escalation of the conflict. People were war-weary.[11] An official Labour delegation to Russia meanwhile reported that Lenin had created a one-party dictatorship in which the trade unions had become mere transmission belts of the state. Sympathy with Soviet Russia undoubtedly existed among the British working class but at no time did it translate into a serious Communist alternative to Labour.[12]

Labour faced no electoral rivals to its left and began to challenge the Liberals in 1918 as the main alternative to the Conservative Party. By 1924 (January to October) Labour formed its first minority government and another followed in June 1929–August 1931. In the first MacDonald combined the roles of Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary; in the second Henderson became Foreign Secretary. The conventional opinion of the day declared both governments a success in the field of foreign policy. On both occasions the key positions were taken by Labour moderates, former Liberals, colonial administrators, and others whose appointments signaled in advance that continuity would prevail. Policy, moreover, was conducted in the conventional way via the 'machinery of the Foreign Office, in more or less complete detachment from the Cabinet'.[13] The first minority government was too brief to demonstrate much more than this. A hard-headed commercial treaty with Russia (after recognition of the Bolshevik government) was the only point of controversy. Labour's readiness to revise the Treaty of Versailles in favour of Germany – which the party advocated in opposition – led to nothing more than MacDonald's endorsement of the Dawes Plan. But when the party returned to opposition it returned to the characteristic emphases of the UDC. No doubt this was conditioned by the rise of pacifist sentiment in the 1920s. Certainly when Labour next formed a government Henderson, whose own peace-making inclinations were reinforced by the prevailing mood, enthusiastically participated in the League at a time when the recently signed Kellog Peace Pact, the rescheduling of German war debts in the Young Plan, the demilitarization of the Rhineland and the London Naval Conference were all seen as triumphs for conciliation and disarmament – the emphases of the party's policy statement *Labour and the Nation* (1928). These priorities were less in evidence in Palestine, Egypt and India. In all three dependencies repression was used to answer nationalist agitations. In 1930 MacDonald opened the Round Table Conference in London to discuss India's constitutional future with no members of the Indian National Congress present – Gandhi having boycotted the process begun three years earlier by the Simon Commission.

11 Stephen White, *Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution* (London, 1979), pp. 39–40.
12 See John Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 91–103.
13 Maurice Cranston, *The Impact of Labour, 1900–1924* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 379.

The domestic political crisis of 1931 which brought down the second Labour Government was intimately linked to the global economic crisis triggered from New York two years earlier. Throughout the following decade, in which Labour was confined to largely impotent parliamentary opposition, international events dominated as never before in peacetime. Several contradictory influences are worthy of note. In all sections of the party a socialist rhetoric was now dominant. But the manner of Labour's defeat in 1931 weakened the parliamentary party and led to the reassertion of trade union influence, which had waned during the period of Labour Government. The trade unions were led by realists such as Ernest Bevin and Walter Citrine, conscious of the weakness of organized labour and mistrustful of the more radical ideas championed by the Labour left. A pacifist public opinion continued to make itself felt. The old Radical denunciation of power politics and secret diplomacy was now accompanied by an emphasis on peace through the medium of the League of Nations. But the left of the party was more than ever convinced that capitalism caused wars – the rise of fascism, militarism and protectionism provided the empirical evidence. While this conviction could generate demands for a military response – as in relation to the Spanish civil war – it could also mistrust any rearmament programme advanced by the National Government in Britain, which could not be relied upon to fight the right wars for the right reasons.

The rump of Labour MPs who survived the 1931 debacle elected a life-long socialist pacifist as leader – the 73-year old George Lansbury. Lansbury resigned in 1935 after Bevin, an advocate of rearmament, launched a scathing attack on pacifism at Labour's annual conference. It was a triumph for the trade union realists who had voted for sanctions against Italy at the preceding TUC congress, just weeks earlier. But Labour's policies remained muddled. Another socialist who believed in the need for a socialist foreign policy replaced Lansbury – Clement Attlee – and although Attlee was no pacifist Labour continued to demand collective security through the League of Nations while refusing to support such rearmament measures as the National Government actually took.[14] As late as April 1939, for example, Labour MPs voted against military conscription.[15]

The Second World War inaugurated the longest period of the twentieth century in which Labour's leaders held Cabinet office. From May 1940 to October 1951 Attlee, Bevin, Hugh Dalton, Herbert Morrison and Stafford Cripps were involved in making and endorsing British foreign policy. It meant that they had a direct hand in the decisions which helped to create the post-war international order. The Labour Ministers in Churchill's wartime coalition supported the first shots in the Cold War, such as the decision to intervene militarily in Greece in December 1944 to prevent the Greek left from coming to power. When the historic Labour victory of 1945 produced the first majority Labour Government all commentators soon remarked upon the continuity of policy. It seemed that the experience of war and the unfolding

14 See C. Attlee, *The Labour Party in Perspective* (London, 1937).
15 Taylor, *The Troublemakers*, p. 193.

Cold War had led to the triumph of power politics over idealism in the Parliamentary Labour Party. Nineteenth-century Liberal conceptions of foreign policy had been overturned by the harsh realities of the twentieth-century. There is an element of truth in this verdict but we should not underestimate the continuities with Labour's pre-war past. Old convictions played a part. Bevin, for example, the Foreign Secretary, had always been a staunch anti-Communist, a patriot and – as we saw in relation to rearmament – something of a realist. He also believed that the British Empire – or Commonwealth as Labour now preferred to call it – was a vital source of national wealth, power and prestige. He acted accordingly and did his best to maintain Britain's global role on the basis of its colonial possessions. In all of this he represented a large section of the labour movement.

For over two decades Labour's programmatic declarations on the Empire had emphasized improving rather than dismantling it.[16] Even the socialist left had occasionally talked about imperial economic development.[17] Indeed leading left-wingers such as John Wheatley voted in Parliament for measures of imperial protection as a policy for reducing British unemployment in 1925. Nothing came of this but the perceived need for imperial economic development would not go away. It was a requirement – even if only a propaganda requirement – of the official commitment to 'trusteeship'. Labour's *The Colonies* (1933), adopted at its annual conference, built on this traditional emphasis. When spectacular evidence of colonial neglect, discontent and stark poverty became undeniable – as when a wave of disturbances swept the Caribbean in 1937–1938 – a new sense of urgency began to appear. Undoubtedly the war heightened and sustained it. Officials now wanted to extract as much war material as possible from the colonies and simultaneously placate American opinion which – led from the White House by Roosevelt – was deeply suspicious of British imperialism. The economic development of the colonies was expedient for both these reasons – it could show that British rule was useful to the indigenovs as well as to the British war effort. Labour socialists such as the Fabians Arthur Creech Jones and Rita Hinden enthusiastically canvassed for this policy and were rewarded with an opportunity to implement it at the Colonial Office in 1945–1950[18].

The colonial development policy dovetailed with Bevin's plan to restore British economic independence from the USA. Bevin's thinking on this envisaged co-ordination with the other European imperial powers[19]. But it strongly resisted the idea that Britain should involve itself in the steps towards economic integration advocated by the USA as part of the Marshall Aid programme. No one in Government doubted that Britain had a global role to play based on the Empire-Commonwealth. The Labour Cabinet took this view as much as the Foreign Of-

16 Examples include Ramsay MacDonald's *Socialism Critical and Constructive* (London, 1921); Philip Snowden's *If Labour Rules* (London, 1923); the ILP's *The Socialist Programme* (London, 1923); and *Labour and the Nation* (London, 1928).

17 As in the ILP's *Socialism and the Empire* (London, 1926) and George Lansbury's 'Empire Day' *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, 23 May 1925.

18 Creech Jones became Colonial Secretary in 1946 while Hinden was head of the Fabian Colonial Bureau and a leading contributor to *Socialist Commentary* which justified the policies in question.

19 John Kent, *British Imperial Strategy and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944–1949* (Leicester, 1993).

fice and the opposition Conservative Party. The decision to manufacture an independent nuclear bomb was an expression of the Government's determination. But while the Foreign Office treated Britain's weakened economic condition as a temporary inconvenience, other parts of the administration saw a different picture. John Maynard Keynes had been required to negotiate an American loan in December 1945 after the USA abruptly ended the Lend-Lease programme. He saw that Britain faced 'an economic Dunkirk' and regarded the world role as a case of *folie de grandeur*. No leading politician agreed with him. But Attlee himself expressed grave reservations in Cabinet about the *extent* of Britain's imperial burden.[20] In particular he resisted the argument that Britain had a vital strategic interest in maintaining a large military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. He was, however, eventually obliged to give way before the combined pressure of the Foreign Office, Bevin, and the chiefs of the imperial general staff; the military top brass threatened to resign unless they got their way. On another occasion Attlee sharply reminded Bevin, when the Foreign Secretary complained of the policy of 'scuttle' in India, that Britain did not have the military means to remain on the subcontinent.[21] The ambitions of British foreign policy nevertheless stifled these points of skepticism. Troops were maintained throughout the Middle East and East of Suez, new long term commitments in Europe were taken on and an indefinite future was envisaged for British Africa. In South Asia Britain hoped to remain a regional power with the assistance of the armed forces of independent India. Bevin also negotiated to acquire the former Italian colonies of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania.[22] The fundamental dilemma of Labour's foreign policy in the years 1945-51 never altered; how was an independent world role to be made compatible with Britain's diminished economic circumstances?

The Cold War solved the problem in so far as it gave Britain and the USA a common purpose. It interested the USA in the security of Western Europe and gave it a long-term military rationale in the region – an outcome which the Labour Government had pressed for since the end of the war. Britain's colonial role became an American asset in this Cold War context. Marshall Aid helped Britain to combine this role with an expensive domestic reform programme. But the 'special relationship' with the USA caused problems too. The left of the party could see that the Labour Government had become increasingly dependent on the leading power of world capitalism.[23] The Soviet Union – emerging from the war with enhanced moral capital as a victorious ally – had by contrast become Britain's principal enemy. Yet the leftwing of the Parliamentary Labour Party led by Aneurin Bevan was inclined to give the Russians the benefit of the doubt, believing that socialist economic development would pave the way to democracy and the peaceful passing of the Stalin dictatorship.[24] A similar

20 R. Smith and J. Zemetica, 'The Cold Warrior: Clement Attlee Reconsidered, 1945–1947', *International Affairs*, 61, 2, 1985, pp. 237–252.

21 A. Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 359–361.

22 See J. Callaghan, *Great Power Complex: British Imperialism, International Crises and National Decline, 1914–1951* (London, 1997), pp. 88–110.

23 As in Richard Crossman et al., *Keep Left* (London, 1947).

24 John Callaghan, 'The Left and the "Unfinished Revolution": Bevanites and Soviet Russia in the 1950s', *Contemporary British History*, 3, 15, Autumn 2001, pp. 63–83.

mentality could also be found in some of the trade unions affiliated to the party, as well as among Labour's constituency activists. The Cold War, the critics could see, had opened the prospect of Britain playing a junior role to the USA in the suppression of Communism and its allies wherever they arose. The Korean War illustrated this point and another one; to remain America's special partner and to maintain its Great Power status Britain would have to shoulder a heavier military burden than other members of NATO. Though Britain was still in the grip of economic austerity the Korean conflict led to American demands for the defence budget to rise from 7.5 per cent of national income to 14 per cent. The Labour left rebelled when it became clear that the domestic reform programme could not survive such military expenditures.

Decades of Division

Labour's return to opposition in 1951 opened a period of thirteen years in which there was plenty of time and numerous reasons for impassioned foreign policy debate. A large majority of Labour MPs supported by most of the votes of the affiliated trade unions dominated the party's annual conference and secured policy victories for the party leadership. The leadership defended NATO, nuclear deterrence and US policy (such as German rearmament) with a proprietorial zeal. The ruling trade union oligarchies secured the leadership's domination of the mass party and enabled it to isolate the left and impose an authoritarian party regime.[25] In Parliament the Labour left-wing could never mobilize more than 63 MPs for foreign policy revolts. Even so foreign policy could eclipse public ownership – the other great policy division of the day – in generating acrimony and ideological conflict. The critics were denounced as dupes of the Communists, the leaders were depicted as creatures of the USA. Their mutual distaste derived from the fact that for both sides in the foreign policy disputes of the 1950s, foreign and defence policy were intimately related to domestic preoccupations and the struggle for the soul of the party. The left minority wanted progress to a planned, largely state-owned economy in Britain and perceived the 'revisionist' leadership as engaged in the constant dilution of such ambitions while keenly embracing capitalism and its foremost protector, the USA. The leadership saw the dissidents as advocates of an undesirable and unnecessary soviet-style economy that would frighten away the voters, in an age when Keynesian techniques made free enterprise compatible with full employment, the elimination of poverty and progress towards equality. Both sides believed that Britain had a world role to play, the left stressing its international moral leadership. The clash of these opposed views was made noisier by the conflict of personal ambitions between Nye Bevan and Hugh Gaitskell. When these two were finally reconciled Bevan emerged as Shadow Foreign Secretary and dramatically broke with the dissidents in 1957 by dissociating himself from the growing demand for unilateral nuclear disarmament.

25 E. Shaw, *Discipline and Discord in the Labour Party* (Manchester, 1988).

The reliability of the unions in protecting official policy was brought into question when some of the biggest voted to support nuclear disarmament in 1959. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), launched in 1958, was also beginning to disturb the constituency Labour parties. In 1960 Labour's annual conference voted for unilateral nuclear disarmament. This was quickly overturned the following year. But it demonstrated the vulnerability of Labour's post-war foreign policy commitments should the trade unions ever become permanently alienated from the parliamentary leadership. This is precisely what happened when the Labour Governments of 1964–1966 and 1966–1970 embarked upon policies of wage restraint and failed to honour their manifesto commitments. The context was one of a swing to the left among politically active youth and an aspect of this change of mood was growing disillusionment with American foreign policy. The defence and foreign policies of the Labour Government were defeated at the annual conference for the first time ever in 1966 and the experience was repeated in 1967 and 1968. The relevant issues were military expenditure (1966), Vietnam (1966 and 1967), Greece (1967), Biafra (1968) and Rhodesia (1968). None of this would have been possible had the majority of votes of the affiliated trade unions remained as loyal to the parliamentary leadership as they had been prior to 1966. But the system of 'social democratic centralism' that had prevailed since the war was breaking down. The slowdown of economic growth combined with the rise in rates of inflation and unemployment fuelled discontent. The unions believed they had been treated as scapegoats by the Government. At the same time disquiet with the foreign and defence policies of the USA continued to grow among the activist left. In the 1970s resolutions were carried at the party's annual conference opposing first use and threatened use of nuclear weapons and the removal of all American nuclear bases in the UK (1972, 1973); there was also a demand for a new definition of Britain's overseas interests (1973).

After the formation of another Labour Government in 1974 in conditions of 'stagflation' the annual conference deplored its failure to honour promises to institute cuts in defence expenditures (1975), its breaches of the arms embargo to South Africa, and its failure to prevent sanctions-busting in relation to Rhodesia (1978). Throughout the decade numerous attempts were made to commit Labour to withdrawal from NATO and the Common Market and to break with bipartisanship in relation to Northern Ireland. All these failed. Labour's defeat in the general election of 1979, however, further changed the balance of power within the party in favour of the critics. In 1981 Labour adopted the policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament again along with the demand that all US bases be withdrawn from Britain.

Return to Normality

The Labour Party's lurch to the left had been driven by the failure of Labour Governments to achieve moderate reforms in deteriorating economic conditions. Social democratic ambitions were seemingly abandoned in these circumstances. The left of the party now gained the initiative and in 1981 forced through constitutional changes designed to give the mass party

more leverage over the parliamentary leadership. The general election rout of 1983, following Labour's first defeat at the hands of Mrs Thatcher in 1979, strengthened the case of those who opposed this radical shift. But it was not until 1989 that nuclear disarmament was finally ditched. Throughout the 1980s the party advocated withdrawal from the European Community, criticised US policy in Central America, demanded sanctions against South Africa, and wanted NATO to adopt a 'no first use' policy on nuclear weapons. But by 1989 power and authority in the party had been centralised once again, following its crisis and breakdown in the years 1966–1983. Three consecutive general election defeats did much to promote the argument that divided authority within the party and the left turn associated with it were responsible for Labour's exclusion from power. Foreign and defence policies returned to the old bipartisanship with the Conservatives, as revealed in such developments as Labour's support for the Gulf War in 1991, the decision to send troops to Bosnia in 1992 and sanctions against Serbia. Though the Labour Party was returned to office in May 1997, following a fourth defeat in 1992, with the promise of an 'ethical foreign policy', this rhetoric was soon found to be compatible with arms sales, the bombing of Iraq, Serbia, and Kosovo, support for the US missile attacks on targets in the Sudan and Afghanistan, and 'constructive engagement' with dictatorships.

The foreign economic policy of the Labour Party in the 1950s had centred on the Commonwealth. In the 1960s the party had been divided about Britain's membership of the EEC. Even though a Labour Government had applied for membership in 1967 the lack of firm commitment within the parliamentary leadership was still evident after Britain became a member. A Labour Government accordingly held a referendum on the issue in 1975. At that time the left of the party believed that membership would undermine national autonomy in the pursuit of socialist economic policies. The left was thus generally opposed to membership. But after ten years of Thatcherism the social benefits of membership began to outweigh such considerations. The 1980s was a decade in which the socialist left of the Labour Party withered away. The old Keynesian social democracy was in retreat too. The party's perennial support for a vigorous industrial policy was increasingly submerged under the language of economic liberalism as Labour fought for credibility as a manager of the national economy. By the time Tony Blair became leader of the party in 1994 it had become an entrenched New Labour conviction that the Conservatives had modernized the economy in line with international trends towards greater openness and more intense competition. Labour embraced globalization and declared that the old social democracy was obsolete.[26]

New Labour

There are obvious continuities in New Labour's foreign policy discourse with the main themes of this essay. Blair's reiteration of the claim that Britain remains a 'pivotal power'[27]

26 John Callaghan, *The Retreat of Social Democracy* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 156–176.
27 For example at the Lord Mayor's banquet, 22 November 1999.

bears a family resemblance to the old idea that its world role derived from its unique occupation of three intersecting circles of influence – Europe, the USA, and the Empire-Commonwealth. Relative economic decline – and eventual withdrawal from Empire – was not allowed to disturb this conviction – sometimes expressed as Britain's continued ability to 'punch above its weight' or play Greeks to America's Romans on the basis of Britain's supposedly superior diplomacy. British support for US foreign policy is a post-war expression, in reduced economic circumstances, of its old national interest in the global management of free trade capitalism. Blair's enthusiasm for globalization is the most recent manifestation of this long-standing commitment, in which the City of London has a disproportionately large stake. It clearly conditions his attitude towards the European Union which he has repeatedly criticized for its inability to ditch the old 'social democratic' institutions which allegedly stand in the way of global competitiveness.[28] Britain's special relationship with the USA during the Blair period has often involved advocacy of the American Way, rather than the European.

Britain's public fidelity to the USA is said to give it subtle, private influence in the counsels of the world's only superpower. But the Labour Government's rapid endorsement of American military actions – Sudan and Afghanistan (1998), Kosovo (1999), the bombing of Iraq throughout the 1990s and the 'war on terrorism' declared in September 2001 – also provokes domestic criticism. Britain, it has long been said on the left, behaves as if it is America's poodle and such compliant behaviour is incompatible with the exercise of political influence in Washington. Despite such criticism nothing like the problems of party management encountered in the 1960s attends to Tony Blair's diplomacy. The main reason for this is that the socialist left is weaker in every respect than it was in the 1960s. Robin Cook's mission statement for the Foreign Office in May 1997, with its references to ethics and human rights, was nevertheless redolent of the old Labour dissent which the socialists used to express.

The suggestion that Labour could pursue an 'ethical foreign policy' could not, of course, survive close scrutiny – Britain's role as one of the world's leading arms exporters was sufficient to expose that fallacy[29]. Moralising nevertheless remains relevant to what is distinctive about New Labour's diplomacy. Tony Blair has eclipsed both of his Foreign Secretaries in this regard by seizing the rhetorical initiative on such occasions as NATO's 'humanitarian' war in Kosovo, calling for the construction of a new 'international community' as he did so. This disposition was given even more scope by the September 11th terrorist attack on New York. The Labour Prime Minister was not only quick to endorse the 'war on terrorism' but also to repeat his call for a new world order that would 'uphold human dignity and social justice from the slums of Gaza to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan'. Blair then toured the globe in an effort to construct the international coalition that would legitimize a war against the Taleban. The same moralizing strain and global ambition exhibited in September 2001 were also fleetingly displayed in his 'save Africa' speeches, when the Prime Minister ostensibly

28 Blair's speech in Sao Paolo on 30 July 2001, for example, described the economic summit at Barcelona scheduled for 2002 as 'make or break time' for economic liberalization of the EU.

29 See M. Phythian, *The Politics of British Arms Sales Since 1964* (Manchester, 2000).

made Africa a top priority for his second term of office. No one really knew why, though Blair's personal role had become increasingly presidential and proactive in matters of foreign policy and the Prime Minister showed signs of being carried away by his own rhetoric. The basic orientation of Labour's foreign policy is, however, a familiar one; it seeks an active role in power politics for Britain provided that its forward position commands the sort of moral authority that can be derived from an international concert or community – a position imperiled by too close an association with American unilateralism. On this as on other matters Blair is doing little different than Gladstone, and the eminent Victorian would find much to approve of in the ideology and interests served by New Labour.

Historical Agendas and Perspectives

Most research on Labour's foreign policies has adopted a traditional diplomatic and political history approach or has focused on the policies and ideas of the various elements of the party inside and outside Westminster. Certain dominant themes and lines of enquiry emerge from this work but until very recently the study of what Labour Governments have done has been severely handicapped. Access to public records is prevented until at least thirty years have elapsed since the Government considered the documents in question.[30] Until the year 2000, when the last tranche of papers relating to the Labour Governments of 1964–1970 was released, the 1945–1951 Governments were the only majority Labour administrations for which we possessed almost all of the relevant documentary evidence. Beyond this specific problem students of foreign policy face general problems arising from the fact that the British political system is, among the democracies, exceptionally centralized. A British Prime Minister, under the arrangements of the Royal Prerogative, is able to make treaties, command the armed forces, declare war, enter into diplomatic relations and engage in numerous other acts of foreign policy without the need to consult Parliament. There are only very feeble institutional mechanisms to check this power and render it accountable. The relationship of secret intelligence to foreign policy-making is notoriously shrouded in secrecy but transparency in the British system is further hampered by numerous secrecy laws which obstruct proper scrutiny of decision-making and the exercise of power. The New Labour leadership specifically raised these issues as worthy objects of reform before coming to power in 1997. But the system survives unscathed five years later.

This constitutional veil on foreign policy makes it unusually difficult to identify the points at which a Labour Government has made a real difference. The crowded years of 1945–1951, which have attracted most interest from scholars concerned with Labour's diplomatic and political history, would be controversial even had the system been more transparent. Research continues to investigate the origins and early development of the Cold War; Labour's colonial policies; the Government's policies on European economic integration; the origins

30 The private papers of leading politicians are widely dispersed and not always available. Gaitskell's papers were not catalogued until 1997 and were closed to researchers until that year.

of post-war mass immigration; the special relationship with the USA; the development of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent and other issues related to the maintenance of Britain's world role. Historians interested in these issues have also concerned themselves with the policies of the preceding wartime coalition, in which the Labour leaders served and with which there are strong lines of post-1945 continuity. The traditionalist-revisionist debate about Cold War origins involves the related question of Britain's role in the origins of the conflict at a time when Labour held power. Among the diplomatic histories of this period there has been important work challenging the 'traditionalist' accounts defending Bevin and British policy as largely reactive to Stalin's aggression; largely altruistic in relation to British overseas dependencies; and largely constructive and far-sighted in terms of decolonisation.[31] 'Revisionist' readings of the record reveal a 'social imperialism' in the years 1945–1951 that was more exploitative of Britain's colonies than anything which preceded it; a retreat from Empire that was equivocal, sometimes begrudging, brutal and clumsy; and an anti-Communist orientation at the Foreign Office which derived from a perception of Britain's interests as a world power based on empire – a perspective with which key Labour ministers, such as Bevin, wholly identified.[32] Britain under Labour took far more initiative in the development of the Cold War according to this historiography than has previously been allowed.[33] Bevin's role in 'educating the Americans' is often seen as crucial to the creation of the Anglo-American global alliance in the immediate post-war years.[34]

Apart from drawing researchers to the policies of the wartime coalition and the role of leading politicians such as Bevin and Attlee the better instances of this sort of research have also examined the role of various state and non-state agencies in the making of foreign policy. The Foreign Office and other bureaucratic offices of state have received some attention.[35] So has the International Department of the Labour Party, the Information Research Department which Labour created in 1948 as an anti-communist propaganda machine within the state, and sections of the extra-parliamentary party such as the trade unions (notably in the design and implementation of a colonial Cold War foreign policy).[36] It has also provided different insights into the relationships between Cold War and colonial issues and how these were mediated by institutional and personal factors.

31 For example in A. Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary* (Oxford, 1985); K. O. Morgan, *Labour In Power 1945–1951* (Oxford, 1985); F. S. Northedge, *Descent from Power: British foreign policy 1945–1973* (London, 1974).

32 See D. K. Fieldhouse, 'The Labour Governments and the Empire Commonwealth', in R. Ovendale (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of the British Labour Governments 1945–1951* (Leicester, 1984); J. Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (London, 1988); J. Kent, *British Imperial Strategy and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944–1949* (Leicester, 1993); P. Weiler, *Ernest Bevin* (Manchester, 1993). M. Curtis, *The Ambiguities of Power: British Foreign Policy Since 1945* (London, 1995).

33 See, for example, A. Deighton (ed.), *Britain and the First Cold War* (London, 1990)

34 As in R. Ovendale, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1998).

35 Such as in J. Saville, *The Politics of Continuity* (London, 1993) and M. Hopkins' study of the Washington embassy between 1945 and 1955 in A. Aldrich and M. Hopkins, *Defence and Diplomacy: British Foreign Policy in the Post-War World* (London, 1994).

36 P. Weiler, *British Labour and the Cold War* (Stanford, 1988).

Historians taking a political economy approach to foreign policy have also seen the 1945–1951 years as decisive. There is a well-established 'declinist' literature which has looked for explanations of Britain's 'descent from power' and questioned the political management affecting this process. The role of sterling and its relationship to Britain's Great Power role has featured in this debate.[37] The 'special relationship' continues to receive attention in this and other contexts with 'revisionist' historians seeing it largely as an illusion born of Churchill's sentiments and wartime needs which the Labour Government was unable to shake off, rather than a hard-headed calculation of Britain's interests.[38] The most controversial of these 'declinist' studies, perhaps, is the third volume of Correlli Barnett's trilogy analyzing Britain's imperial overstretch and relative economic decline which indicts Labour for neglecting domestic economic renewal in favour of maintaining Britain's world-role and implementing costly welfare reforms which the nation could ill-afford. The latter is rooted, according to Barnett, in an evangelizing 'New Jerusalemism' which suffused Labour ideology but was by no means confined to it.[39] Britain under Labour thus squandered Marshall Aid, in this account, because of an inflated domestic welfare programme combined with a Great Power foreign policy.

Party Ideology

None of these studies is able to ignore the role of ideas, beliefs and values although most of the mainstream literature on foreign policy assumes that it is little troubled by partisan differences of this sort. Studies dealing with the idea of the 'special relationship' between Britain and the USA, for example, are dominated by functionalist accounts focusing on the military, bureaucratic and political aspects of the relationship rather than its cultural construction. Another typical weakness of such studies is their British perspective, though this itself speaks eloquently of the nature of the special relationship which has concerned the British far more than the Americans. For students of ideology Labour's role in the creation and maintenance of the special relationship is of interest because of the tensions and divisions within the party which it helped to generate and give expression to. Henry Pelling's *America and the British Left* was published as long ago as 1956 and is chiefly notable for sharing the pro-American leanings of Labour's Gaitskellite leadership and largely misses the opportunity to understand the sources of the intra-party divisions over Labour's foreign policy. The only book devoted to Labour's special relationship with the USA since Pelling relies on secondary sources and

37 As in S. Strange, *Sterling and Policy* (Oxford, 1971).

38 For example, J. Charmley, *Churchill's Grand Alliance: the Anglo-American Special Relationship 1940-57* (London, 1995) but see also H. Bull and W. R. Louis (eds.), *The Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations Since 1945* (Oxford 1997), especially the chapter by Bradford Perkins 'Unequal Partners: The Truman Administration and Great Britain', pp. 43–65.

39 C. Barnett, *The Lost Victory: British Dreams, British Realities, 1945–1950* (London, 1995). Among the replies to Barnett see J. Tomlinson 'Marshall Aid and the "Shortage Economy" in Britain in the 1940s', *Contemporary European History*, 9, 1, 2000pp. 137-155.

debates within the parliamentary party.[40] One fertile way into this area, however, is via the intellectual and cultural formation of the relevant leading Labour politicians, which the British taste for political biography has helped to facilitate. Hugh Gaitskell, for example, is said to have been 'remarkable for being passionately, almost uncritically, pro-American for the rest of his career', following his prolonged collaboration with the USA in the formation of the European Payments Union in 1950.[41] But what is really remarkable is the fact that Gaitskell shared this disposition with most of the generation of Labour's leading parliamentarians who succeeded Attlee and Bevin; George Brown, Denis Healey, Roy Jenkins, and Anthony Crosland; followed by David Owen, Shirley Williams, and Bill Rodgers. During the Cold War a rich array of transatlantic links connected Labour's leaders to the American political establishment. This is a facet of intellectual history, as well as international history[42] but it has not been researched in any real depth in relation to Labour's foreign policy, notwithstanding the fact that the Labour administrations of Wilson and Callaghan, 1964-70 and 1974-79 were decidedly warmer towards the USA than some of the Conservative Governments which came before and after them.[43]

Did the Labour constituency parties discuss foreign policy issues to any great extent? What about the role of the affiliated trade unions? How and why does the level of interest in foreign policy vary in time and by issue? There is only fragmentary information on these matters in part because of the traditional concern with elite opinion and elite groups and institutions. Elite opinion itself can be broadly or narrowly specified, of course. In relation to the project of European integration research has examined 'third force' proposals from Labour's backbenchers and Bevin's advocacy of a colonial variation of this idea within the Cabinet – short-lived projects inspired by the perception that it was possible and necessary to find an independent role in the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union in the years 1945–1948. Other studies have examined the inter-relationship between the Labour elites and those of the trade unions, business, civil servants, and the media, as well as those of other countries. Some have charted the battle of ideas over Europe, focusing on the left-right intra-party struggle which flared up in the 1960s. For many years the best narrative history of Labour's policies and ideas on the colonies was P. S. Gupta's *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement, 1914–1964* (London, 1975), to which has been added Stephen Howe's survey of the whole British left.[44] Neither of these books attempt much of an exploration of the related issues of race, racism, and national identity. But in respect of Labour's immigration policies,

40 P. Jones, *America and the British Labour Party: The Special Relationship at Work* (London, 1997).

41 K. O. Morgan, 'Hugh Gaitskell and International Affairs', *Contemporary British History,* 7, 2, autumn 1993, p. 314.

42 It receives some attention in studies of the cultural Cold War such as F. Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?* (London, 1999) and A. Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London, 1997), and in the biographies of some Labour politicians.

43 But see S. Fielding, '"But westward, look, the land is bright": Labour's Revisionists and the Imagining of America, c. 1945–1964', in J. Hollowell (ed.), *Twentieth Century Anglo-American Relations* (London, 2001), pp. 87–104.

44 S. Howe, *Anti-Colonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire, 1918–1964* (Oxford, 1993).

studies have made connections with the party's attempts to promote British influence in the emerging Commonwealth by means, for example, of the 1948 British Nationality Act. This subject has generated interest in the cultural dimensions of foreign policy, the domestic context of imperial retreat and the forging of a post-war British national identity.[45] Comparative perspectives on these and other issues of foreign policy remain rare.[46]

There is as yet no thorough history of the foreign policy of the Labour Governments of 1964–1970, though valuable research has already been published on aspects of it such as the question of arms sales. In the absence of access to Cabinet papers for this period until very recently research has had recourse to US records shedding light on Labour's domestic performance and its relationship to the foreign policy requirements of Britain and the USA.[47] Researchers have been able to make use of the unusual number of published diaries produced by these Governments but given what I said earlier about the extreme centralism and secrecy of British politics these are of only limited value. We know that the first two Wilson Governments spent a great deal of time on controversial issues such as Commonwealth immigration, an ever present sterling crisis, Rhodesia's unilateral declaration of independence, the question of Britain's continuing defence role East of Suez, the renewal of Britain's nuclear arsenal, arms sales to unsavoury regimes such as that of apartheid South Africa, the question of entry to the European Economic Community and attempts to defend the US war in Vietnam and even mediate a peace deal. The general picture that emerges is the familiar one of a clash of ethics and realpolitik, with the latter usually in the ascendant. Future research on Labour and foreign policy, however, is likely to reflect the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences to a much greater extent than before and in this there is still much to be done on the first seventy years of the twentieth century in relation to the competing claims of class and nation, national identity, the impact of imperialism and the transition to a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society.

45 See Chris Waters, '"Dark Strangers" in Our Midst: Discourse of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947–1963', *Journal of British Studies,*36, 2, 1997pp 207-238; B. Carter and S. Joshi, 'The role of Labour in the creation of a racist Britain', *Race and Class*, 25, 3, 1984; B. Carter and K. Paul, 'The politics of national identity: racism, migrant labour and the Attlee Governments, 1949–1951' in M. van der Linden and J. Lucassen (eds.), *Racism and the Labour Market* (Bern, 1995); and I. R. G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy since 1939: the Making of Multiracial Britain* (London, 1997).

46 But see S. Berger and A. Smith (eds.), *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity 1870–1939* (Manchester, 1999).

47 As in C. Ponting, *Breach of Promise: Labour in Power 1964–1970* (London, 1989).