Recent years have seen a growing interest in the UK concerning Britain’s role in Latin America. In 2010 the British Foreign Secretary William Hague announced that it was “time for Britain at last to think afresh about Latin America and the opportunities it presents for political cooperation and trade and investment.”¹ This statement of intent was followed up by a series of high-profile visits by British Ministers and members of the royal family to Latin America, alongside the re-opening of dormant embassies and renewed investment in the region by British firms. This effort came against the backdrop of a steep decline in Britain’s presence in Latin America throughout the course of the twentieth century. As Hague acknowledged in his speech, “For much of the twentieth century Latin America was considered to lie within a sphere of influence outside Britain’s traditional interests. It was thought to be predominantly a concern for the United States….“²

This assumption of U.S. omnipotence in Latin America throughout the twentieth century has been mirrored to a large extent in the treatment of the region by international historians. It is therefore heartening to see the appearance of Bevan Sewell’s article, which adds to a small but growing cannon of work on British foreign policy in Latin America in the twentieth century.³ Sewell’s article focuses on British policy towards Latin


² Ibid.

America in the late 1950s and early 1960s and specifically considers British policy towards the U.S.-led Alliance for Progress. Initiated by the Kennedy administration, this major aid programme aimed to modernise Latin American economies and in the process shore the region up against the perceived threat of international communism. Adding a transatlantic perspective to the aid programme, Sewell’s article charts the gradual engagement of the British government with the Alliance.

While focused primarily on Latin America, Sewell’s article will be of interest to a much broader audience than historians working on this region. For Sewell, British policy in Latin America in this era can only be fully understood as part of a three-pronged approach to world affairs by British officials, taking into account strategic Cold War considerations, bilateral relations with Washington, as well as Britain’s economic interest in Latin America. Sewell places the interaction of these different concerns at the centre of his analysis, arguing:

it was only when these three positions were aligned – when it benefitted the West’s position in the Cold War, when it was compatible with shifting patterns in relations between Washington and London, and when it was seen to be a worthwhile investment of British influence – that any real momentum for an expanded British role started to develop (608).

But while not neglecting the broader influences on British policy-making, Sewell argues that Britain’s own economic self-interest in Latin America is key in explaining the final decision to embark upon a more direct engagement with the Alliance for Progress. As he puts it, “it was only when a shift was also deemed to accord with London’s own interests that a change in attitude became apparent” (609).

Prior to this point of convergence, the different factors influencing British policy caused divisions within Whitehall. From the outset of debates about Britain’s role in Latin America, the Foreign Office was of the view that it was necessary for Britain to play an active role in the region both in order to maintain close relations with Washington and meet its broader strategic commitments in fighting the Cold War. Summarising these views in August 1960, a Foreign Office memo argued that Britain’s “special position with the US … depends largely on the extent to which we can be seen to exercise a useful influence on the common interest all over the world. We simply cannot afford to abdicate our position in such an important part of it as Latin America” (quoted in Sewell, 612). These arguments were strengthened over time as Cold-War tensions heightened in the early 1960s, the British government increasingly wished to strengthen cooperation with the U.S., and calls for European contributions to the Alliance for Progress by U.S. officials became increasingly common.

But these arguments in favour of British participation in the Alliance for Progress – made forcefully and consistently by the Foreign Office – met stern opposition from the Treasury. From the Treasury’s perspective, Britain’s interests in Latin America were insufficient to justify the expenditure of limited resources necessary for the country to make any meaningful contribution to the aid programme. As the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury Frank Lee put it, “a specially mounted campaign on behalf of Latin America would involve an unjustifiable diversion of effort and resources from other parts of the world” (quoted in Sewell, 613). In

particular, the Treasury was opposed to diverting resources away from the Commonwealth, where, it believed, British interests were much more pressing.

It was only when the perceived importance of the Commonwealth began to ebb in the mid-1960s that the Treasury finally began to countenance the idea that it might be worth a financial investment by the government to actively contribute to the Alliance for Progress in Latin America. This belief – joined with concerns over maintaining close relations with Washington and broader Cold War commitments – finally allowed Britain to take the step towards active participation in the Alliance for Progress. As Sewell explains it, “By 1964 there was enough convergence between the different elements underpinning British decision-making to make a more proactive stance toward Latin America possible” (624).

Sewell makes clear in his analysis of British policy-making towards Latin America that the main sticking point preventing the country taking a more active role in the region prior to the mid-1960s was considerations over the financial burden this would require, and whether this could be justified. It was only when the Treasury was convinced that Latin America was sufficiently important to Britain that it was willing to support contributing to the Alliance for Progress. Thus Sewell is able to conclude that “British policy in this period … was shaped by more than the exigencies of the cold war or the desire of British officials to forge closer relations with the United States” (625). While not discounting these factors, what emerges as the key element in Sewell’s analysis is “the desire among advisors in Whitehall to shape British policy in a way that was cost-effective and, above all, financially beneficial” (625).

Sewell’s article is an excellent piece of historical scholarship. It is well researched, drawing on archival sources from the U.S. and Britain, as well as contemporary media coverage. The article is well written and conveys clearly the often complex nuances of British policy-making. Ultimately, the article offers a convincing analysis of the evolution of Britain’s policy towards Latin America in general (and the Alliance for Progress in particular) in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Its central conclusion asserting the primacy of economic self-interest as a motivating factor behind the British decision to actively participate in the aid programme contributes to important debates about the formulation of British foreign policy in the Cold War.

One of the article’s strengths is to locate British policy towards the Alliance for Progress in Latin America in the broader context of Anglo-U.S. relations, as well as broader Cold War considerations. However, a little further context could have been provided in two ways. First, the perspective of the Latin American states on Britain’s role in the region – while touched upon briefly – could have been expanded a little. Was there a strong desire on the part of Latin American governments to see British participation in the Alliance for Progress, and if so, what motivated this?

Secondly, a more detailed explanation of precisely what British interests in Latin America were at this point in time could have been offered. While reference to a Board of Trade paper indicates the proportion of total British exports sent to Latin America (and the proportion that this made up of Latin American imports as a whole), more detail here would have been useful. What type of materials did Britain export to Latin America at this time and to which countries in particular? What about the trade in the other direction (British imports from Latin America) or British investment in the region? While this is of course a work in diplomatic history (rather than economic history), a better understanding of the economic interests held by Britain in Latin America at this time would have been helpful in clarifying the Treasury’s reservations about investing government resources in the region. Similarly, a clearer statement of the scope of Britain’s strategic interests...
(or lack of them) in Latin America would have aided in explaining the underlying factors informing British policy-makers attitudes towards the region.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Sewell’s article remains a fine piece of scholarship. It makes an important contribution to debates about British foreign policy in the Cold War, while at the same time constituting a welcome addition to works which seek to internationalise the history of U.S.-Latin American relations in the twentieth century. As interest in Britain’s role in Latin America grows, hopefully more works of this kind will appear.

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