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Review by Helen Parr, University of Keele

In his elegantly written and well researched article, based on his doctorate on Anglo-German relations 1974-82, Mathias Haeussler makes an extremely important point.1 Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s renegotiation of Britain’s terms of entry into the European Community (EC), and the subsequent referendum on staying in, may have secured a domestic political victory, but it came at a significant international cost: “a British self-marginalisation in Europe that has... been of a more lasting nature” (784).

British historiography of Wilson’s policy towards European integration, Haeussler shows, generally praises Wilson, because he held together a muted principle in favour of Britain’s membership of the EC, against significant domestic opposition. In 1967, Wilson applied for British membership of the EC for a second time. His initiative was unsuccessful, but he kept the application ‘on the table.’ This policy, which demonstrated some strategic foresight, contributed to a shift in French policy towards enlargement. When Labour lost the 1970 election, many parliamentarians began to voice their hostility towards British membership in the EC on the terms which Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath would be likely to attain.

Labour’s opposition to EC membership resulted partly because the left now sought to forge an alternative economic strategy and wanted to be free from any EC restrictions on British economic policy, and partly because many centrist MPs were agnostic about the EC but did not want to miss the opportunity to put political pressure on Heath. In May 1971, Foreign Secretary James Callaghan effectively declared his opposition to membership on Heath’s terms. Callaghan’s stance forced Wilson’s hand. In October Wilson advocated renegotiating the conditions Heath had secured and putting the results to a national vote. When

Labour won by the slimmest of majorities in March 1974, Wilson had to turn his domestic hedging into a national policy.

The mid 1970s, Haeussler suggests, offered an unusual opportunity to strengthen the ever-elusive British-German-French political axis. The West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt was more inclined towards Atlanticism than his predecessor. The French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing was less opaque than Georges Pompidou in his willingness to deal with the Americans. In the aftermath of the oil crisis and the failure of a political grouping with a distinctly ‘European’ identity, the possibilities for co-operation in the EC and between the EC and the U.S. became more fluid.

Wilson’s domestic preoccupation, and his lack of longer term vision, spurned these potential openings. While Britain’s Prime Minister fretted about cheese and butter imports from New Zealand, Schmidt and Giscard made significant agreements at the Paris Summit in December 1974. Their co-operative inclinations created the European Council, institutionalising regular heads of government meetings. They also agreed to reintroduce qualified majority voting in the EC for non-essential matters, to move to direct elections to the European Parliament by 1978, and to set Belgian Prime Minister Leo Tindemans to report on future progress to European Union.

Haeussler, using British and German governmental records as well as Schmidt’s private archive, convincingly shows that Wilson’s diplomacy with Schmidt was exceptionally flawed. In November, Schmidt spoke at the Labour Party Conference, an appearance agreed by all to have been dazzling, and one that has fostered an illusion of Anglo-German harmony over the renegotiation. One Labour Cabinet minister said – apparently without any irony – that Schmidt’s speech was “the most brilliant performance that they had ever heard at a Labour Party Conference” (775).

However, Schmidt could not compensate for the ambiguous hole at the centre of Britain’s policy. The West German Chancellor was completely unimpressed with Wilson’s personal diplomacy, and was unconvinced that Wilson held any great interest in Britain’s future relationship with the European Community. Schmidt emerges as a pertinent observer of British politics, commenting in May 1974 that “there was a fatal tendency of the English to regard their EEC-membership as the cause of all their economic ills” and that all the renegotiation demands could be solved easily “if you know where you are going... [he could] not believe that the majority of the Labour Party conference believe[d] that Britain’s long-term future depended on EC-payments with regards to agriculture, or the regional and social funds” (774, 776).

Haeussler’s article thus raises important questions about Wilson’s attitude towards EC membership. In his 1974 Premiership Wilson displayed a “lassitude verging on melancholy,” to use Peter Hennessy’s phrase (778).² Perhaps Wilson was unwell, and lacked the energy to tackle, once again, the details of the financing for the Community’s agricultural budget. Perhaps the viciousness of Labour party politics had worn him down. Perhaps he did not really believe in Britain’s membership of the EC in the first place, although he knew Britain had no choice but to remain a member. Haeussler argues that Wilson could not bring himself to care about the outcome of the renegotiation, as long as he could show a domestic audience that he had gained something, and hence could hope in the referendum to secure a vote for staying in.

One of the issues on which Britain sought better terms was financing for the agricultural budget. Agricultural levies and tariff revenues went straight into the Community budget under the principle that the Community should possess its ‘own resources.’ Britain, an agricultural importer, would pay 24% of the budget in 1980, although its share of the EC’s GNP was only 14% (780). Schmidt recognised that Britain had a problem, but he had one too. His Finance Minister, Hans Apel, did not wish to concede to Britain, particularly if it meant a greater burden for the German taxpayer. Schmidt worked out an agreement with Giscard, secretly establishing a Franco-German working group, in advance of the Dublin Summit in March 1975. At Dublin, the Germans read Wilson’s hand (or lack of it) well. Schmidt held firm his position that German taxpayers would not take change, even though privately he was willing to make a small concession. Wilson, it appeared, was completely uninterested in the details, and accepted the German draft, turning the discussion back to New Zealand.

It has been commonplace to see Wilson as having had no room for manoeuvre, his hand forced by the Labour Party’s antipathy towards EC membership. In fact, Haeussler demonstrates that Wilson did have choices about what he could do and say, and that he consistently made the wrong call. He could have shown a stronger, more determined face to the West German Chancellor, and could have convinced him that he was committed to a British future in Europe. Had Wilson done so, it could have made a difference, possibly securing a slightly better deal on the agricultural budget, and fostering the impression of a longer-term British vision for its membership of the Community that could take shape once Wilson was over the domestic hump. It is tempting thus also to think, given that the referendum result was strongly in favour, and because the Labour party split anyway six years later, that Wilson could have argued more fervently in favour of British membership to a domestic audience too.

More committed British involvement probably would not have taken the European Community in substantially different directions in the late 1970s and Britain’s existing influence with the United States meant that Britain was not left out of the burgeoning transatlantic economic summitry in the middle years of the decade. Nevertheless, a greater commitment from Wilson, as Haeussler shows, would surely have strengthened Britain’s hand in bilateral relations with France and Germany. It could have made Britain a more important player in the European Council and thus it could have helped Britain to play its long sought for role as a bridge or a pivot between the EC and the U.S. as the transatlantic economic apparatus took shape.

Domestically, the renegotiation and referendum meant that the British public gained the impression that the EC was an entity not to be embraced or even lived with but to be challenged. According to Schmidt, Britain’s limp-hearted involvement meant that Britain counted for little. Wilson’s legacy, therefore, was to concede an outcome which he had sought membership of the EC to avert. His non-committal attitude meant that Britain’s place in the world would be defined not by Britain, but by others. In 2012, Schmidt told German television that he had been wrong in the 1960s “when I thought we had to admit the English in any case, even against de Gaulle’s will. Subsequently, I have come to agree with de Gaulle” (784).

Wilson had decided in 1967 that it was in Britain’s interests to enter the EC, and indeed, that there was no choice for Britain but to join. Haeussler’s excellent article shows that Wilson’s policy in the 1970s stopped

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that strategy from dying but did not take it forward. He prioritised the internal cohesion of the Labour Party to the extent at which he could not personally bring himself to give any sign of enthusiasm about Britain’s membership of the EC. Thus, it is hard not to think that he fell short of meeting the decade’s wider challenges. Wilson established a precedent for Britain in the EC of engagement that was so lukewarm it might as well have been cold.

But perhaps Wilson’s support for Britain in Europe, hidden under layers of ambiguity, reflects the sceptical edge of an important British centre ground that Britain has to be in the EC but has no reason to be particularly enthusiastic about it. The convincing yes vote in the 1975 referendum established a consensus in British politics that has lasted for forty years and might last longer. The topicality of renegotiation and referendum in current British politics is obvious. If there is a ‘lesson’ from the Wilson years in the 1970s, perhaps it is that there are degrees of semi-detachment.

Wilson’s objective was to keep Britain in the EC, and hence, he should have operated with more zest, in Europe and back in Britain. He did not have to speak with such unending vagueness about his overall goals. Even with such a poor domestic political hand, he could have played the national statesman, much as he had in 1967, but he lacked the determination, and probably he lacked the personal commitment too. Britain was in, but membership was not an essential part of Labour’s political vision for Britain, and it was left to Margaret Thatcher to take the centre-ground. By 1979, there was no doubt that the Conservatives were the party of Europe.

Helen Parr is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Keele University. She has written and published on British and French policies towards the European Community in the late 1960s and 1970s, and on British nuclear weapons policy in the same period. Her publications include Britain’s Policy towards the European Community 1964-7: Harold Wilson and Britain’s World Role (Routledge, 2006). She is currently working on a social and cultural history of the British Parachute Regiment and the 1982 Falklands War.