5 The Conservatives and Europe: the pragmatism of power 1951–57

THE TRIUMPH OF EDEN: 1951–55

With Churchill’s return to Downing Street in October 1951, Continental federalists had high hopes of a substantial shift in Britain’s attitudes towards European integration. They were encouraged by the presence of leading Europeanists within the Government; Sandys, Eccles and Thorneycroft were ministers, and Macmillan and Maxwell Fyfe held Cabinet posts. Maxwell Fyfe was appointed to lead a strong delegation to Strasbourg and a further fillip came in the week before the Assembly’s meetings when, ‘despite strong opposition from the Foreign Office’, Churchill appointed Boothby to represent the Conservatives, and by implication the Government, in a debate in Strasbourg between members of Congress and a delegation from the Consultative Assembly.

Although the Conservative delegates concurred with their Government that the Pleven Plan was quite unsuitable, accepting the powerful strategic arguments against British involvement, they were keen that there should be a marked change in tone. They assured the Strasbourg Assembly that the new Conservative Government would give more encouragement to the Council of Europe: although Britain could not belong exclusively to any one grouping – considerations of defence, Commonwealth ties and the economic implications of the sterling area precluded British participation in a purely European community – Britain might be the lynch pin between a wider Atlantic community and ‘European arrangements on a supranational basis’.

They were swiftly disillusioned. ‘Maxwell Fyfe spoke in the morning in Strasbourg. The big guns [Winston, Macmillan] were sitting in Whitehall, but Maxwell Fyfe was acting with full Cabinet authority.’ Although the wording of his statement was carefully cautious, Maxwell Fyfe was convinced that it
significantly changed the emphasis of Britain’s approach. He meant ‘that we would join the Pleven discussions to remould it. We would take a full and honourable part in negotiations which Britain had refused to do over the Schuman Plan, brushing aside the commitment to supranationalism. We all went off to lunch and came back at 5.00 pm when we saw the papers with the headline about Eden’s statement in Rome . . . The whole thing was unbelievably awful.’ Henceforth, ‘we were regarded as almost untouchables, and it would be better if we went home.’

On 3 December 1951 the whole Conservative delegation in Strasbourg signed a round-robin letter to Churchill saying their position was intolerable. ‘It was a desperate message . . . saying we must make our goodwill known otherwise Europe would fall apart and form something without us. It was a really strongly worded letter of protest asking if we had gone back on everything that we said.’ In his response which supported Eden’s stance, the Prime Minister showed no hint of discomfort. Further personal interventions and individual letters of protest to Churchill and Eden received no reply. ‘Nothing happened. Thereafter the European Movement rather sank. Although we went on meeting, the steam went out of it.’

The events of November 1951 proved to be a watershed. Thereafter there emerged three lines of approach in Conservative backbench attitudes to Europe:

1. Thanks to the twin distractions of German rearmament (and the political form this was taking through the European Defence Community/European Political Community) and imperial preference, only a hard core of MPs within the Strasbourg delegation and in organizations such as the British Committee of ELEC, worked to counter Eden’s indifference to the development of ‘Little Europe’, and sought to promote alternative military and economic arrangements. These MPs were Amery, Smithers and Boothby.

2. The ‘centrist line’, favoured by those Conservatives who wanted a British lead within the Council of Europe and a closer association with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), and who were profoundly discouraged by the Foreign Office’s indifference. These MPs included