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New Labour, New Europe?

Scornful of continental concepts of ‘European union’ in the late forties and affronted by and dismissive of the Schuman Plan in 1950, the Labour Party in opposition in the fifties added nothing to the process of European integration. The Eden government’s indifference to the Messina conference in 1955 was mirrored by Labour. So the European Community emerged as a real if unpalatable fact without any British input to its form or aims. For the next 30 years the Labour Party

‘What we need is a combination of practical thoughts and idealistic aspirations’ – Willy Brandt

Personality: Tony Blair

R. Broad, *Labour’s European Dilemmas*
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writhed in indecision. It was *against* membership of the Community when in opposition in 1961–63; *for* membership when in government in 1966–70; *against* membership once more when back in opposition in 1970–74; *for* membership again when in government in 1974–79; *against* membership once again when in opposition after 1979. So swung the party’s pendulum until finally, by the late eighties, the issue exhausted itself. The pro-membership cause won by the march of events.

Ideological oscillation by a political party when in and when out of power is a commonplace of democratic politics. For Labour it was not confined to Europe. Since 1945 many issues have aroused passionate dispute, sometimes lasting years, spanning times in government and times in opposition, and then effectively settled by common decision or by external circumstance. Europe, along with Clause IV and nuclear disarmament, caused dissension for a generation. The three were intertwined though not coterminous. By and large, where anyone stood on one issue showed where he or she stood on another, except that on Europe the Left could reach out at times to allies in the Centre and on the Right. The place and extent of economic planning and public ownership were matters of debate from the fifties onwards. After 1973 they became essentially subsidiary to Europe, for national and regional planning and the policies pursued by publicly owned industries were subject to EC rules. All three disputes contributed to the party’s long absences from government and to its weakness when there.

Labour opponents of British membership of the European Community argued in the sixties and seventies that it was not the *party* that wanted to join or, after 1973, to remain in. The party, as represented by the constituencies (or at least by the activists) and by many unions (or at least their leaders), was fairly consistently against membership, though going reluctantly along with it when the Wilson and Callaghan governments endorsed it. Europe was a major element in the breakaway to form the Social Democratic Party in 1981. Compared with ‘the march towards socialism’ under the Attlee governments, the Wilson and Callaghan administrations disappointed. Despite improvements in education, increased social housing and better social services, the abandonment of the economic planning and the extension of state ownership foreseen in the 1974 manifesto, the acceptance of the IMF loan and budgetary restrictions in 1976 were dispiriting. There was, in the words of that manifesto, no ‘fundamental and irreversible shift of power and wealth in favour of working