

Patrick Gordon-Walker, The European Policy of the Labour Party

Caption: In 1952, Patrick Gordon-Walker, a Labour MP and British delegate to the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, sets out in the French magazine Notre Europe the Labour Party's position on European issues.

Source: Notre Europe. Revue européenne. dir. de publ. Hoffet, Frédéric; Tabouis, Geneviève; Zenner, Jacques. 1952, n° 14; 3e année. Strasbourg: Société européenne d'éditions et de publications. "La politique européenne du Parti travailliste", auteur:Gordon-Walker, Patrick , p. 26-32.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/patrick_gordon_walker_the_european_policy_of_the_labour_party-en-bc441c70-e71c-4bc7-99c3-15e3e940c2b5.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

The European Policy of the Labour Party

by the Right Honourable Patrick Gordon-Walker

Labour Member of the House of Commons

Former Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations

United Kingdom Representative in the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe in 1951 and 1952

The general attitude of the Labour Party to the Council of Europe was clear whilst the party was in power. It remains the same now that Labour is in opposition.

Our party is opposed to the United Kingdom becoming a member of a European federation. The United Kingdom must not become a province in a newly created State. That also applies to partial federations on the lines of the Schuman Plan and the European Community. All those institutions provide for joint parliaments and supranational bodies whose members will be subject to a new authority that is not accountable to the parliaments of their own countries.

Leaving aside for a moment the reasons for that attitude, which is generally misunderstood, I would point out that the corollary of that policy is that we are firmly opposed to any attempt to make the Council of Europe, and the Consultative Assembly in particular, anything that they are not. We are firmly opposed to those who consistently try to confer powers on an Assembly that is purely consultative. We believe that the Assembly can fulfil a useful and necessary role in its present form. But we doubt that it can even survive or maintain its position if it continues to engage in pointless debates about its own status.

The Labour Party delegates in Strasbourg resent the constant accusations that they are bad Europeans, selfish, obstinate and blinkered. We believe that we have a much more realistic and optimistic attitude to European union than our critics. In our view, a harangue such as the one from Mr Spaak after his resignation as President of the Assembly inevitably does a great deal of harm. However eloquent and well-intentioned such speeches might be, they nonetheless perpetuate tension and disagreement.

Without exception, all the progress made towards European unity — whether in the OEEC, SHAPE, the Schuman Plan or the EDC — has been achieved outside the Council of Europe. That must be largely attributed to those who talk about the creation of Europe and of 'real Europeans'.

It has to be admitted that the position of the Labour Party has to a great extent been presented as negative. We have been portrayed as the only bad Europeans. If only we could be converted, everyone would set to work to build the real Europe. The United States Congress delegates who came to Strasbourg last year and seemed to think that what had proved possible and valid for the United States should also be possible and valid for Europe echoed those accusations.

Whilst they were in opposition, the Conservatives continued to hold that general view. They gave the impression that, even if they were not participating in a European federation, they would at any rate be in favour of British participation in a partial federation on the lines of the Schuman Plan. The Conservative Party changed its position when it came to power, causing consternation and vexation amongst the federalists. But there is no indication that it made them take a more realistic view.

However, one thing should be quite clear now: the United Kingdom does not wish to become an integral part of a federation in the strict sense of a new sovereign State. And it is not only the United Kingdom, because it is a mistake to think that the Labour Party and British people who do not belong to a party are alone in taking that attitude. Virtually all Scandinavians, most Belgian socialists and all German socialists agree with us. They would not change their view simply because the British changed theirs. They are not simply following the United Kingdom. They believe that their policy is the right one.

I think that the time has come to recognise that the Labour Party can put forward constructive ideas on European unity and the Council of Europe. Now that it is clear that the path being followed by the federalists

in Strasbourg is not leading anywhere, the comments that the Labour Party feels that it has to make on the subject should at least be noted. While the Conservative Party was in opposition, it did not think it necessary to listen to the Labour Party. Everyone was hoping for a change of government in the United Kingdom, because then, it was said, the British would side with the federalists. In those circumstances, it was hardly worth the Labour Party putting forward its positive ideas on European unity. No one would have listened in any case.

On the whole, the Labour Party merely stated that if the countries of continental Europe were considering a partial or total federation, we would do our best to support them and cooperate with them under conditions that did not entail our becoming a province of such a federation. That is still our position. We are not preventing other countries from forming a federation, and we should be happy if they are successful. If their plan is put into effect, we shall have to find ways of cooperating with them.

However, we are not merely acting as benevolent spectators and leaving all the work to others. We have clear ideas on the right way to achieve European unity, which we see as one of the main objectives at the present time.

We make a distinction between European federation and European unity. In our view, those who talk about federation as the only way of achieving unity are doing great harm to the cause. Because of them, anyone who is against the idea of federation is seen as an enemy of European unification or even a bad European.

It is quite certain now that no federation will encompass the whole of Europe. There might or might not be partial federations on the lines of the Defence Community. What is certain is that a number of European countries will remain outside. For that reason, if we want to create a united Europe we shall have to find a way of developing a broader community than these partial federations.

We believe that the right solution must be an organic unity distinct from the constitutional methods implied by the idea of federation. By organic unity, I mean cooperation between governments that can gradually become an increasingly close union. In the case of the OEEC and NATO, we have seen how coordinating sovereignties can create a much more effective union than relinquishing sovereignty. The development of intergovernmental organisations would help us achieve real unification in Western Europe.

The Labour Party is not inflexible in its approach to the difficult issue of European union. Our only concern is that over-rigid ideas and over-specific schemes are counter-productive. It goes without saying that we are prepared to alter our policy to keep pace with developments.

Recent decisive developments, particularly the Lisbon Conference and the Soviet note on German unification and the remilitarisation of Germany, need to be taken into consideration. Those two factors are closely linked and concern an issue that is absolutely fundamental for anyone trying to take a realistic view of European unification and the future of the Council of Europe, namely German rearmament.

The Labour Party agrees in principle that German rearmament is necessary, but it should be subject to certain conditions. Other NATO powers should be rearmed before Germany, and German troops should be incorporated into an international army.

To what extent will the Lisbon plans meet the conditions that Labour is imposing for German rearmament, if they are implemented? What effect will the new Soviet proposals have on the situation?

At the moment, no one can answer those questions. That is why opinions differ within the Labour Party about some aspects of European policy. Only a few people are in favour of the United Kingdom joining the Defence Community, and even they would like to see it built on an entirely new basis.

Some are more inclined to give the EDC as much support as possible, without actually joining. Others again think that the Soviet proposal on German rearmament and unification has considerably reduced the likelihood of the EDC succeeding.

However, these differences of opinion are only differences of emphasis in a general policy. They will be resolved as the situation develops.

They will not affect the attitude that the Labour Party has to the Council of Europe. It is part of a general policy on European questions. We do not see the Council of Europe as a special institution requiring a special policy. That is not because of a narrow-minded and outmoded attachment to national independence (which is not in itself bad). It stems from the permanent basis of our policy towards Europe.

It is also our opinion that the defence of Western Europe needs to be organised. We are prepared to make a major contribution and to keep British forces in Europe until the threat of attack has passed. We believe that some form of German rearmament is inevitable. We do not know when it will happen and whether it will be for West Germany alone or for a unified Germany. In our view, Germany should be integrated into an international army once it has been rearmed.

It is our belief that the Atlantic Community is of crucial importance and that Europe should be unified within that framework.

To be honest, in order to understand the Labour Party position properly, it has to be appreciated that our starting point is the Atlantic Community and not Europe. We are not unaware that Europe is a unit capable of living on its own resources.

It is vital for the United Kingdom that Europe should be unified within the Atlantic Community and that no steps should be taken that might separate the two Communities.

The United Kingdom is at the same time a European power, an Atlantic power and a Commonwealth power. We cannot fulfil our role in Europe properly unless that triple aspect is taken into account.

One reason why we cannot become a subordinate member of a new federal state is that we cannot fulfil our role in the Commonwealth if we relinquish our sovereignty. The Commonwealth is made up of sovereign nations with equal rights. We would not be able to belong to it if we were a province of another State.

But apart from that, in the Atlantic Community we maintain the closest possible links with the Americans. That is essential to our role as an Atlantic and a Commonwealth power. Each member of the Commonwealth has close links with the United States, and each recognises that the United Kingdom and the United States will remain closely allied.

If we did decide to join a European federation, there would be a serious risk of America withdrawing from Europe. A sizeable body of opinion in America would be in favour of giving up financial commitments in Europe as soon as possible.

In remaining outside all European federations, we aim to maintain the link between the European and Atlantic Communities. That is vitally important for our own role as a power and also for the strength and prosperity of Europe. The federalists trying to make the British join European federal organisations are not pursuing a very clear-sighted policy. But we are not merely taking a negative attitude; we want to lend our full support to the establishment of intergovernmental institutions in Europe that can easily be extended to the Atlantic Community as a whole.

There remains the question of the future of the Council of Europe, which is already in danger of being left out. If it persists in trying to turn itself into a federal parliament with powers, it could well lose its influence. That would be a great pity. The Assembly performs a very valuable role as a forum for discussing European matters. It can coordinate the operations of the various European organisations and the institutions currently being created.

The recent statements by Mr Eden include proposals that the EDC and European Coal and Steel Community

parliaments should be modelled on the Strasbourg Assembly. There are, however, dangers in that idea, because linking two parliaments that are completely different in nature could lead to friction.

The Consultative Assembly would in any case be much more effective if it could discuss matters relating to the intergovernmental organisations to which all the European countries belong.

That is another reason why we should like to see efforts focused on the creation of new organisations of that kind. Not only would they promote true European unity, they would also give the Consultative Assembly a real purpose.