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Debating Federal Europe in the British Parliament, c. 1940-1949

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Abstract:

Federalism, or the fear of it, worked as a catalyst in the British referendum on Brexit in June 2016. In this paper we focus on the pre-European integration context and ask what kind of an alternative federalism was seen to afford in British politics before and after the Second World War. We limit our discussion to parliamentary debates, which have only rarely been used as primary sources for studying European integration history. The British Parliament was one of the key political arenas for debates on foreign policy, not just in terms of informing the party lines but also guiding the public discussion. In the early part of the 1940s the British federalist movement was able to generate political debate on the issue and gain the attention of many leading politicians. We argue that the approach to the use of the concept was politically charged but remained open to various context-based interpretations, which did not eventually lead to any concrete proposals. During the latter part of the 1940s the majority of British MPs were open to different ways of creating unity in Europe. The emphasis on national sovereignty, however, continued. As a result 'federalism', attached to structures for unity, gave way to more pragmatic political solutions.

Keywords: federalism, Europe, British Parliament, 1940s, politics, integration

Introduction

After the Second World War, Britain took a very prominent role in arguing for the unity of Europe as former Prime Minister Winston Churchill delivered his famous Zürich speech in 1946. In the context of European co-operation, federalism entailed both economic and political benefits, in addition to the construction of shared identity and

institutional structures. However, the Labour government was not keen on engaging in any federal plans. The aim of this paper is to analyse arguments presented in the British Parliament in the 1940s featuring unusual, or even paradoxical, conceptualizations of federalism in the European context. This is carried out in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the situation in which British interests regarding European integration were positioned, and to give a point of reflection to Britain's subsequent relations with Europe. For instance, in the early 1970s fears of federalism influenced debates on the British policy towards the European Economic Community, and in the debates prior to the 2016 referendum the feeling of loss of sovereignty entailed the perceived danger of deepening political union.¹

The period before and after the Second World War marks in many ways a shift in the political order in Europe. Between the wars, Britain had been considered as the leading country of internationalist education, owing largely to the League of Nations Union that had a wide-ranging educational programme on international relations. This influential movement, reaching its peak in popularity in the early 1930s, promoted the idea of British citizens being 'entitled to have their say over the direction of foreign policy'.² By the end of the decade, however, the League of Nations had clearly failed to pacify the continent. Across the party political spectrum, federalism was seen as the last remaining option for the future of Europe, which is also shown in the extraordinary proposal of Churchill's coalition government for the creation of Franco-British Union in June 1940 that would hardly have been conceivable twenty years earlier.³

Many British academics and politicians such as Barbara Wootton, Lord Beveridge, Sir William Ivor Jennings, Lord Lothian and Ronald Mackay became involved in the federal movement since the Federal Union was founded in 1938.⁴ The British federalists were extremely influential not only in the British context but also in

continental Europe. Among other federalist texts, especially Lord Lothian's pamphlet *Pacifism is not enough, nor patriotism either* (1935) influenced and inspired Altiero Spinelli, who found British federalist thought 'precise and antidoctinaire'.⁵ Based on this connection, it seems rather paradoxical that federalism never took hold in British political thought.

Previous research into the history of British federalism has mainly focused on movements and associations advocating federalism.⁶ Our emphasis, however, will be on the parliamentary debates, which allows us to analyse the arguments surrounding European federalism in British politics from the perspective of actual political discourse. The verbatim records of parliamentary debates provide previously non-explored source material for analysis of British political thought of federalism. We argue that the speech acts in the parliamentary debates offer fruitful material for a more profound understanding of the federalist debate in Britain. Parliamentary debates do not just display the arguments for and against on issues of national significance but also guided the wider public debates. They provide an important public platform for government and opposition alike in the controversies and challenges of foreign policy.⁷ From this point of view, it is relevant to consider the British federalist discourse as part of the legitimisation of political decision-making.

To study the debates on European federalism in the Westminster parliament, we use a methodological approach that combines contextual analysis of speech acts, drawing on the works of J. L. Austin, J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, and more traditional conceptual history, based on German *Begriffsgeschichte* as propounded by Reinhart Koselleck, extending to the more recent theories in the study of parliamentary debates.⁸ In the field of conceptual history, parliamentary debates have become considered as essential sources to examine the dynamics of the use of political language

as well as current controversies through discursive processes.⁹ This kind of qualitative analysis provides a fruitful way to grasp the historical contingency of the federalism debate in Britain, as it focuses on individual political agents and their intentional use of language. Instead of concentrating on ‘uncritically accepted ideologies’, analysing speech acts will help to illustrate how current beliefs have become accepted from amongst many other possibilities. Here it serves for a critical reading of what kinds of other alternatives and justifications were presented in British public debate on federalism.¹⁰

The corpus of our analysis is not very large due to the selection criteria.¹¹ But it would be all too easy to dismiss the 1940s’ federalism debate as a marginal issue. Indeed, after the fleeting success of the federal movement at the beginning of the Second World War, the debate on the topic started to become rather sidelined in British politics. Nevertheless, even less popular issues have the potential to become prominent due to the publicity of debating, a point of view that encourages not only the study of mainstream themes but also the analysis of apparent anomalies.

It is not our intention to explain the narrative in detail or to test the frequency of the use of economic and political arguments but to analyse *how* the concept of federalism was articulated in parliamentary debates in order to provide points of reflection to the current British discussion. Our attention is on *what kinds of arguments* were attached to the idea of federalism in the parliamentary debates in order to interpret the shifting political aspects of the concept. We asked, first, as what kind of an alternative the idea of a federal Europe was presented; secondly, who were its main proponents in the British Parliament; and finally, what was the turning point for the decline of federalist thought in Britain as observable in the parliamentary debates?

Newspapers and archival sources are used to complement the analysis to reconstruct the understanding of European federalism as a political idea.

Our analysis is divided into two sections, first, to concentrate on the arguments about federalism during the wartime and, then, to shift the attention to the post-war context. This division has been chosen because it seems to have been easier to support federalism during the war, as no one knew about the outcome and how it would affect the European politics. Clement Attlee, the leader of Labour party that had endorsed federalism since at least 1918, had coined his famous phrase in 1939: ‘Europe must federate or perish’.¹² After the war, the Labour party, however, quickly gained a reputation for being anti-European. On the Conservative benches a number of key politicians advocated unity, but intergovernmental co-operation was preferred over federalism.¹³ To investigate further how these party positions were constructed and defended, we will first turn to the use of the idea of federalism in the parliamentary debates during the war.

Westminster debates on European federalism during World War II

The outbreak of the Second World War had demonstrated that peace was not a ‘natural’ state of affairs between European nations. In early 1940 the idea of federalism gained wide support in Britain, especially due to the activities of the Federal Union. The Federal Union, which was founded in 1938, became an important organisation in the dissemination of federalist ideas in Britain.¹⁴ At its peak, in 1940 and 1941, it had 12,000 members. Federalists included prominent members of the Labour and Conservative Parties and they sought to have as many federalist-oriented MPs in Parliament as possible.

Between late 1939 and early 1940 the Union was already involved in an attempt to form a political union between Britain and France that was presented to the French

government in June by Prime Minister Churchill.¹⁵ Its members succeeded in enlisting firm support for their cause among leading politicians. One of these was the Minister of Labour and National Service, Ernest Bevin, a former trade union leader and later Secretary of Foreign Affairs in the first post-war cabinet.¹⁶ However, after a brief period of strong parliamentary support the Federal Union lost its momentum. This decline was also seen in the parliamentary debates.

During the war, the question of federalism was only rarely mentioned in the House of Commons debates. It would emerge in discussions on whether the British government should have a plan for the re-settlement of Europe after the war. But the support was rather lukewarm, as the outcome of the war was still very much unpredictable. The uncertainty even prompted some Conservative members to question the intentions of the federalist movement. On 18 November 1941, Sir Waldron Smithers (Conservative; Chislehurst) asked Prime Minister Churchill whether he perceived any need to restrict the activities of the Federal Union as its main objective was ‘to surrender sovereign powers to a federal government’.¹⁷ The next day Harry Selley (Conservative; Battersea South) addressed the Secretary of the State for Foreign Affairs, Anthony Eden, asking ‘whether Mrs. Barbara Wootton, member of the Council of Federal Union Limited, and economic advisor to Chatham House Reconstructional Committee, receives in the latter capacity a salary from His Majesty’s Government; and to what extent does such work involve access to confidential documents?’¹⁸ Wootton was a leading figure of the Federal Union who advocated a ‘transnational federation’ that meant the establishment of a supranational government ‘with limited functions’.¹⁹ Selley continued his mission against the federalists by asking Labour Home Secretary Herbert Morrison whether he would consider the banning of the book *The Case for Federal Union* written by W. B. Curry. Selley’s argument was that it had a ‘bad effect

on the public morale'.²⁰ Curry's book had been published (already) in 1939 and sold 100,000 copies in just six months.²¹

In a House of Lords debate in June 1942 Lord Davies, a staunch supporter of the League of Nations and the author of *A Federated Europe* (1940), commented on Lord Samuel's suggestion that federalism was not the only possible alternative for 'international co-operation'. He argued that federalism had 'two distinct branches', federation and confederation, which had to be reconciled 'because one hopes that the principle of democratic control, the direct participation of the peoples themselves, may find a place in the long-term plan of post-war reconstruction. I believe that, after all, a democratic basis is the best guarantee for a just and durable peace'.²² He proposed that the idea of federalism should not be entirely abandoned but was willing to suppress any supranational elements of the post-war settlement. In his book Davies had promoted a view that considered 'federal institutions' as 'consisting of representatives of member states' that passed resolutions unanimously without a democratic structure.²³ In the House of Lords debate, however, he seems to relate the idea of federalism to 'democratic control' as the condition for 'just and durable peace' in Europe. By way of contrast, in another House of Lords debate the same year the British Empire was defended in strikingly similar terms by Viscount Elibank, with no reference to federalism. He contended that the Empire was based on 'bonds and ideals' of 'freedom of thought, of action, and expression, of self-government, and religious liberty', and that it was through 'these democratic ideals' that the Empire would continue to stay united in the future.²⁴ These ideas were warmly supported by Viscount Cranborne (Conservative), at the time acting Secretary of State for the Colonies.²⁵ He was by no means the only one to defend the idea of the British Empire. However, this example shows that in the parliamentary debates during the Second World War the concept of

empire was detached from the idea of European unity as such. As will be shown below, the case became rather opposite after the war.

On 14 April 1943 Lord Robert Cecil, one of the originators of the League of Nations and a Nobel Peace Prize winner, moved a motion in the House of Lords in which he raised the question of post-war international relations. He took up the suggestion of the Prime Minister, who had spoken for the founding of an international authority to safeguard peace and prosperity in Europe.²⁶ Churchill had called it a 'world institution' that would include all nations worldwide on an equal basis. Cecil only aimed at clarifying this government policy by outlining a short presentation of the propositions uttered on the matter. They included a speech by Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary, who had indicated that the new authority was to be 'more representative' and to have a more 'positive policy' than the League of Nations and to have its own armed forces. According to Cecil these three suggestions for improvement were rather vague and there were more important issues that needed to be addressed first. He urged the government to come up with a concrete solution as to the constitution of the international authority. In his view there were only three available 'schools of thought'. The first one did not aim at a definite constitution, on the grounds that this would prove 'the more difficult' to carry out. Cecil himself argued that the international authority envisaged needed a constitution. He said that there was a second school of thought which argued that the League of Nations had not been 'definite enough, and that nothing short of something in the nature of a new Federal State or Federal Union is any use.' Cecil himself, however, was reluctant to suggest a federal model because he considered it 'premature' and was not convinced that it would be a viable basis for an international organisation. The third option, of which he was in favour, was a

confederation 'of really independent States, who have agreed for certain purposes to act together in order to preserve peace and promote international co-operation.'²⁷

Lord Davies, who spoke after Cecil, agreed that some form of international authority had to be founded after the war.²⁸ Rather than dwelling on federation or confederation, his argument involved the United Nations as the main international organisation. His suggestion was opposed by Lord Samuel, who was not in favour of establishing an organisation with a written constitution overriding the British constitutional system. In this context he made a reference to the Federal Union saying that its members were 'actively engaged in the interesting parlour game of drafting constitutions on paper' which would, in all likelihood, amount to nothing.²⁹ He portrayed the proponents of federalism as mere intellectuals with little hope of formulating any concrete proposals. This could hardly have been the case. By this time the federal movement had become countrywide with supporters in thirteen regions. The Federal Union organised public meetings and conferences and published its own *Federal Union News* and pamphlets that were sent to all contributing members. In early 1943 the movement mounted a campaign to collect signatures on a manifesto that called for a 'People's Poll' on federal institutions to be set up after the war. It did not prove successful but managed to attract more members to the cause.³⁰

In December 1943 the idea of federalism was re-introduced in the House of Commons. Under-Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Paul Emrys-Evans (Conservative; South Derbyshire), commented on the discussion regarding the question of Commonwealth in *The Times* instigated by Lionel Curtis, one of the leading members of the Federal Union. Emrys-Evans noted that Curtis was regarded as 'a great authority on Empire affairs'. He was known for promoting the founding of a federal parliament and imperial government that would be in charge of foreign policy and

defence. However, Emrys-Evans did not share Curtis' view that a federal parliament would not solve post-war problems and receive the needed support of the British dominions.³¹

In *The Times* Curtis had asked whether the government was prepared to accept the fact that the British Commonwealth was unable to defend its dominions.³² The Under-Secretary argued that federation would not be a suitable model for the post-war arrangement of colonial affairs. Instead, he promoted 'regular meetings of Prime Ministers' that would take place once a year until 'the new international organisation' was set up after the war.³³ Arthur Creech Jones (Labour; Shipley), who was known for his expertise in colonial affairs and was Ernest Bevin's protégé, also agreed that 'federalism is not the way of advance, that the idea of federalism is not practical politics in any discussion of our relations with the Dominions'.³⁴ Bevin himself had been a supporter of the Federal Union but in 1942 had asked for his name to be removed from the records of the association.³⁵

The ex-Secretary of State for War, Mr Hore-Belisha (Liberal; Devonport), was the only Member of Parliament who proposed a motion on the idea of federalism in Parliament. In a House of Commons debate in April 1944 his ideas were welcomed by Captain de Chair (Conservative; Norfolk, Southwest) who regarded them as visionary and well worth considering: 'He [Mr Hore-Belisha] is doing what is natural to the British, taking the first step, but I believe that an Empire federation, in the light of those other, compact world forces which have arisen, will come about, possibly not within 10 or 15 years'.³⁶ This was one of the few instances during the war that federalism was explicitly promoted in the Westminster parliament. But Hore-Belisha connected the founding of a federation to the preservation of the British Empire. The only one to defend the idea of founding a European federation was the Earl of Huntingdon

(Labour). According to him, it was the ‘only device which so far has worked’ to prevent war: ‘By federation you remove the means of making war from each State and put it into the hands of a federal authority’.³⁷

All in all, both Conservative and Labour MPs in the parliamentary debates that took place during the war expressed their doubts about the federal system. However, some remained fairly open to the idea of federalism as one option for securing long-term peaceful co-existence among European nations. Among them was Commander King-Hall (Labour; Ormskirk) who urged the government to devise a policy for ‘a united or federated form of Europe’.³⁸ Even though the idea of federalism was generally deemed outmoded or impracticable, the majority of MPs argued for it as a plan that was desperately needed to make sure that peace would be lasting. However, the concept of federalism was rather associated with the idea of empire than the founding of a supranational organisation.

The emerging post-war situation posed new challenges. As peace was expected to last, international cooperation was offered as the needed solution. In this context, the concept of federation was frequently employed to describe the post-World War II political context and its possibilities for international co-operation. In a House of Lords debate in February 1945, the Earl of Huntingdon called attention to the issue of encouraging European democracies to unite in order to avoid another war in Europe.³⁹ This kind of discourse would continue to be present in the following years. Furthermore, the United States provided a strong model of federalisation for the supporters of the federal structures, even portraying a radical revolutionary approach to national politics; simultaneously, the employment of the United States as a model was problematic due to its capitalist-oriented political system.

The Soviet Union provided yet another model of federalisation, this time with a still positive touch, and the Swiss state with its many minorities was the third example cited. Here lay the key challenge to the concept of federalism in the parliamentary context: to what extent was it to be incorporated into the economic ideology and, from another perspective, reconciled with democratic principles? As the Earl of Huntingdon argued, a 'proposed federation of European States should, and must, be founded on democracy'. As such, federalisation was, above all, a peace-oriented approach to world politics. Britain could no longer continue to believe that it could maintain the balance between different hostile groups in Europe. Here lay the memory of the League of Nations and its failed bid to safeguard peace. Ideas on federalisation were not presented as a consideration of suitable federal structures; they were simply measures to push the government to be more open towards political initiatives.⁴⁰ Viscount Cranborne, the government's representative, drew attention to the need to create concrete measures to work with the issue, as the concept of federation seemed to be loosely used instead of being considered as a form of central government and a single elected legislature responsible for the entire continent. According to Cranborne, the mere suggestion of a federation of Commonwealth states, despite the fact that there was potential for its formation, was purely academic in nature.⁴¹

Westminster debates on European federalism under new government: 1945-1949

The rise of the Labour Party to power in 1945 created expectations that different federalist policies could be implemented, as the party had advocated such cooperation for years. In November 1945, during a debate on foreign affairs in the House of Commons, the new Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, outlined a positive approach to federation, based on social democratic ideals and pointing to the United States as a

suitable model that included parts of the state power being concentrated in the federal government. As Bevin reminded the House: ‘The fact is, no one ever surrenders sovereignty; they merge it into a greater sovereignty’. This led former Conservative foreign secretary Anthony Eden to declare that a new conceptual understanding of sovereignty was needed. Such discussion was relevant, as the readiness to embrace changes to sovereignty was the ingredient needed for federalism. Furthermore, the ‘world assembly’ Bevin envisaged was about maintaining peace, and thus closely related to the work carried out to establish the United Nations.⁴² The point was that Britain had survived the war without suffering as much political and institutional damage as most of the European states. It was in a better position to lead the creation of a federal organisation. Bevin did not promote just any organisation, but one with socialist ideology, albeit in less radical form than that of the Communists.⁴³ Bevin’s remarks received certain attention but their main value was the overall positive approach towards weak federal structures between different states in order to maintain peace and to strengthen a certain ideological approach. Originally the idea of a family of European nations, basically pointing towards a federal Europe, originated from Aristide Briand’s plan, published in 1929.⁴⁴ Now, after yet another world war, the same plan was referred to.⁴⁵ To build structures for unity was time consuming, and this was generally understood.⁴⁶ In the British parliamentary system, the majority party had significant powers over the federalisation policy, or the lack thereof. Furthermore, if there were to be a federal structure, it had to uphold certain amounts of liberal tradition, in addition to more social democratic principles, in order to gather support from the opposition benches. The tradition was referred to in the debates, likewise the need to signal the British readiness to consider different kinds of initiatives.⁴⁷

Despite publicly positive stances, actual efforts to lead the integration effort were lacking in 1945, and the following year brought no better results, at least as far as the British were concerned. Initiatives from other countries were also absent.⁴⁸ In the Labour Party, Harold Laski, Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics and a member of the powerful National Executive Committee, suggested a ‘functional federation’ comprising currency, tariffs, labour standards and other economic issues. Laski had suggested this to ex-diplomat and Independent peer Robert Vansittart (Lord Vansittart) who launched the idea in the House of Lords in early 1946 as a part of an attempt to speed up the integration process.⁴⁹ In this speech federalism was again linked to the United Nations Charter. The Charter was ratified in 1945, making clear that various regional organisations could be established to maintain peace.⁵⁰ At this point, the view of the British government was that it was imperative first to wait for the formation of the United Nations before making any further moves.⁵¹ More individual requests to show leadership appeared from time to time. For instance, Robert Boothby MP, a known federalist⁵², made such a plea in February and pointed out the emphasis on economy. Boothby simply called for ‘the regional grouping or federation of countries which have economic interests in common’, an organisation that would act as a third bloc between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁵³

It appeared that it was not easy to have a full parliamentary debate on federation, at least in the Commons, although at least one effort was made.⁵⁴ Among the general public, attitudes towards supranational political authority differed, although the issue was seldom even referred to. It seemed to imply a phase of creating structures, and at this point even the general agreement to proceed with integration was lacking in intergovernmental relations. Furthermore, it was not even clear that a Western European

federation was the solution and there were other ideas as well.⁵⁵ What was needed was more energy to carry out the plans.

According to Lipgens, it was Winston Churchill's Zurich speech on 19 September 1946 that brought European unity back onto the political agenda. The general public had appeared to have lost interest in the issue after the end of the war but a speech from a prominent, if not the most salient, politician of one of the main victors of the war led many other key politicians to start considering the issue again.⁵⁶ In British politics, the Federal Union had continued to work for the promotion of European federalist ideas but was unable to muster sufficient support. The leading politicians had lost interest in the idea of federation, especially in the government. Churchill had not talked about a 'federal union',⁵⁷ but had expressed a more abstract idea of a regional organisation without describing as far as the model itself.⁵⁸ After Churchill's speech, more ideas were expressed to the British leadership within parliamentary circles, but the issue continued to proceed slowly. The British government was aligning its foreign policy according to the United Nations, an organisation in which the British were in an important position due to membership of the Security Council.

Then there was the question of Germany. A federal Germany could be linked to a Western European Federation more easily than to a centralised system.⁵⁹ The question of centralised, intergovernmental decision-making versus supranational, broader political authority clashed with the traditional formation of the European nation states, in which wars had played a significant role.⁶⁰ Ernest Bevin argued in May 1947 that the British had advocated federalism for the Germans, drawing on the British experiences with the Commonwealth countries and showing a supportive attitude towards federation as a political model.⁶¹

In 1947 declining economic conditions rendered the need for closer co-operation acute, as Eden reminded the House of Commons, and again underlined the need to embrace a different meaning of sovereignty.⁶² US Secretary of State George Marshall's speech on 5 June opening up the possibility for economic aid in Europe led to acknowledgements in the House of Commons that a Western European federation would not be able to feature Soviet participation, and even that relations with the Soviet Union necessitated the establishment of some sort of United States of Europe.⁶³

In the latter part of the 1940s it became increasingly clear that the economic conditions determined the approach of Britain towards different models of co-operation with other European states. The economic aspect was, however, only a part of the issue. Since early 1948 the British government had had adjusted its position on European co-operation, but also on the need to strengthen the economies of various Western European states, the ideological battle against the radical socialism in communist form fuelling the British policies. Foreign Secretary Bevin outlined this in January 1948 in the House of Commons, preceded a circulation of internal memoranda within the British Cabinet outlining the critical situation in Europe and the threat posed by the Soviet Union. The message was also circulated among the Commonwealth countries since they provided the key political framework for British foreign policies.⁶⁴ In the Commons Bevin confirmed his positive approach towards co-operation, if it would take into account three principles, (i) no nation should dominate, (ii) the old understanding of the balance of power should be discarded, (iii) instead four-power co-operation and assistance to all states in Europe was needed, in order 'enable them to evolve freely each in its own way'.⁶⁵ As Wurm states, Bevin's idea was that of a 'broadly conceived, loosely defined association'. This underlined the more general understanding of

federalism, as many even within the associations promoting European unity did not insist on full British participation.⁶⁶

Various associations and the Europe Movement advocated more or less a federal political authority entailing a representative European Parliament. From the British point of view the issue was not so straightforward and involved a party political dimension (the ideological rift between socialism and capitalism), an imperial dimension (the role of the Commonwealth), a European defence dimension (the role the United States would play) and an economic dimension (economic revitalisation would not require federal structures but international agreements). Parliamentarians acquired ideas from the movements and there were individual efforts to debate common European political structures, also including a long-term goal of federalism. In March 1948, a large group of MPs tried to urge a debate on a motion featuring federalism as a long-term goal, underlining the understanding that the British wanted things to proceed, but slowly. The government, however, was reluctant to give an opportunity for such a debate and the motion was only touched upon as a part of a debate on foreign affairs in early May.⁶⁷

On the conceptual level the discussion on federalism widened in 1948. There were two key events. The first was the Congress of Europe in The Hague in May 1948 involving the federalists. The second was a series of diplomatic negotiations that lasted from autumn until early 1949, and led to the creation of the Council of Europe. The outcome was not something the federalists had hoped for, but it was a step forward in the integration process.

The Congress of Europe was attended by hundreds of European members of parliament, academics and journalists. In Britain, the Labour Party leadership, however, was unenthusiastic and even warned its MPs against participating in the Congress as it

involved a capitalist approach to European co-operation. There were also other reasons for the reluctance of the Labour Party to proceed with the issue. Britain was one of the victors of the war, with the state clearly stronger than was the case with any of the continental Western European countries.⁶⁸ Before the Congress, Bevin had expounded in the Commons the British interest to pursue federalism by calling the Brussels Pact a practical move and describing federalism as ‘such a dramatic move [that] might appeal to idealists’, drawing attention to the events of world politics.⁶⁹ Nor was he alone in that view. As Wilson Harris (Independent; Cambridge University) stated: ‘These things [sketches for federal union] are all castles in the air.’⁷⁰

Members advocating European unity perceived a need for a political unity, and as such, for a common political authority - and this implied federalism, at least partially. Bevin, on the other hand, had emphasised the voluntary basis. Eden linked any political outcome of integration to the British Empire and to its role, showing that even the supportive side of the Commons was wary of the fate of the Commonwealth.⁷¹ The formation of a federal union was nevertheless described by Ronald Mackay, key advocate and founder of the Labour Party Europe Group in 1947, as a rather old invention reminiscent of a political union that already existed, say, in Britain between the English, the Welsh and the Scots. Federalism was portrayed as an instrument to solve the problems with unstable but democratic small states. At this point the Commonwealth was not considered a problem.⁷²

Prime Minister Attlee told the House that despite being a supporter of federalism, he considered the search for unity to consist of practical agreements and steps that would create a new conceptual understanding of national sovereignty instead of pursuing a federalism-oriented approach.⁷³ To sum up, federalism was shown as a useful and contemporary tool to solve a set of problems faced by Britain and other

Western European nations. The concept of federalism continued to be presented as more or less open to different kinds of ideologies, assuming that they would share certain group of moral values, usually based on the liberalist tradition with individual freedoms. Supranational authority was envisaged, but the concept of national sovereignty continued to emphasize the fears and problems of federalism. Many MPs mentioned the loss of sovereignty, despite the fact that at this point there were no concrete proposals to create structures. Another issue was the schedule; should states advance step by step in creating unity, with federalism a distant potential goal, or should they advance rapidly, as supporters of worldwide federalism as Henry Usborne (Labour; Acocks Green) stated, due to the pressing contextual reasons and practically as the only way to achieve peace.⁷⁴

The fear of the Communists also influenced the federalist MPs. For instance, in late September Robert Boothby (Conservative; Aberdeen and Kincardine East) warned against the rapid Communist advance in Europe: ‘there is no time to set up any kind of elaborate federal constitution’.⁷⁵ From the government benches it was hoped that more attention might be paid to the meaning and substance of European unity rather than to constitutions.⁷⁶ The constitutional approach to federalism was more clearly present after the Congress of Europe, as it had drawn attention to the aspect, but this also clashed with governmental interests in Britain. In May 1948 Attlee had told the House that unity should advance step by step as practical issues arose. A similar approach was present in the diplomatic negotiations that continued to stress the clear international movement to create permanent structures and look for a kind of European Parliament.⁷⁷ The British government had not been enthusiastic about promoting federalism with a capitalist tendency, and this attitude intensified during autumn. There was a spirit within the British cabinet that ‘federal’ enthusiasm needed to be channelled ‘into sensible

channels', as the cabinet official Norman Brook recorded.⁷⁸ The Labour Party had already clarified its position on federalism in September 1948 by producing a pamphlet in which federation was rejected - the party advocated a more gradual series of agreements that would link different nations together, rejecting the constitutional approach.⁷⁹

No wonder that the outcome, the Council of Europe, was a somewhat weak organisation with strong powers vested in the hands of the governmental representation, and having an assembly instead of a functional and representative parliament, with Britain one of the participants who had advocated a looser organisation.⁸⁰ The British government had shown that it was more interested in practical cooperation and to nurture its Commonwealth relations. On the other hand, the British feeling of insecurity was satisfied through defence cooperation. As debate on the Schuman Plan would reveal in 1950, federalism in a form of having a supranational authority had become a remote idea.⁸¹

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to illustrate the various arguments for and against European federalism in the British Parliament before and after the Second World War. With a close analysis of the speech acts presented by MPs we were able to identify a clear shift in the political struggles over the meanings of federalism. It roughly took place after the Second World War when the concept became politicised around the questions of empire and national sovereignty.

During the war federalism mainly appeared in debates about the future of the continent and was, therefore, rather freely used as one possible alternative. But already then some Conservative members expressed their concern of the potential surrendering of sovereign powers in House of Commons debates. Suspicions were thus raised as to

the ‘real’ intentions of federalists. And, it seems that the proponents of federalism in Parliament were gradually beginning to abandon the idea. Lord Davies, who otherwise supported European federalism, was willing to give up the supranational elements in the post-war settlement. Lord Cecil, who had been one of the founders of the League of Nations, did not consider federalism as a viable option. Instead, he supported a confederation based on an international authority. Supporters of federalism were largely denounced as mere intellectuals who played games of constitution drafting. Both Tory and Labour MPs were of the opinion that federalism was not a practical solution. Hore-Belisha, a Liberal MP and former Secretary of State for War, was the only one to propose a motion on federalism. But, instead of arguing for European federalism, he defended the idea of forming an ‘Empire federation’. The immediacy of the European context was then pointed out by the Earl of Huntingdon (Labour) who argued that federalism was the only means available to safeguard peace between sovereign states. In the post-war parliamentary debates this became the most compelling argument for European federalism, not just among Labour peers but also backbenchers.

After the war, there was a major conceptual shift in the orientation of the federalism debate. The parliamentary debates show that the concept of federalism was used as the complete opposite for the management of the empire, and in this way the concept played a role in the redefinition of national sovereignty. As the newly appointed Labour government’s members had been previously promoting federalism, it first seemed that this created a much-needed opportunity to make concrete federal plans. The paradox was that, although federalism was referred to in rather positive terms in the House of Commons, the Labour government was lacking the initiative to make concrete proposals in relation to the European integration process. Before his appointment as the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin had been a supporter of federalism. After the war,

however, he detached himself from the Federal Union. The official Labour government policy was to, first, focus on the formation of the United Nations and, then, to proceed step by step with European unity.

In 1946 Churchill delivered his famous Zürich speech which created another momentum for a federalist debate in Britain. But both the Tories and Labour party members tended to have rather vague ideas about what European unity might mean in practice. In 1947 the Labour government supported the foundation of federal Germany but was reluctant to commit to any further European federal plans. In March 1948, a large group of MPs who promoted federalism proposed a motion to be debated in the House of Commons on the issue. The government gave a minimum amount of time for the debate and its representatives largely rejected federalism as idealism. The opposition frontbenchers, such as Anthony Eden, were vocal about the need to redefine national sovereignty. This happened just prior to the Congress of Europe that started the diplomatic negotiations of the European integration process.

At the same time when the concept of federalism became a part of the wider European discussion, the Labour government was constrained by its own policies and the indirect rise of national sovereignty. In fact, after 1946, many British MPs were definitely willing to support federalism, but simultaneously somewhat critical, underlying only the actions necessary to avoid the further Communist success in an economically devastated Europe. This kind of approach concentrated on practical issues instead of pursuing strong structures that might undermine the British position towards the Empire. The loss of national sovereignty was still a major concern among the MPs, as well as the rapidly changing political situation in continental Europe that made the planning of the federal structures very difficult. And most significantly, neither of the two leading political parties in the British Parliament was willing to give up the

Commonwealth and to choose Europe over the maintenance of the Empire.

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Notes:

¹ See House of Commons Debates (HC Deb) 20 January 1971, 6th ser., vol 809, cols. 1079-220; HC Deb 4 Feb 2016, 6th ser., vol. 605, cols. 1119-1157.

² McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations*, 6.

³ Douglas, *The Labour Party, Nationalism and Internationalism, 1939-1951*, 217.

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- ⁴ Bosco, "Lothian, Curtis, Kimber and the Federal Union Movement": 465.
- ⁵ Bosco, "Lothian, Curtis, Kimber and the Federal Union Movement": 466.
- ⁶ E.g. Bosco, *Federal Union and the Origins of the 'Churchill Proposal'*; Mayne and Pinder, *Federal Union*; see also Crozier, "Federalism and Anti-Federalism in the United Kingdom": 160-172.
- ⁷ Cf. Ihalainen and Matikainen, "The British Parliament and Foreign Policy in the 20th Century": 1-14.
- ⁸ E.g. Austin, *How to do things with words*; Skinner, "Rhetoric and conceptual change": 60-73; Koselleck, "The Temporalisation of Concepts": 16-24; Cf. Ihalainen and Palonen, "Parliamentary Sources in the Comparative study of Conceptual History": 17-34.
- ⁹ Ihalainen, Ilie and Palonen, "Parliament as a Conceptual Nexus": 1-16.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 105, 126-7.
- ¹¹ The corpus is formed of parliamentary debates that were selected on the basis of word searches between 1940 and 1949 from the online search engine Hansard 1803-2005: <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com>. The key terms used were 'federalism+Europe', 'European+federation' and 'European+federal'.
- ¹² Bell, "Document No. 62", 167-168.
- ¹³ Onslow, *Backbench Debate within the Conservative Party and its Influence on British Foreign Policy*, 12; Wurm, "VII: Great Britain": 636-7.
- ¹⁴ Bosco, *Federal Union*, 1-2; see also Burgess, *The British Tradition of Federalism*, 139-148.
- ¹⁵ For details and press comments on the proposal, see Bell, "Document No. 71", 187-9.
- ¹⁶ Pasture, *Imagining European Unity since 1000 AD*, 170.
- ¹⁷ HC Deb 18 November 1941, 5th ser., vol. 376, col. 188W.
- ¹⁸ HC Deb 19 November 1941, 5th ser., vol. 376, col. 354.
- ¹⁹ Rosenboim, "Barbara Wootton, Friedrich Hayek and the Debate on Democratic Federalism in the 1940s", 898.
- ²⁰ HC Deb 20 November 1941, 5th ser., vol. 376, col. 506.

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- ²¹ Milani, “From Laissez-Faire”, 4.
- ²² House of Lords Debates (HL Deb) 04 June 1942, 5th ser., vol. 123, col. 163.
- ²³ Lipgens, *A History of European Integration*, 63.
- ²⁴ HL Deb 21 July 1942, 5th ser., vol. 123, cols. 935-6.
- ²⁵ HL Deb 21 July 1942, 5th ser., vol. 123, col. 970.
- ²⁶ Churchill’s speech was broadcast on 21 March 1943. This was the first time that he mentioned post-war reconstruction and put forward the idea of founding ‘a Council of Europe’. See Bell, “Document No. 86”, 229-233.
- ²⁷ HL Deb 14 April 1943, 5th ser., vol. 127, cols. 172-9.
- ²⁸ HL Deb 14 April 1943, 5th ser., vol. 127, cols. 189-190.
- ²⁹ HL Deb 14 April 1943, 5th ser., vol. 127, col. 193.
- ³⁰ Mayne and Pinder, *Federal Union*, 32.
- ³¹ HC Deb 02 December 1943, 5th ser., vol. 395. cols. 594-5.
- ³² “Empire Unity”, *The Times*, 26 August 1943.
- ³³ Emrys-Evans, HC Deb 02 December 1943, 5th ser., vol. 395. col. 595.
- ³⁴ HC Deb 02 December 1943, 5th ser., vol. 395. col. 629.
- ³⁵ Milani, “From Laissez-Faire”, 13.
- ³⁶ HC Deb 21 April 1944, 5th ser., vol. 399, col. 535.
- ³⁷ HL Deb 11 October 1944, 5th ser., vol. 133, col. 494.
- ³⁸ HC Deb 28 September 1944, 5th ser., vol. 403, col. 571.
- ³⁹ HL Deb 06 February 1945, 5th ser., vol. 134, col. 913.
- ⁴⁰ HL Deb 06 February 1945, 5th ser., vol. 134, cols. 914, 917-8.
- ⁴¹ HL Deb 06 February 1945, 5th ser., vol. 134, cols. 920-2.
- ⁴² HC Deb 23 November 1945, 5th ser., vol. 416, cols. 784-6.
- ⁴³ Millington, HC Deb 23 November 1945, 5th ser., vol. 416, col. 818.
- ⁴⁴ For details of the Briand plan, see Lipgens, “Europäische Einigungsidee“, 46-89.
- ⁴⁵ E.g. Eden, HC Deb 22 November 1945, 5th ser., vol. 416, col. 612.

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- ⁴⁶ Earl of Perth, HL Deb 28 November 1945, 5th ser., vol. 138, cols. 84-5.
- ⁴⁷ Usborne, HC Deb 22 November 1945, 5th ser., vol. 416, col. 681.
- ⁴⁸ Meetings of foreign ministers in Potsdam (May 1946) and Paris (July 1946) ended without clear ideas for the future of Europe. See Lipgens, *A History of European Integration*, 292.
- ⁴⁹ HL Deb 24 January 1946, 5th ser., vol. 138, col. 1099.
- ⁵⁰ United Nations, *Charter*, article 52.
- ⁵¹ Viscount Stansgate, HL Deb 24 January 1946, 5th ser., vol. 138, cols. 1108-9.
- ⁵² In the British context federalism is often linked to persons described as continentals; its opposite was a 'functional approach'. See Wurm, "VII: Great Britain", 629.
- ⁵³ HC Deb 20 February 1946, 5th ser., vol. 419, col. 1251. In June 1946 he talked about a broader 'Western Federal Union' with cultural and political issues attached. HC Deb 04 June 1946, 5th ser., vol. 423, col. 1949. If attitudes towards federalism are defined, the broadest definition took a stance that would involve economy, defence, political issues and cultural issues, possibly also social issues unless they were linked to the political sphere. Different shades of opinion underlined the unclear nature of the integration scheme.
- ⁵⁴ Usborne; Greenwood, HC Deb 27 February 1947, 5th ser., vol. 433, col. 2285.
- ⁵⁵ See for example Wadsworth, HC Deb 04 June 1946, 5th ser., vol. 423, col. 1898.
- ⁵⁶ *A History of European Integration*, 317.
- ⁵⁷ Churchill's position on federalism was rather vague. He spoke of the need to establish 'a kind of United States of Europe' with Franco-German reconciliation as the first step towards achieving it. For an analysis of the speech, see Klos, *Churchill on Europe*, 16.
- ⁵⁸ Wurm, "Document No. 193", 662-6.
- ⁵⁹ Lord Vansittart, HL Deb 03 December 1946, 5th ser., vol. 144, cols. 559-60.
- ⁶⁰ Tilly, *Coercion*, 20-8.
- ⁶¹ HC Deb 15 May 1947, 5th ser., vol. 437, col. 1726.
- ⁶² HC Deb 19 June 1947, 5th ser., vol. 438, col. 2238.
- ⁶³ Usborne; Boothby, HC Deb 19 June 1947, 5th ser., vol. 438, cols. 2318, 2320-1.

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- ⁶⁴ HC Deb 22 January 1948, 5th ser., vol 446, col. 395–6; Bevin, “The first aim of British foreign policy”, 1-2.
- ⁶⁵ HC Deb 22 January 1948, 5th ser., vol. 446, col. 388.
- ⁶⁶ “VII: Great Britain”, 630, 643.
- ⁶⁷ Mackay, HC Deb 18 March 1948, 5th ser., vol. 448, cols. 2302-3; “Plan to save Europe’s democracy.” *The Manchester Guardian*, 13 March 1948; Morrison, HC Deb 08 April 1948, 5th ser., vol. 449, cols. 362-4.
- ⁶⁸ Grantham, “British Labour”, 443-4.
- ⁶⁹ HC Deb 04 May 1948, 5th ser., vol. 450, col. 1108.
- ⁷⁰ HC Deb 04 May 1948, 5th ser., vol. 450, col. 1217.
- ⁷¹ HC Deb 05 May 1948, 5th ser., vol. 450, col. 1273.
- ⁷² HC Deb 05 May 1948, 5th ser., vol. 450, cols. 1282-3, 1288, 1291.
- ⁷³ HC Deb 05 May 1948, 5th ser., vol. 450, cols. 1317-9.
- ⁷⁴ HC Deb 05 May 1948, 5th ser., vol. 450, cols. 1366-7.
- ⁷⁵ HC Deb 22 September 1948, 5th ser., vol. 456, col. 987.
- ⁷⁶ HC Deb 22 September 1948, 5th ser., vol. 456, col. 1013.
- ⁷⁷ Practical issues included, for instance, the creation of a customs union or other agreements that would remove obstacles from cross-border trade or other issues that impacted different nations.
- ⁷⁸ CM (48) 68, 4 November 1948, 64-5; Brook, “Notebook”, 280-2.
- ⁷⁹ Wurm, “Document No. 212”, 712-6.
- ⁸⁰ CP (48) 249, 2-4; Bevin, “Council of Europe”, 1-6.
- ⁸¹ “From the FCO to the UK delegation in Paris”, 1-3; Attlee, HC Deb 27 June 1950, 5th series, vol. 476, cols. 2163-2164.