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British parliamentary attitudes towards a supranational parliament and the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, 1948–49

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SUMMARY

With a mounting communist threat from Eastern Europe after the Second World War, in Western Europe an attempt was made to create permanent structures not only to help in facilitating cooperation in different fields of life to rebuild societies, but to launch a common European supranational parliamentary body. The creation of the Council of Europe in May 1949 proved to be a compromise. It lacked a workable European parliament, as had been the vision of certain federalists in many Western European countries. During the creation process, the British foreign policy leadership emphasized the weak supranational parliamentarization of Western European politics. In this article, parliamentary debates and archival sources are utilized to examine British political discussions that related to the creation of the Council of Europe and its parliamentary body, the Consultative Assembly, in 1948–49. The author also asks whether the British parliamentarians were in favour of a truly European parliament and how their attitudes surfaced in the first session of the Consultative Assembly when the question of European parliament was on the agenda.

KEYWORDS

Integration; European parliament; supranational; Council of Europe; postwar; House of Commons

Introduction

In a recent edited volume on the conceptualization of parliament and parliamentarism, the editors Pasi Ihalainen, Cornelia Ilie and Kari Palonen argue that parliaments in Europe have historically been central in forums for dissensus and debate, and that parliamentarism itself is composed of four core concepts: (i) deliberation (between opposing views), (ii) representation, (iii) responsibility and (iv) sovereignty, thus helping to distinguish representative parliaments from mere assemblies. Furthermore, the editors discussed parliamentarism from its ideal theoretical ground, pointing especially to the way representatives in parliaments are selected, to parliaments' ability to debate freely and to how a parliament's own prerogatives to become a sovereign decision-making institution in relation to other state institutions have evolved.¹ The question of centrality of debate *pro*

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¹P. Ihalainen, C. Ilie and K. Palonen, 'Parliament as a Conceptual Nexus', in P. Ihalainen, C. Ilie and K. Palonen (eds), *Parliament and Parliamentarism. A Comparative History of a European Concept* (New York, 2016), pp. 1–9.

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et contra as a distinctive feature of the parliamentary style of politics, the ways and rituals of debate and institutional factors have been researched in recent years, not to mention the way political history has been revealed through the examination of parliamentary debating on various cases and themes, pointing, for instance, to how parliamentary foreign policy has been able to develop.²

However, national parliaments provide different topics for research compared with international or even supranational parliamentary organs. The present-day European Parliament traces its history to the 1950s and especially to the Treaty of Rome of 1958, when three separate international organizations were merged to create the European Economic Community. However, the question of a European representative parliament was older, and found its first post-Second World War expression in the form of the rather weak Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, established on 5 May 1949.³ This article analyses the political debate on a European supranational parliament in the British Parliament, a series of debates that occurred in 1948 and 1949, when the search for an expression of a European parliament was rapidly moving forward as different associations and subsequent governments started to work with concrete proposals to develop permanent structures of European unity. It was during these years that the Council of Europe evolved from an idea to an organization. I ask if the British members of parliament (MPs) were in favour of supranational European parliamentarism and how they talked about it in the period 1948–49. As will later emerge, a national debate on a European parliament touched the very core issues of what parliamentarism as an ideal is about. The parliamentary debates are supplemented with archival documents dealing with the work of the British Cabinet in the period 1948–49 and opening a perspective on how British policy on Europe was being formulated in relation to a conception of a European parliament.

This analysis intends to fill a gap in the current knowledge of the history of European integration and the history of European parliamentarism. The present research on European integration is rich and diverse, with accounts of the early history of integration drawing attention especially to the role of wartime resistance movements as advocates of European unity, to the role of the nation-state as a proponent of integration policies, and especially to individual events and groups.⁴ Furthermore, the British case has provided one relevant case to venture into the question of identity, especially in relation to what Europe or the phenomenon of Europeanization meant. Here, Europeanization is interpreted as an examination of the effects of European integration.⁵ Still, what we know about the early history of manifestations of European parliamentarism continues to be

²K. Palonen, 'Speaking pro et contra: The Rhetorical Intelligibility of Parliamentary Politics and the Political Intelligibility of Parliamentary Rhetoric', in S. Soinen and T. Turkkala (eds), *The Parliamentary Style of Politics* (Helsinki, 2008), pp. 82–105; C. Ilie, 'Parliamentary Discourse and Deliberative Rhetoric', in Ihalainen et al. (eds), *Parliament*, pp. 133–45; P. Ihalainen and S. Matikainen, 'The British Parliament and Foreign Policy in the 20th Century: Towards Increasing Parliamentarisation?' *Parliamentary History* 35, (2016), pp. 1–14; T. Häkkinen, *The Royal Prerogative Redefined. Parliamentary Debate on the Role of the British Parliament in Large-scale Military Deployments, 1982–2003*, Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 224 (Jyväskylä, 2014).

³B. Rittberger, *Building Europe's Parliament. Democratic Representation beyond the Nation-state* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 74–6.

⁴See, for example, W. Lipgens, *A History of European Integration. Volume 1: 1945–1947. The Formation of the European Unity Movement*, translated by P.S. Falla and A.J. Ryder (Oxford, 1982); A. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-state*, 2nd edn (London, 2000); J.T. Grantham, 'British Labour and the Hague "Congress of Europe": National Sovereignty Defended', *The Historical Journal* 24, (1981), pp. 443–52.

⁵M. Conway and K. Klaus (eds), *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century. Historical Approaches* (Houndmills, 2010); J. Jokela, *Europeanization and Foreign Policy. State identity in Finland and Britain* (London, 2011), p. 2.

sparse. This is especially so when dealing with ideas that preceded the creation of parliamentary institutions. In this, the ideas that stem from public debate between parliamentarians provide interesting insights.⁶

The British Parliament provides a relevant corpus to examine the Council of Europe. Britain, together with France and the smaller Western European countries Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, was in a key position to create the entire organization after intense rounds of negotiations during the winter of 1948 and 1949. In many European countries parliamentarism had gone into crisis after the First World War. The rise of antiparliamentarism was evident, for instance, in Nazi Germany.⁷ The British political system had not only survived both world wars, but had also emerged as the victor and often-referred example from the point of view of continental parliamentary regimes.⁸ The British parliamentarians were in a constitutionally weak position since they lacked major foreign policy powers owing to the royal prerogative rights of the executive branch (the government). Debate offered an alternative route to exert influence. Their role in debating was not only to inform the executive on the MPs' opinions, but also to inform the public about what the elected representatives of the nation thought about the form of a European and perhaps even supranational parliamentary body.⁹

The corpus analysed consists of all the parliamentary debates held in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords and recorded verbatim;¹⁰ as a supplementary measure, keyword searches were conducted among the British parliamentary sources to pinpoint exact situations in which MPs or peers referred either to 'European assembly' or 'European parliament'. Furthermore, the speeches of the British delegation to the first session of the Consultative Assembly in August/September 1949 were also utilized to create a balanced view. All speeches featuring commentary on the European parliament/European assembly were analysed qualitatively, with special emphasis on the use of concepts as part of political argumentation. Furthermore, different contextual information is given in order to explain the style and motivation of parliamentary discourse.¹¹

This article is divided along the following lines. First, a view of the British approach to European cooperation is established, followed by two empirical sections that utilize parliamentary debates. In the first of these, the debates of the British Parliament are utilized to ascertain ideas on European parliamentarism when the Council of Europe was first an idea, then through diplomatic negotiations became a reality. Next the topic will be elaborated by scrutinizing what actually started to happen in the first session of the Consultative

⁶For ideas on European democracy, see for example, J. Pinder, *Foundations of Democracy in the European Union: From the Genesis of Parliamentary Democracy to the European Parliament* (Basingstoke, 1999). ProQuest Ebrary.

⁷M. Conway and V. Depkat, 'Towards a European History of the Discourse of Democracy: Discussing Democracy in Western Europe, 1945–60', in M. Conway and K. Klaus Patel (eds), *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century. Historical Approaches* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 132–4.

⁸W. Kaiser, 'The Political Reform Debate in Britain since 1945: The European Dimension', *Contemporary British History* 12, (1998), pp. 51–4.

⁹On the role of parliament in foreign policy, see P.G. Richards, *Parliament and Foreign Affairs* (London, 1967), pp. 1–34; Ihalainen and Matikainen, 'British Parliament'.

¹⁰Two online databases are utilized to ensure we obtain all data needed: the Hansard 1805–2005 of the Millbank (<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/>) and the ProQuest House of Commons Parliamentary Papers.

¹¹On studying concepts as parts of an argument, see Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 2002), vol. I, EBSCOhost, pp. 175–87. For other contributions utilizing concepts and parliamentary debates in the British context, see for example P. Ihalainen, *Agents of the People. Democracy and Popular Sovereignty in British and Swedish Parliamentary and Public Debates, 1734–1800* (Leiden, 2010); T. Häkkinen, 'The Concept of the Royal Prerogative in Parliamentary Debates on the Deployment of Military in the British House of Commons, 1982–2003', *Redescriptions. Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 17, (2014), pp. 160–179.

Assembly of the Council of Europe, and how the British delegation responded to ideas to create a workable legislative organization and a truly European parliament. After empirical sections concluding remarks will be presented.

The British and the search for unity in postwar Europe

As mentioned, the British political system was able to provide a model for how a modern parliamentary democracy could be created. As a concept, democracy had experienced a major wave of support. The Second World War had been a struggle between totalitarian ideology and values dubbed as Western European or even universal, with Italian fascism and German Nazism being defeated. The values of the Western Allies had been drawn from different interpretations of European civilization and culture and different contexts gave rise to different interpretations.¹² This also applied to the political culture surrounding parliament.

A combination of the critical state of national economies and infrastructure, migration waves and the emergence of radical communism in various Eastern European countries under the Soviet military presence presented major challenges that had to be addressed in postwar Western Europe. As Walter Lippens points out, the idea of European unity had been proclaimed by various wartime resistance groups in various European countries. Now these active groups were gathering their intellectual forces in postwar Europe in order to cope with existing challenges. This was also evident in Britain, in which there had been thriving ideas about European federalism in the 1930s and 1940s. European federalism was a rather long historical and political vision to which even the history of the Holy Roman Empire could be linked, and in these unity schemes a version of a representative and legislative European parliament played a key role.¹³

This was evident in how the idea of a European parliament was advocated in postwar Europe. Immediately after the war the Movement for European Unity had been somewhat quieter until Winston Churchill's famous speech of 1946 in Zurich on the need to create a kind of United States of Europe changed the situation. Now that a renowned and respected European politician advocated unity, the speech imbued the intellectual movement with new energy to create unity. Furthermore, the policies of US Foreign Secretary George Marshall and the planned recovery programme in 1947 had an impact on the emergence of European cooperation. The pressure from the United States was supplemented by events in Eastern Europe and the rise of radical communism. The key development in terms of European parliament resided, however, among the general public. In spring 1948 the movement that consisted of different associations organized a major meeting in The Hague. Participants at this Congress of Europe ranged from politicians to academics, and ultimately the Congress accepted a call to create a European parliament together with other structures. This plea was circulated among the governments and would transform into an idea that led to the creation of the Council of Europe.

Between January and May 1948, the British Parliament had already been able to debate a variety of issues relating not only to European unity, as both European defence cooperation and economic cooperation were prominent on the political agenda. The

¹²Conway and Depkat, 'Towards a European History', pp. 132–4.

¹³Lippens, *History of European Integration*, pp. 142–53; T. Haapala and T. Häkkinen, 'Debating Federal Europe in the British Parliament, c.1940–1949', *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 24, (2017), pp. 801–16.

latter related to an entire conceptualization of Western civilization in peril. This was a framework for foreign policy that Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin had been advocating since January 1948. Economic conditions were dire, and various agreements could help to improve national economies. Like other peoples, the British had to make policies in order to create both agreements and organizations that would influence the understanding of national sovereignty. This meant that national interests influenced the direction of the integration process which helped to strengthen the nation-state. Before 1948, the idea of a European parliament had occasionally surfaced in the British Parliament. When the idea was supported by concrete diplomatic proposal and had gained lot of public attention in 1948, the matter started to receive major attention in British politics. The creation of a European parliament was also highly relevant from the British point of view, given the tradition of parliamentary supremacy at the core of the political system.¹⁴ It was not an easy task to suddenly discuss the idea of integrating some of the powers of the national parliament into an international organization, or even to embrace the idea of a European parliament. It would go beyond simple supportive discourse in parliament to actual, concrete international institution-building in which domestic politics played a role. For instance, after gaining a majority in the general elections of 1945, even the Labour Party adopted a policy in which national sovereignty was protected despite the party's earlier policy on European federal development.¹⁵ While in government, the Labour Party remained pro-Europe but on its own ideological terms. The importance of national sovereignty was related to parliamentary sovereignty but at the same time the parliamentary discourse emphasized the need to redefine sovereignty.¹⁶ A European parliament was one such test.

Visions of European parliamentarism, 1948–49

In 1948, talk about a European parliament was somewhat sparse compared to the policy debates that dealt with European unity as a whole. Parliament was part of these discourses and MPs talking on unity represented either the federal or practical side. The latter referred to politicians emphasizing international agreements in different fields instead of a process that would lead to some form of political union between state participants. Talking about federal structures in a positive manner did not necessarily feature mentioning a European parliament since it was a basic premise of such discourse.

On 5 May 1948, the House of Commons debated an all-party motion on European Union and the supporters of the motion intended to show to the government on the eve of the Congress of Europe that the MPs supported the creation of a political union among Western European countries.¹⁷ This was a gesture intended to pressure the British government to follow the expectations of the upcoming Congress. Earlier the government had been reluctant to provide time for the motion. Since the Congress of Europe

¹⁴See A. Milward and V. Sørensen, 'Interdependence or Integration? A National Choice', in A.S. Milward, F.M.B. Lynch, R. Rainieri, F. Romero and V. Sørensen (eds), *The Frontier of National Sovereignty. History and Theory 1945–1992* (London, 1993), pp. 1–32; A.V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution*, 8th edn, reprint 1915 (Indianapolis, 1982), p. xxxvi.

¹⁵Grantham, 'British Labour'.

¹⁶T. Häkkinen and M. Kaarkoski, 'The Question of European Unity and the Conceptualization of Sovereignty in the British Parliamentary Debates, 1945–2016', submitted to *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 2/2018, forthcoming.

¹⁷House of Commons Debates (HC Deb) 05 May 1948 vol. 450 cc1270–392.

was a pressing issue, MPs were allowed to voice their concerns and ideas for the conception of European unity. This was also an opportunity to directly or indirectly test the idea of European parliament. In fact, Ronald Mackay (Labour [Lab.], Hull North-West), the initiator of the motion on European unity, was one of the members who advocated Western European federalism and the creation of a European parliament. The motion, supported by the mostly Conservative opposition in the House of Commons, called for the initiation of a process that would eventually lead towards political union featuring a federal structure with a representative government. Furthermore, in relation to the parliamentary role, the motion called for a meeting of national parliamentarians to draft a constitution for such a federal structure. As will be discussed below, this general idea of the members of national parliaments also drafting a structure for a European parliament resurfaced in autumn 1949, when the Consultative Assembly met for the first time. Nevertheless, it is revealing that in the British parliamentary discourse in May 1948, only Ronald Mackay referred to a 'European assembly' to describe the type of meeting the motion was calling for.¹⁸ At this point the government observed the international events but did not advocate federal structures in Europe. This meant that at the governmental level, the British role was rather passive. On the other hand, several British parliamentarians were active, albeit without directly mentioning the European parliament during the British parliamentary debates. This was evident both in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords.

After the Congress there were efforts in Britain to influence the government to take a positive stance towards not only a European parliament, but also to the idea of creating permanent structures for unity. For instance, Winston Churchill advocated permanent structures for unity. In the British case there had been no governmental representation in the Congress of Europe owing to ideological differences between the Labour Party National Executive Committee and the perceived aims of the Congress of Europe. In fact, the Conservative Party portrayed itself as more pro-Europe. This meant a more supportive stance towards European unity as a general scheme.¹⁹ In autumn the European Parliamentary Union held a meeting in Interlaken, Switzerland, to discuss the future of Europe. In relation to this meeting, the French and Belgian governments made a proposal to establish a deliberative and consultative assembly based on the recommendations of the Congress of Europe.²⁰ In the British executive branch, the mood towards the formation of a European parliament or even an assembly was hesitant during the summer of 1948. In one of the meetings of the Cabinet, Bevin saw the conception of a European parliament simply as a vehicle for communist propaganda, owing to the idea that such a parliament would feature freedom of speech.²¹

When the signatory states to the Brussels Treaty discussed the idea of a European assembly in July 1948, Bevin was unable to commit Britain to the scheme.²² Nevertheless, during the course of the diplomatic negotiations based on the French and Belgian proposal, some kind of compromise was needed. The British Government was well aware that

¹⁸Mackay HC Deb 05 May 1948 vol. 450 col. 1284.

¹⁹Grantham, 'British Labour', pp. 445–6.

²⁰Lord Walter Layton House of Lords Debates (HL Deb) 24 September 1948 vol. 158 c313.

²¹The National Archives. Records of the Cabinet Office CAB 128/13/14. Cabinet Conclusions CM (48) 54 17 July 1948, p. 155.

²²The National Archives. Records of the Prime Minister's Office PREM 8/786 Minutes of the 2nd meeting of 20 July 1948 of the Consultative Council (2nd plenary session) The Hague, pp. 2–6.

the political and economic context required cooperation and participated in the negotiations. In the House of Commons during a debate in December 1948, Foreign Secretary Bevin said that the government was supporting the creation of a European assembly, referring to an interest to accommodate the mood of the general public.²³ The British desire to create supranational parliamentarism was not widespread, but the entire project had more significant European underpinnings which the British had to take into account in the political context. For instance, in the debate Winston Churchill referred to the need to have the Germans learn ‘free, liberal civilisation and democratic Parliamentary processes’ in order to have them incorporated into their understanding of Western European civilization. This was a key word of the time for the British government and served as a counterbalance to radical communist ideology.²⁴

The British Cabinet endorsed the policy that the British would work out a compromise model. This compromise would limit the parliamentary dimension, for instance by creating a permanent meeting forum for the representatives of the national governments and in which the representation of the people could be gradually achieved through some kind of an assembly resembling the new General Assembly of the United Nations.²⁵ This was not parliamentarism, but it was a start. During a debate in the House of Commons in December 1948, Churchill had emphasized that the aim of the European movement to create European unity through the creation of a European assembly was not intended to encroach on the sovereignty of national governments. This was a key issue of interest for many Western European states such as Britain. Churchill continued that there was an idea to create such an assembly without executive powers. This meant a structure in which the executive power would be in the hands of the national government in one way or another.²⁶

The ultimate outcome was a compromise. The press had reported on the ongoing negotiations, but the process was given only a limited amount of publicity. This also applied to the way parliament in Britain was excluded from the process, although its power rights and parliamentary conventions hardly expected any other role than the debate on the outcome. In a debate in September 1948, some MPs, mostly Conservatives, had expressed criticism that the government was not actively pursuing the establishment of a European assembly. At that time Mackay had argued that a European assembly would not constitute a contradiction of other efforts to cooperate. This contradiction was the perceived fear of the government to which Bevin had indirectly referred earlier.²⁷ The political context nevertheless encouraged the government to join the diplomatic negotiations that were based on the Franco-Belgian proposal. The British were, nevertheless, in a key position thanks to their power and prestige.

During the negotiations, the British advocated a weaker model whereas the French supported federal structures. As Winston Churchill claimed in the House of Commons, even the composition of the British delegation to an international group to review different ideas and models for unity seemed to be tending away from the federal model. Churchill’s own question referred to a consultative body without executive powers, revealing his

²³HC Deb 09 December 1948 vol. 459 c585.

²⁴HC Deb 28 October 1948 vol. 457 cc252–3.

²⁵The National Archives. CAB 129/30/19. CP (48) 249, 2 November 1948, pp. 6–8.

²⁶HC Deb 10 December 1948 vol. 459 cc711–13.

²⁷HC Deb 17 September 1948 vol. 456 cc437–8.

interest in first pursuing a course in which at least some kind of assembly could be created.²⁸ Based on the work of this group, which was published in early January 1949, the real negotiations were started by the Permanent Commission of the Brussels Treaty. During this phase, the international parliamentary body was part of the organization envisaged. There was no political readiness to make it a real parliament and it was described as an assembly. The British were able to limit the agenda-setting powers of this Consultative Assembly, but the outcome was nevertheless substantial. The creation of the entire Council of Europe was a significant step forward in efforts to seek permanent and even representative structures for European unity.²⁹

The Permanent Commission of the Brussels Treaty prepared a draft paper on the structure of the planned organization and took a stance on several practical issues, such as the location of the new organization and the range of topics the organization could handle. Furthermore, it was apparent that most national governments were reluctant to create a political body that could make the governments accountable for their actions, and the proposed Consultative Assembly was seen as a compromise.³⁰ Britain was one of those reluctant to create strong structures. The proposition certainly lacked the characteristic features of parliament, as discussed in the introduction. The national governments reviewed the proposals in the Consultative Council of the Brussels Treaty and ultimately drafted a constitution for the proposed Council of Europe. During this phase, the British Cabinet pursued a course that would continue to make the parliamentary body of the proposed Council of Europe as weak as possible. For instance, the British wanted to remove a bloc-voting principle from the proposed rules in order to avoid combining unwelcome controversial issues with more reasonable ones.³¹

In December 1948 Foreign Secretary Bevin had told the House of Commons that, despite the public pressure for the rapid creation of a European assembly, whatever would be built should be built to last instead of setting up a 'mere façade'.³² Churchill, on the other hand, wanted above all a show of readiness to pursue real unity. Issues such as the composition of the British diplomatic delegation to review different models suggested that the British government was not thinking likewise – at the core of Churchill's criticism was the selection of Hugh Dalton, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, as delegation chairman. According to Churchill, Dalton had supported unity only if it were to be carried out on a socialist basis. At this point Churchill defined the Assembly as 'consultative and deliberative' and still lacking executive powers.³³ Dalton rejected Churchill's views and emphasized that he was open in the matter of unity.³⁴ In the same debate Ronald Mackay argued that the outcome of unity should feature a body large enough to be effective, 'so that we can have a wider discussion of the whole question of a European Union' – hints at political union were occasionally present, but most of the MPs spoke for a gradual development towards unity.³⁵

²⁸HC Deb 18 November 1948 vol. 458 c566.

²⁹The National Archives. CAB 128/15/8. CM (49) 8, 28 January 1949, pp. 44–5.

³⁰The National Archives. CAB 129/32/35. CP (49) 35, 18 February 1949. Ernest Bevin: 'Council of Europe', pp. 1–6; CAB 128/15/15. CM (49) 15, 24 February 1948, pp. 81–3.

³¹The National Archives. CAB 129/32/18. CP (49) 18, 28 January 1949, p. 1.

³²HC Deb 09 December 1948 vol. 459 c585.

³³HC Deb 10 December 1948 vol. 459 cc712–14.

³⁴HC Deb 10 December 1948 vol. 459 cc728–30.

³⁵HC Deb 10 December 1948 vol. 459 cc774–5.

As can be observed, the politics of titles had focused on the creation of an assembly. This revealed the lack of both executive and even parliamentary interest in Britain in the creation of a model of a European parliament. This was apparent in parliamentary discourse in general, since comments calling for the creation of a ‘European parliament’ were rare. To set the use of ‘European parliament’ in its proper context, besides Ronald Mackay’s speech in 1948, it was not until 21 July 1949 that Harold Macmillan (Con. [Conservative], Bromley), one of the more pro-unity-minded Conservative MPs, first referred to the new organization of the Council of Europe to feature a ‘germ of a European Parliament’.³⁶ As will be discussed in the following section, this idea was part of an approach more often associated with continental representatives participating in the first session of the Consultative Assembly. It is worth noting that the politics of naming pointed to a difference between the planned consultative body and national parliaments. At this point in the British political discourse the rapid creation of a real parliament was not perceived as a real and workable solution, as it was a somewhat novel political idea that still needed some time to mature. In a debate in the House of Commons in September 1948, Bevin had expressed an idea that an assembly could be possible, to handle issues first put forward by the national governments. Nevertheless, the creation of a constitution for an international organization was a formidable task that needed time.³⁷ This was not novel openness compared to 1946–47; before 1948 the notion of a European parliament was rarely under debate, but the idea of European unity surfaced from time to time. Furthermore, it appeared that the British MPs often saw federal structures as synonymous with union.

Rejection of stronger European parliamentarism, 1949

After the creation of the Council of Europe on 5 May 1949, some ideas regarding the role and functions of the Consultative Assembly were aired when the House of Commons held a debate on foreign affairs in July 1949. Harold Macmillan (Con.), one of the members of the British delegation to the Consultative Assembly, criticized the limitation of speaking but expressed a reluctance to change the current rules.³⁸ Ernest Bevin told the House that he had not initially been interested in creating an assembly and had preferred a simple committee of ministers, but this was the result. Nevertheless, Bevin pointed to Macmillan’s comment about the Consultative Assembly being a ‘parliament in embryo’ and reminded the House that governments had not drafted a constitution for the Council of Europe. In fact, he spoke in favour of the British tradition of building upon precedents and thus gradually transforming the system, and was unwilling to discuss rules or procedures.³⁹

The organization was divided into two bodies, the Committee of Ministers and the Consultative Assembly. The former featured governmental representation, whereas the latter was for members of national legislatures. The British delegation to the Consultative Assembly featured representation from the various key political parties of the time, and the behind-the-scenes selection process had been carried out in the government with

³⁶HC Deb 21 July 1949 vol. 467 c1582.

³⁷HC Deb 15 September 1948 vol. 456 cc105–6.

³⁸HC Deb 21 July 1949 vol. 467 c1578.

³⁹HC Deb 21 July 1949 vol. 467 cc1594, 1601.

the opposition parties being able to put forward their own candidates basically according to the government–opposition division. The list of selected representatives was then given to parliament in the form of a statement. The delegation consisted, as was also typical for other national delegations, of influential politicians recruited from their own ranks, and often in one way or another associated with policy on Europe. Furthermore, the British delegation in the Consultative Assembly was the only delegation to have governmental representation. This lack of government members was viewed as partially limiting the potential influence of the Assembly.⁴⁰

The first session of the Assembly started in early August and lasted until early September 1949, and during this time the committees of the Assembly would also convene and address different topics. When the session reached its end, there had been major talks on the future of the entire organization. The Assembly was only able to make recommendations and to debate a variety of issues, but owing to procedural constraints this hardly sufficed to show that it worked as a parliament. No wonder that it was the state of the organization that had drawn major recommendations. This debate was partly related to the agenda of the first session, as the Committee of Ministers had basically asked the Consultative Assembly to develop the organization. In issues of policy to reform the organization, some suggestions were less radical. This discussion involved different national delegations besides the British.

Of the British delegation, only Ronald Mackay was in favour of federalism and most British representatives talked about more practical and less radical solutions. As a whole, the British discourse on the future of the Consultative Assembly differed from more federalist-minded ideas, although two representatives, Robert Boothby (Con.) and Harold Macmillan (Con.), called the Assembly ‘an embryonic Parliament’ with Macmillan developing the metaphor further and seeing the Committee of Ministers as the embryo of a European Cabinet.⁴¹ At one point Mackay tabled a motion calling for strengthening the Assembly and voted against any amendments to one committee report on issues that seemed to lack a parliamentary spirit.⁴²

During the session several discourses were related to the strengthening of the Consultative Assembly towards becoming more of a real parliament: the rights and prerogatives of the Assembly in relation to the Committee of Ministers (such as the right to decide on the agenda); the possibility to gain legislative powers, whereas the Committee of Ministers would be transformed into an executive branch; the right of a country to appoint its own to the organization; the right to take binding decisions instead of making mere recommendations and procedural rules. The British representatives participated in these discussions. For instance, Winston Churchill talked about a need to stand up for the Assembly’s rights, like ‘all free, effective Parliaments in the world’. However, in the British delegation, discourses differed: for instance, Lynn Ungoed-Thomas (Lab., Llandaff and Barry) pointed out that the Assembly would not replace national parliaments and was

⁴⁰The members of the British delegation were Winston Churchill, Ronald Mackay, Peggy Herbison (the only female in the group), Herbert Morrison, Hugh Dalton, William Whiteley, Frederick Cocks, Aidan Crawley, Maurice Edelman, Fredrick Lee, Will Nally, Arwyn Ungoed-Thomas, Harold Macmillan, Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe, Robert Boothby, David Eccles and R. Ross; Ungoed-Thomas HC Deb 17 November 1949 vol. 469 c2305.

⁴¹Boothby, 11 August 1949. Council of Europe, Consultative Assembly, First session, 10 August–8 September 1949. Reports, part I, sittings 1 to 6 (Strasbourg, 1949), p. 28; Macmillan, 17 August 1949, p. 238.

⁴²Mackay, 5 September 1949. Council of Europe, Consultative Assembly, First session, 10 August–8 September 1949. Reports, part III, sittings 12 to 15 (Strasbourg, 1949), pp. 1026, 1032.

not an ordinary parliament.⁴³ The direction of the organization related to the question of transforming the Council of Europe to become a political union with federal structures, an issue vehemently opposed by some whereas others were strongly in favour, such as the question related to the surrender of national sovereignty to a supranational body. The British were more interested in balancing different viewpoints, supporting the long-term perspective of developing the organization and in retaining their own Commonwealth cooperation as a key priority. This existing cooperation created the framework although different ideas for creating a European parliament and parliamentarism were reviewed, at least when decisions influencing ideas on sovereignty were at issue.

On more procedural issues, as Seymour Cocks (Lab.) pointed out, ‘... is this Assembly to be a Parliament or merely a conference or a crowd?’⁴⁴ In fact, at least some British anticipated some parliamentary characteristics, but an issue of its own was the clash of continental and British parliamentary cultures. Different parliamentary cultures had different notions about how to arrange parliamentary decision-making, such as the question of substitute members, the opportunities of external actors to influence the proceedings, or the connections between the Committee of Ministers and the Consultative Assembly. The British talked about their parliamentary model whereas different delegations tried to strike a balance between Westminster and continental parliamentary cultures for the Council’s procedures. Furthermore, different interpretations concerning rules had to be made during the session, thus introducing opportunities to compare the Westminster and continental models of parliamentary decision-making.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, there was a drive to create traditions that could help to define the Assembly for further use. As Herbert Morrison (Lab.) stated in the Assembly, ‘This is not a conference; this is not a demonstration; it is a parliamentary institution, and it is important that parliamentary traditions should evolve as quickly as they can be evolved.’⁴⁶

In November 1949, during a debate in the House of Commons, Bevin criticized the way some countries in the Consultative Assembly had been trying to ‘introduce the parliamentary methods of individual countries into the Council of Europe and set up an opposition to the Committee of Ministers as though the Ministers were all of one party’, and warned against creating antagonism. Bevin reported that the Committee of Ministers had decided to reject some of the proposals of the Consultative Assembly, such as the question of accepting new member states by a majority vote in the Assembly. The accession of the Federal Republic of Germany was naturally the pressing issue behind this stance, as the timetable and requirements for West German entry procedure were still taking time.⁴⁷ Of other issues relating to the development of the Consultative Assembly, Aidan

⁴³Macmillan, Churchill, Ungoed-Thomas. Council of Europe. Consultative Assembly, First session, 10 August–8 September 1949. Reports, part I, sittings 1 to 6 (Strasbourg, 1949), pp. 40, 44, 50. Of wanting to assign own officials, for instance Churchill, Macmillan, 17 August 1949. Council of Europe, Consultative Assembly, First session, 10 August–8 September 1949. Reports, part I, sittings 1 to 6 (Strasbourg, 1949), pp. 28–32, 238.

⁴⁴Cocks, 5 September 1949. Council of Europe, Consultative Assembly, First session, 10 August–8 September 1949. Reports, part III, sittings 12 to 15 (Strasbourg, 1949), p. 1002.

⁴⁵See, for instance, Churchill, 11 August 1949. Council of Europe, Consultative Assembly, First session, 10 August–8 September 1949. Reports, part I, sittings 1 to 6 (Strasbourg, 1949), p. 20; Crawley, Nally, 18 August 1949. Council of Europe, Consultative Assembly, First session, 10 August–8 September 1949. Reports, part II, sittings 7 to 11 (Strasbourg, 1949), pp. 374–8.

⁴⁶Morrison, 17 August 1949. Council of Europe, Consultative Assembly, First session, 10 August–8 September 1949. Reports, part I, sittings 1 to 6 (Strasbourg, 1949), p. 232.

⁴⁷Bevin HC Deb 17 November 1949 vol. 469 cc2209–10.

Crawley (Lab., Buckingham), one of the members of the British delegation in the Assembly, suggested initiating a system of fees to be paid to members in order to improve the working of the committee, this in addition to more flexible decision-making regarding when the committees would convene.⁴⁸

In many respects, the committees seemed to be in a key position when it came to the efficiency of the Consultative Assembly. Furthermore, Frederick Lee (Lab., Manchester Hulme) suggested that perhaps one minister could attend and represent the Committee of Ministers in debates as was the case in the British Parliament, but this latter issue was quickly challenged by Bevin as it implied that one minister would represent 12 different member states, a highly problematic issue.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Lynn Ungood-Thomas (Lab., Llandaff and Barry) pointed out that an occasional representation from the Committee of Ministers would give 'weight' to the sessions. In addition to this, Ungood-Thomas argued that the Assembly should have powers to implement its recommendations.⁵⁰ This debate in the House of Commons shows that even though the British delegation was mostly emphasizing a gradual and practical way of developing the Council of Europe, there was nevertheless debate on introducing quite parliamentary features to the Consultative Assembly that would improve the debate more towards representatives versus the Committee of Ministers. The British Cabinet, however, was reluctant to support such measures.

The Committee of Ministers eventually decided at a meeting in late 1949 to ease certain procedural restrictions, but as a whole the national governments were not interested in transforming the Council of Europe into a real and workable European parliament. Furthermore, since 1950 the Schuman Plan started to open up more avenues for representative European cooperation.

Conclusion

What this article has shown is that there existed British debate on alternative versions of a European parliament and parliamentarism in the period 1948–49. However, it was also indirectly shown that the impact of national parliamentarians on the foreign policy approach of the government was weak but still able to help to initiate a change of policy. MPs in the British Parliament were able to benefit from the wider public mood that supported European unity. As the inception of a European parliament was one of the issues relating to European unity, the Conservative opposition in particular was able for its own part to pressure the government to participate in diplomatic negotiations that led to the creation of the Council of Europe. Party constellations persisted: the Conservatives acted more pro-Europe than did the Labour Party, although there were exceptions among the Labour Party backbenchers. It is also relevant to see the extent of stances taken in the first session of the Consultative Assembly; the British parliamentarians did present ideas on parliamentary characteristics and utilized the domestic parliamentary forum to promote these ideas further. Furthermore, it was also shown that parliamentarism as a whole was under debate not only in the British Parliament, but also in the Consultative Assembly, in which British representatives participated by discussing what

⁴⁸HC Deb 17 November 1949 vol. 469 cc2242–3.

⁴⁹HC Deb 17 November 1949 vol. 469 c2294.

⁵⁰HC Deb 17 November 1949 vol. 469 c2305.

constituted parliamentary and parliament in a European political body. The British representatives were able to bring into the discussion their own experiences and models that did not always prevail in contrast to their continental counterparts. This helped to intensify the political debate.

It was noted in the introduction that (i) deliberation between opposing views, (ii) representation, (iii) responsibility and (iv) sovereignty are concepts closely related to the concept of parliamentarism. In the case of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, all these issues were at least indirectly under debate, with responsibility indirectly linked to the question of executive versus legislative relations with an idea of having ministers participate occasionally in the sittings of the Assembly. The Consultative Assembly served first as an opportunity and next as a forum to discuss possibilities and models to create a European parliament and to see what kind of challenges it would give rise to. This discussion was often carried out using the concepts of parliament, assembly and sovereignty. The use of these concepts in arguments provided a discursive process to deliberate the idea of a European parliament. In the end, domestic political reasons such as the tradition of British parliamentary supremacy were deemed more important than an as-yet immature international parliamentary body. At this point, a European institution under development was unable to influence the national institutions in a direction that would have enabled supranational European parliamentarism.

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