PUBLIC OPINION AND BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY

Kenneth Younger

INTERNATIONAL issues are relatively remote from daily life. While the ordinary citizen knows about the housing situation or the price of food, and can check the truth about them from his own experience, he cannot easily judge the truth of what he is told about events in the Congo or Cuba, about the Sino-Soviet dispute, or about President de Gaulle's action in January 1963. Nor is it always obvious what such questions have to do with him.

The remoteness of the ordinary citizen from foreign policy is, however, diminished, either when he fears direct attack from abroad, or when he becomes aware that the domestic affairs of his own country are being subverted by foreign Powers. An Israeli citizen, for instance, must be continuously sensitive to the activities of neighbouring Arab states. Or again, a contemporary German, whose country is internally divided owing to the conflict of the Great Power blocs, must feel himself to be immediately affected by his country's external relations.

Britain has been almost uniquely fortunate in her freedom from foreign invasion over several centuries, and this has given her people a sense of self-sufficiency which was barely shaken even in 1940 when the threat of invasion was for once a real one. Moreover it is a long time since British domestic politics have been seriously subverted by the action of foreign Powers. One might say that this has not been a real threat since 1745, which ended Scotland's age-long role as the Fifth Column of the King of France. For this reason foreign subversion plays relatively little part in British politics. Perhaps the one spectacular exception to this was the occasion in 1924 when the publication of the much-disputed Zinoviev letter, purporting to give instructions from the Communist International to the British Communist Party, contributed to the fall of the Labour Government in October of that year.

For these reasons there has perhaps been less cause for mass opinion to be aroused over foreign issues in Britain than in many other countries, though the insular quality of British thinking can easily be exaggerated. Opinion polls in recent years indicate something like a 2 to 1 majority of British citizens who habitually give priority to domestic over foreign issues. There are surely many other countries where the proportion would be fairly similar.

On the other side of the balance sheet, Britain's position as a world trader for 400 years, and an imperial Power administering a scattered overseas empire for some 250 years, has created a direct interest on the part of particular limited sections of the public in conditions all over the world. For instance, the class who provided administrators in India and Africa and, until quite recently, in Australia and Canada; the merchants in the Far and Middle East, and the investors in Chile and Argentina, Cairo and Singapore, have all, for generations, had overseas contacts and interests, and have not hesitated to call upon British governments to protect them. At various periods such bodies as the old East India Company, the Oil Companies on the Persian Gulf, and more recently, the so-called Katanga Lobby with interests in the Congo and Rhodesia, have all pressed particular polices on the Government, determinedly but with varying effect. Alongside these one must also mention the high-minded and the religious, the anti-slavery societies and the missionaries, the League of Nations Union and the United Nations Association. Bodies of this kind are organised for the purpose of influencing government, and are convinced that the Government is in a position to influence world affairs. Although taken together these bodies still represent only a limited section of the community, and sometimes exert pressures which cancel each other out, nevertheless they are a continuous and real factor in the formation of policy.

The relative remoteness of the ordinary citizen from international issues, coupled with the intense interest of these limited pressure groups, may be responsible for the oligarchic flavour which still attaches to foreign policy. The common man votes overwhelmingly on domestic issues so that even his elected representatives have in the past paid only limited attention to his views on foreign affairs. In any case these have usually been less clear and less firmly held than his views on domestic questions. There is still some truth in this today, but the awareness of the ordinary voter is now growing fast with improved education, with the impact of the mass media and with the growing consciousness of all classes that they share a common fate with other countries, especially in matters of peace and war. There is now a noticeable link, in Britain as elsewhere, between the diplomacy of the Government and their domestic elections. It has, for instance, been a matter of cynical comment in Britain that official enthusiasm for Summit Conferences and for conciliation between the Power blocs suddenly took fire in the years 1955 and 1959, and again in 1963, when General Elections seemed to be in prospect. This phenomenon, of course, is not exclusive to Britain.

One consideration peculiar to foreign policy is that governments have to pay attention to the public opinion of foreign countries and to world public opinion as well as to their own. Some countries, like the

Chinese People's Republic, or General de Gaulle's France, at present pay rather little attention, but all pay some attention at some times. World opinion is, of course, the new element which the founders of the League of Nations and of the United Nations aimed to call into being to replace military force in the regulation of human affairs. How far world opinion can as yet be said to exist, and whose opinion it is that is expressed, for instance in votes at the United Nations, are controversial questions requiring more detailed attention than can be given here. But most governments recognise that the new forms of international diplomacy by parliamentary discussion have created certain new pressures to which they must occasionally respond. Britain is no exception to this. Conservatives may tend to resent international interference, especially in the colonial field, while others may exaggerate the effective power which lies behind the oratory in international gatherings, but all acknowledge that international opinion cannot be wholly ignored. There is even a tendency in discussing foreign policy to refer to foreign public opinion more often than to British as a limiting factor upon the Government's freedom of action. It would be misleading to assume from this that British opinion is being ignored. The explanation is rather that British Ministers tend to identify themselves almost subconsciously with their own public opinion and so find little need to refer to it, whereas foreign public opinion is an external force to be assessed like any other.

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One or two recent case histories may help to bring some of these very general observations to life. The first is the so-called policy of appeasement of the Nazi and Fascist dictators before the Second World War. This policy is now widely recognised today as having been mistaken. But those who are still apologists for the two Prime Ministers involved, Baldwin and Chamberlain, maintain that the guilt should not be attributed especially to the Government, but rather to the nation as a whole. The nation, they say, was deeply pacific and unready to make a major effort to resist Hitler or Mussolini. The two Prime Ministers merely reflected this view. Chamberlain's skill, it is claimed, is shown by his having taken the nation united into war in 1939, the earliest occasion on which this could possibly have been done.

It is worthwhile to examine this defence. It is of course quite true that the slaughter of 1914–18 had deeply affected opinion in Britain as in France. In particular, it had made men suspicious of any attempt to revive the old armaments race between national states. On the other hand, there were probably more people who saw the alternative as some kind of collective security system to which Britain would make some

military contribution than there were true pacifists unwilling to take any military action at all.

That the inter-war peace movement in Britain should not have been taken by British Governments as being defeatist in the face of aggression was surely indicated by the results of the famous Peace Ballot of 1935, in which the astonishing number of $11\frac{1}{2}$ million votes were cast. Of these, approximately 10 million supported the League of Nations and international disarmament, and even the application of economic sanctions against aggression. When the crucial question of military sanctions was posed, there was, as one would expect, less unanimity, but even military sanctions were supported by the impressive margin of $6\frac{3}{4}$ millions against less than $2\frac{1}{2}$.

The Prime Minister of the time, Baldwin, showed clearly that he had understood these figures by fighting a general election on the issue of support for the League against Mussolini's Abyssinian adventure. But within weeks of the election victory, his Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, was negotiating with Laval to give Mussolini most of what he wanted. The public outcry in all parties was such that Hoare had to be sacrificed, the only instance of a Foreign Secretary being driven to resign by public opinion. But it was a hollow victory. The Government's post-election policy was not radically changed, Abyssinia was not saved and within a few months Hoare was back in the Cabinet in a new post.

As the slow build-up to the Second World War continued, and the Nazi menace became all absorbing, the signs multiplied that the Government was not simply responding to the climate of public opinion but was influenced primarily by different motives. Among these the most powerful was the belief, maintained until a very late date, that Soviet Communism was the real danger and that Hitler might be an essential bulwark against it. This was coupled with an extraordinarily old-fashioned inability to understand what sort of men the new dictators were. The public was ahead of Ministers in this, but Ministers were powerfully supported by some influential groups in political society and in business and by *The Times*. Between them these elements exploited the public's undoubted longing for peace, and by speech and writing polluted the stream of information on which the public relied to form its judgments. The Labour Opposition's refusal to vote defence estimates confused the public further and the lone voice of Churchill was not enough to swing opinion massively against the Government's line.

A clear lead from the Government on the need to prepare for resistance to aggression could have transformed the opinion of a public which had already shown signs that it was prepared to support the League of Nations, by force of arms if necessary. But the lead was not

given and those who failed to give it cannot hide behind the excuse that the public was not ready to make sacrifices. How could it be, when the Government itself was constantly stating that the danger was unreal?

In 1938, the climax year of appeasement, a former head of the Foreign Office News Department, Sir Arthur Willert, wrote [1]: 'I do believe that the unsuccess of our foreign policy lately has been less due to inevitable popular indifference or slowness of thought than to the fact that Lord Baldwin and our other political leaders have not been particularly educative, or clear-cut or convincing in their approach to external problems.' This is a diplomat's way of saying that Ministers misled the public and it is true. The moral is that, in Britain, public opinion requires and will accept a clear lead from the top. When a government begins to make the shortcomings of public opinion the excuse for its own acts or omissions, the truth is likely to be either that the Cabinet itself is divided and rudderless or that it is actually engaged in miseducating the country.

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After 1945, when a new threat of aggression in Europe was feared, there was a new climate of opinion, partly because the memories of appeasement in the 1930s were still vivid. Nevertheless, left-wing opinion was reluctant to believe in a Soviet threat and there was a left-wing Government in power in Westminster. Moreover, the people were war-weary, and if the Government had chosen to minimise the danger, the public would have been more than happy to believe them. Fortunately the lesson of the Baldwin/Chamberlain period had been learned and the necessary truths were spoken, often in the face of strong sectional resentment. Even when Britain's entry into the Korean War in 1950 had to be decided within 48 hours, Government and Opposition alike followed President Truman's lead and the public accepted the decision.

There is little evidence that the Government was conscious of any need on this occasion to test public opinion. To support the American alliance was, for many people, an almost instinctive reflex: for others it was inconceivable that Britain should stand aside from the first attempt of the United Nations to resist armed aggression. This was certainly an occasion when Ministers confidently identified themselves with public opinion to such an extent that they scarcely realised that public opinion had any part in their decision.

The position was less simple when the demand came later in the same year for the rearmament of Germany. This was widely unpopular

[1] *International Affairs*, November-December 1938, p. 820.

among right and left wing alike, but especially among the left, and there was a Labour Government in office with a parliamentary majority of only six and in constant danger of defeat. It is true that this was not an issue which the Opposition leaders, Churchill and Eden, were likely to use to defeat the Government, but it was a hard choice for Labour all the same. The decision was taken and the party, faced with an imminent election, gave the Government sufficient support. Labour lost the election a few months later, but the reasons for the defeat lay overwhelmingly elsewhere. Once again the evidence suggests that a clear lead from government can usually rally support even for unpopular policies, and that party loyalty is likely to outweigh distaste for particular measures.

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One cannot omit from this selective survey some mention of the extraordinary Suez affair of 1956, even though most people regard it as being, from start to finish, an exception to all the normal British policy-making procedures.

It is certain that there was no general public demand for a military response to President Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal. This occurred in late July, as the holiday season approached its peak, and at first only informed political circles showed much excitement. Nor was the policy of military intervention widely favoured among experts, though there was certainly some right-wing parliamentary and Press support for it.

Essentially the Suez expedition was the policy of a few Ministers, especially Sir Anthony Eden, and so conscious were they of lack of support, even among officials, that they carried secrecy about their intentions to the point where success was endangered by lack of proper preparation. British Ambassadors in the Middle East were not consulted, most of the Foreign Office was kept in the dark and generals were caught partly unprepared by the timing of the operation.

This is not the place to re-argue the Suez controversy, but only to consider how public opinion affected events. Until the attack on Egypt, mass opinion played no part at all, and informed opinion virtually none, in encouraging the Government to do what it did. When the attack was launched, informed opinion tended to move against the Government, and when the operation failed this tendency strengthened, even among many Government supporters. But mass opinion, both Conservative and Labour, had a nationalist not to say chauvinistic reaction once the attack had been launched. It felt involved with the British troops and wanted them to win, and afterwards it felt involved in the national humiliation. Government supporters in Parliament, despite misgivings, closed their ranks in the interests of political self-preservation.

Although the Prime Minister resigned, he did so from ill health, not on account of the public's wrath. No other leading Minister lost office for his part in the affair, and the new Prime Minister, Mr. Macmillan, led his party to victory at a general election less than three years later with an increased majority. Since this ill-fated expedition was, by any standard, a failure, with adverse repercussions upon Britain's position in the Commonwealth, in the NATO alliance and in the United Nations, it is surely remarkable that those responsible in effect paid no special price whatever.

If, as has been asserted here, public opinion played no part in initiating the action against Nasser, it was nevertheless the public's passive acquiescence which, after the event, enabled the Government to survive the fury of the Opposition and the censure of most of its normal allies throughout the world. Historians may perhaps conclude that Sir Anthony Eden, in promoting the Suez adventure, was subconsciously identifying himself with the resentment which was widely felt in the country about Britain's loss of her Empire and about the diminution of her power of independent action; and that it was because the electors felt themselves to be moral co-partners in his escapade that they exacted no penalty from him or from his colleagues.

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Finally, what has been the role of public opinion in the evolution of Britain's relations with Europe since 1945? If Britain were to become part of Europe, to the extent of political integration, this would mark the end of an historical chapter which began with the Reformation. Since then, despite Britain's constant involvement in European affairs, her primary concern has been essentially to protect herself from the risk of domination by Continental Powers, while she has grown rich and strong by maritime trade and by fostering connections with the ends of the earth. So integration with Europe now would involve a reorientation in the thinking of many British citizens as well as in the policies of their Government.

In the early post-war years mass opinion did not come positively into play at all on this issue. In the absence of a lead from the Government it was inconceivable that the general public should actively demand so radical a change as union with a weak and demoralised continent that had just torn itself to pieces for the second time in this century. The war had not caused the ordinary Englishman to lose faith in his national institutions. His natural allies seemed to be the Commonwealth and the United States, and his hopes for world order were centred upon the world-wide United Nations rather than upon regional integration.

But if there was no popular enthusiasm for Europe, neither was there popular hostility; far from it. If the Government had preached integration the ordinary man might well have been persuaded. But it did no such thing. It is easy to ascribe this to shortsightedness, but at the time union with Europe did not seem to offer a solution to any of Britain's most pressing problems—shortages of food and raw materials, the need to ensure American economic and military support as the Cold War developed, the transfer of power in India and the decolonisation of an Empire.

In retrospect the lack of interest in European integration may seem to many to have been wrong, but if so most people were in it together in the early years. Little pressure was brought upon the Labour Government to join Europe either by the general public or by informed opinion in the Foreign Office, the City of London, industry or the Services. Indeed there was a good deal of pressure in the opposite direction. When the Conservatives came to power in 1951 their policy was soon seen to be essentially the same, and it did not change for another 10 years.

After the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 the success of the European Economic Community forced a reappraisal upon Britain, which culminated in a major switch of Government policy and the application to join EEC in the summer of 1961. Once again no strong demand by the general public for this change can be identified. Relations with Europe had not been an election issue in 1959. But informed opinion had been slowly altering, perhaps since the aftermath of Suez, which had shown the weakness of Britain's independent role, the lack of cohesion in the Commonwealth and the uncertainty of the so-called special relationship with the United States. Equally important, the statistics showed the economic growth of EEC in alarming contrast to the relative stagnation of the United Kingdom.

The move to join Europe after all began effectively among officials of the Treasury and the Foreign Office. Cabinet opinion was uncertain and was probably swung by the Prime Minister. When it became known in early 1961 that Government policy was changing, repeated opinion polls [2] showed that nearly half the public was willing to follow a Government lead into Europe, that less than a quarter was opposed and that more than one third was undecided.

The size of the undecided group remained continuously high and in July 1961, just before the official application to join EEC, it was the highest single group at 40 per cent. At first there was little difference between Conservative and Labour opinion, both parties being split, but when the Government decision was announced party loyalty

[2] References to information polls are based upon figures made available by Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd.

caused a big jump in Conservative support. For a time Labour support increased too, and at the end of 1961 over half the Labour voters were said to be in favour, but as the Labour leadership became increasingly critical of the prospective terms, Labour opinion fell away, and this probably accounts for the fact that during 1962 overall support for entry into Europe never quite reached as much as 50 per cent. of the whole.

During this period there was growing debate in political, press and business circles, as the different interests took up their positions. On the whole, support for joining EEC tended to grow as time went on, especially in business, and this no doubt encouraged the Government to go forward. Mass opinion on the other hand remained largely ineffective because the Government was inhibited from ramming home the need for Britain to join EEC, both out of fear of weakening the hand of the negotiators and also out of fear of a serious public reaction if the negotiations should break down, as always seemed possible. In the result the wider public remained confused, major political issues such as federalism and national sovereignty tended to be blurred, and there was a growing disparity between what Mr. Heath was actually obtaining in negotiation in Brussels and some of the explanations which were being given at home.

In this phase the Government seems to have decided to join EEC even if the terms were very stiff, to rely upon the imminence of a general election to ensure sufficient Conservative backing in Parliament, and to count upon the public to adjust itself gradually afterwards, during the period of transition to full integration. These were not foolish calculations, and but for President de Gaulle they might well have succeeded. Once the Government had initialled an agreement it is unlikely that they would have been repudiated by Parliament. Repudiation of the Treaty by a subsequent Labour Government would have been scarcely more probable.

In all this story the role of public opinion does not loom very large. Yet in one respect it may, almost by chance, have been decisive. Though it was de Gaulle who determined the breakdown in the negotiations, it was the long drawn-out bargaining which gave him his chance. If Mr. Heath could have agreed terms in the spring or even the summer of 1962, before de Gaulle's position was consolidated by referendum and elections, it is not certain that de Gaulle could have acted so decisively. For this reason many diplomatic experts, including M. Jean Monnet, have suggested that Britain should have signed the Treaty first and bargained afterwards. This advice may be technically sound, but it is questionable whether the British Government could have committed Britain in advance, without even trying to secure safeguards for the Commonwealth, the British farmers and other interests. Had it tried to do so, it might

have overstepped the broad limits of tolerance within which party supporters are prepared to allow a government to act as it thinks fit.

The breakdown of the negotiations affected the opinion polls less dramatically than might have been expected. The standard question asked throughout had been whether joining EEC would be approved if the Government considered that it was in the country's best interests. In December 1962, just before the breakdown, the figures were Yes 48 per cent.; No 26 per cent.; Don't Know 26 per cent. In February 1963, just after, they were Yes 41 per cent.; No 30 per cent.; and Don't Know 29 per cent. Even in late spring, when joining EEC had already ceased to be immediately practicable, there were still 39 per cent. for political and 57 per cent. for economic association. Considering what had happened, this shows a remarkable steadiness of sentiment—unless of course it is to be ascribed to mere indifference.

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These instances from recent experience suggest that British public opinion rarely makes itself decisively felt as a separate force of which governments consciously take account, but that it is nevertheless there in the background, setting limits to what a prudent government will attempt. If Ministers are competent they will sense fairly easily what these limits are, by reason of their own continuous contact with their constituents and with special interest groups.

I doubt if this situation differs radically from the situation in other European countries, but it does differ from the situation in the United States. There, the Constitution was designed to prevent the Administration from having a foreign policy and the legislature was set up to be a separate and rival force in government. Moreover, American politics are based upon the concept of continuous popular participation in government, whereas the British concept is rather of a government democratically chosen and periodically answerable at elections for what it does, but free, and indeed under an obligation, to use its own judgment in the meantime rather than to submit all its actions to popular approval.

If Mr. George Kennan and Mr. Walter Lippman are to be believed, popular influence upon foreign policy under the United States system in recent years has not, on the whole, been beneficial. Certainly one does not need to share Shakespeare's contempt for the mob in order to realise that popular opinion is not necessarily always a force for peace and that, for instance, it may be more easily affected than either the government or the foreign service by waves of chauvinistic passion. On the other hand, the ability of British governments to ignore or to manipulate public opinion, instead of being compelled to conduct the sort of continuous public argument with it which goes on in the United States, has

been at least partly responsible for some of Britain's worst errors, notably the appeasement policy in the 1930s. Even in the more defensible case of British policy towards Europe, it is surely no matter for congratulation that, during more than a decade of discussion, public opinion was never crystallised by the kind of grand debate which regularly convulses the United States. The result was that, throughout the Brussels negotiations, it never emerged from its confusion to play a constructive part in the moulding of events.

Why does the democratic principle work so feebly in this field of government? It cannot now be said that the public lacks the information on which to form its views. On the contrary, the stream of news and comment on world affairs which flows from radio and television and from the serious Press is more than most people can absorb. The weakness now derives rather from the public's failure to maintain a continuous interest in world events in the intervals between crises. It is precisely in these intervals that opinion ought to be exerting its formative influence upon official thinking. When crisis comes, decisions must inevitably be left to government.

A second weakness is the lack of authoritative centres of opinion outside government from which the general public can take its cue. It is here that the contrast between foreign and domestic affairs is most marked. Consider for instance the current domestic controversies over university expansion and other aspects of education. Apart from the fact that these issues touch every family in the country more or less closely, the public also receives guidance from a number of organised bodies which carry direct responsibility for education, notably from the universities, schoolteachers and local councils. There are thus several authoritative points of view which the wider public, in making up its mind, can set against the information put out by the Ministry.

In a world where problems of government become more complex every year, the wider public requires the help of organised opinion-forming groups of this kind, and in home affairs this help is usually available. In foreign affairs it usually is not, so that the public is much more dependent upon the version of events which the government chooses to give it. Occasionally business interests may hold a strong view on an issue of policy, and even more occasionally they may think it worth their while to convey their view to the public. But, much more often, businessmen prefer to regard general policy as a matter for politicians and content themselves, at most, with making private representations to a government department.

Here again the contrast with United States practice is striking in two ways. Firstly, international questions are widely discussed and reported on by American universities and independent research institutions. Some of this work is sponsored by the great Foundations, which

are more numerous, richer and more apt to promote international studies than comparable British trusts. But much independent work is also commissioned both by the Administration itself and by Congress. This is one characteristic American response to the tremendous international responsibilities which have been suddenly thrust upon the United States by her emergence as the greatest world Power.

In Britain there are now some small signs of official interest in enlisting the cooperation of bodies outside the civil service, both in the policy-making process and in the formation of an informed public opinion. But there is a striking contrast between the role of the United States Congress in foreign policy-making and the relative ineffectiveness of the British Parliament in this field. While the primacy of Parliament is an article of faith in British constitutional theory, it is far from being a matter of fact. The House of Commons, for instance, has altogether negligible facilities either for keeping itself corporately informed on international matters or for bringing organised pressure to bear upon the Government. There is nothing like the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees of Congress. Indeed, it is notorious among back-bench politicians that they can often acquire information about British policy more easily in Washington, or in the corridors of NATO headquarters or at Strasbourg than they can in Westminster.

Traditionally British parliamentarians have prided themselves on their direct access to Ministers, who are themselves Members of Parliament, and on their power to elicit information by parliamentary question. These are both valuable assets, but they do not compensate for the absence of any organised system for enabling Parliament to maintain an effective scrutiny of policy, backed by the right to obtain essential information from the growingly powerful official machine.

No doubt a wholesale adoption of the methods employed by Congress would produce wide repercussions upon British constitutional practice, for instance upon the doctrine of ministerial responsibility. Nevertheless, when one notes the growing feeling that Parliament is beginning to lose its former pre-eminence in British politics, and when one sets this alongside the evident failures of public opinion in the realm of foreign policy, one must surely conclude that Parliament ought to do more to play the part of informed middleman between the Government and the electorate. Its present failure to do this seems likely to leave public opinion without an effective focus, and to condemn Parliament, in an age of growing professionalism, to an amateur status which belongs to another age.

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