New Labour, New European Policy? Blair, Brown and Utilitarian Supranationalism

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that since 1997 the Labour governments have practised a European policy of ‘utilitarian supranationalism’. Their strategy has been characterised by a preparedness to embrace European policy solutions in line with Labour’s 1997 manifesto commitment to pursue a constructive diplomacy in the European Union (EU). This policy, it is argued, has led to a stronger British imprint on the character of the EU. However, this (upstream) stage of utilitarian supranationalism has been accompanied by efforts in the downstream stage to reduce the domestic electoral salience of the EU. Consequently, the government’s diplomacy shows no sign of garnering additional domestic support for the EU.

Introduction

When the Labour government came to power in the United Kingdom (UK) in 1997, it aimed to pursue a constructive European policy which departed from that of John Major’s outgoing Conservative government. Successive Labour Party manifestoes sought to establish some kind of British ‘leadership’ within the European Union (EU). How does the record look eleven years later? Did New Labour succeed in breaking the UK’s European diplomacy free from its reputation as ‘an awkward partner’? Did the Labour governments succeed in placing an imprint upon the shape and direction of the EU? Have the Labour governments’ policies re-shaped a traditionally unenthusiastic public in its attitudes to the European Union?

In addressing these issues I argue that New Labour’s policy has been characterised by a ‘utilitarian supranationalism’ which has been schizophrenic in nature. By utilitarian supranationalism I mean that, on the one hand, the Labour governments have been able to pursue the national interest and their own political goals through European policy, and have done so unencumbered by the intra-party divisions that prevented such an approach under the Major government. Thus the Blair and Brown governments have exploited the opportunities...
which the EU offers for resolving intractable policy issues: on matters ranging from economic competitiveness through to security and defence policy. On the other hand, this engagement in European Union diplomacy has been bounded by electoral constraints. Thus the domestic strategy of utilitarian supranationalism has been designed to try to depoliticise the European issue in view of the British public’s lukewarm attitudes towards integration. Utilitarian supranationalism therefore has an upstream component (the government’s European diplomacy) and a downstream component (managing the salience of the European issue in domestic electoral politics).

In developing this argument, I will offer two perspectives. First, I offer an overview of the European policy of the Labour governments from 1997 to mid-2008. I then explore certain key policy issues in more detail: first, integration policy; and then day-to-day policy in the economic, foreign and defence, and justice and home affairs domains. I also consider the Labour governments’ record on bilateral relations and their attention to the mechanics of policy-making within Whitehall. The argument presented is that the Labour governments certainly achieved a break from the party’s own policies of 1983; that the Blair government can claim notable achievements in placing a British imprint upon the EU; but that little progress was achieved domestically in establishing public support for this more constructive diplomacy.

Overview

The Labour Party’s conversion to a pro-European policy during the 1990s, under the leadership of Neil Kinnock and then John Smith, has been well charted. The shift from the 1983 policy of withdrawal was explained by a number of factors: the defection of some Labour Party members to form the Social Democratic Party, thereby creating an electoral challenge in alliance with the Liberal Party; the shift of the trade union movement to support for integration; the failure of a socialism ‘in one country’ policy in France under François Mitterrand; the shift to pro-Europeanism on the part of several key figures in the party; and as part of a shift to more pragmatic centrist policies across the whole spectrum. The indirect contribution of the policies of the Thatcher governments should not be under-estimated. Responding to the increased centralisation of British government Labour politicians in the party’s traditional industrial heartlands such as Scotland came to see the European Commission as a potential ally, particularly during the presidency of Jacques Delors.

At a tactical level, the Labour Party exploited European policy opportunistically while in opposition. The divisions on European policy within the Conservative Party during the second Major...
Government (1992–7) provided an open goal for the Labour opposition during the process of ratifying the Maastricht Treaty. The Major government’s relations with EU partners had deteriorated as its own support was challenged by a group of Conservative backbench Eurosceptic MPs. In 1996 it even pursued a policy of non-cooperation with EU partners in response to the export ban on British beef during the BSE crisis. These developments provided Labour MPs with ample opportunity for attacking the Conservative government’s European policy.

Tony Blair’s speeches to the 1994, 1995 and 1996 party conferences had contained noticeably positive messages on Europe. A speech at Chatham House in April 1995 spelt out his argument that Britain’s global influence was dependent on influence in the EU. He also emphasised the need to strengthen a ‘people’s Europe’. The development of Labour’s Business Agenda for Europe, released in May 1996, placed emphasis on the development of the single European market and indicated that the pro-European policy was not following traditional social–democratic concerns. A positive European policy did not become an objective in its own right but was seen as integral to a wide range of other policy goals, such as on economic competitiveness. Indeed, Blair’s commitment to seizing the electoral centre-ground meant that there was considerable caution about fighting the election on the European issue.

This pre-election period defined the pathway of the Labour governments’ European policy to the present. There was a willingness to embrace supranational solutions where they were perceived as in British interests. At the same time, electoral tactics placed clear constraints on this supranationalism. The constraints found clearest expression in Labour’s decision to match the Conservative Party’s existing referendum commitment on the single currency. The schizophrenia of utilitarian supranationalism was exposed in the two manifesto pledges on European policy for an incoming Labour government: to hold a referendum on participation in the single currency; and to lead reform in the EU. Labour was to be electorally defensive at home, while undertaking a more offensive diplomacy abroad. Reflecting a cautious electoral strategy, the commitment to hold a referendum on the single currency was designed to neutralise this issue’s salience in the general election. The commitment to lead reform in part also reflected electoral calculation; British public perceptions of the EU chimed with the need for reform. The manifesto also included a more detailed set of proposed action points (see Box 1), which displayed a striking degree of similarity with the policy goals of the Major Government.

- Rapid completion of the single market: a top priority for the British presidency.
- High priority for enlargement of the European Union to include the countries of central and eastern Europe and Cyprus, and the institutional reforms necessary to make an enlarged Europe work more efficiently.
- Urgent reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. We will seek a thorough overhaul of the Common Fisheries Policy to conserve our fish stocks in the long-term interests of the UK fishing industry.
- Greater openness and democracy in EU institutions with open voting in the Council of Ministers and more effective scrutiny of the Commission by the European Parliament. We have long supported a proportional voting system for election to the European Parliament.
- Retention of the national veto over key matters of national interest, such as taxation, defence and security, immigration, decisions over the budget and treaty changes, while considering the extension of Qualified Majority Voting in limited areas where that is in Britain’s interests.
- Britain to sign the Social Chapter.

New Labour’s first term provided a number of important opportunities to put the manifesto commitments into practice. The first was the EU’s Inter-Governmental Conference (IGC) on treaty reform, which had been underway for over a year and was scheduled for completion barely a month after the general election. Tony Blair had established a working group to prepare party policy for the eventuality of taking over the negotiations from the Major Government. At the end of 1996 the Labour Shadow Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, had appointed a former UK Permanent Representative to the EU, Sir Michael Butler, to tour other EU national capitals to gauge likely reaction to Labour’s proposals. Following convention the Shadow Cabinet was able to meet senior Whitehall officials after parliament had been dissolved for the election. Thus there was good preparation in Whitehall so that Labour could operationalise policy upon election. It was able to accede to the Maastricht Treaty’s Social Chapter, from which the
Major Government had opted out. And it agreed to qualified majority voting (QMV) in the EU’s Council of Ministers on some matters, while defending the veto in other policy areas deemed important to national interests. Coming so soon after the election, the new government did not yet need to adopt a defensive posture towards public opinion.

That posture was much more to the fore, however, with Chancellor Gordon Brown’s parliamentary announcement, on 27 October 1997, of the government’s policy on the Euro. There were three key features to this policy announcement. First, Brown announced that ‘in principle, a successful single currency within a single European market would be of benefit to Europe and to Britain’. Secondly, he announced that there were no constitutional grounds for not joining. Instead, thirdly, the decision would rest on the outcome of five economic tests:

1. Whether there can be sustainable convergence between Britain and the economies of a single currency.
2. Whether there is sufficient flexibility to cope with economic change.
3. The effect on investment.
4. The impact on the financial services industry.
5. Whether it is good for employment.

Together with the existing commitment to hold a referendum on membership, the announcement remains the basis for the government’s policy today. The key determinant of policy was the economic tests. A defining characteristic of the policy announcement was the attempt to de-politicise the issue through a rules-based approach, thereby reducing its electoral salience.

During the first half of 1998 the government took over the presidency of the European Union. It therefore had the task of chairing all meetings of the Council of Ministers, its many subordinate committees as well as any summit meetings, acting on the EU’s behalf in many matters of external relations, acting on the Council’s behalf in inter-institutional relations, and managing the EU’s political agenda. Much of the presidency’s business is either pre-programmed or the product of events over which there is little control but there may be some scope for subtly advancing interests that are of particular national significance. The government announced its objectives on several occasions. The core goals were to: preside over the key decisions to launch the single currency; inaugurate the enlargement process and the requisite internal EU policy reforms; pursue an agenda of policy reform aiming at employability and competitiveness; strengthen EU efforts to combat crime and enhance environmental protection; continue the process of establishing the UK as an influential and constructive partner in the EU; and involve the British people in the presidency.
What light does the British presidency shed on the government’s utilitarian supranationalism? The conduct of the British presidency was evaluated positively. However, the UK was unable to occupy a central position in respect of the EU’s policy agenda. Specifically, the launch of the final stage of European Monetary Union, at a special European Council on 1 May, was an important moment in the EU’s history. However, UK non-participation underlined the government’s difficulties in playing a leading role in the EU. The launch of the enlargement process was more in line with the government’s policy: an objective on which there was bipartisan agreement within the UK. But enlargement negotiations were pretty much pre-programmed, so it was largely the good fortune of the government to host a formal ceremony to launch this EU policy priority. Arguably the most important distinctive contribution came in the context of economic reform and competitiveness. The Chancellor had already made a strong input on this policy area in connection with the Luxembourg employment summit in November 1997. Momentum was accelerated under the UK presidency and these developments were to culminate in the Lisbon Strategy for making the EU more competitive in the global economy.

Tony Blair recognised that the UK had not established itself as a central player in the EU, prompting reflection on policy that was also undertaken by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and his officials in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Two areas quickly emerged as priorities: one substantive and one procedural. The policy priority, which also noted in a think-tank report on British leadership in Europe, was that defence was a policy area where the UK could play a key role. The second conclusion was that renewed emphasis should be placed on utilising bilateral relations as a way of promoting the British approach to the EU. Alongside these steps a number of reforms were introduced within Whitehall with a view to boosting strategic capacity on European policy-making.

These reflections on policy led to what was arguably the most pro-active upstream period of the Labour governments’ utilitarian supranationalism. The December 1998 Anglo-French initiative at St. Malo on giving the EU a stronger defence identity set the agenda for what became the European Security and Defence Policy. A further instance of utilitarian supranationalism culminated in the agreement in March 2000 at the Lisbon European Council on a strategy designed to transform Europe into the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. These initiatives placed significant British imprints on the EU. However, the second Blair government (2001–5) experienced much more difficulty in maintaining the constructive policy with EU partners.

In its 25 ‘steps to a better Britain’ the 2001 Labour manifesto included one explicit European policy goal: to ‘lead economic reform in Europe’. The manifesto itself tackled the EU in a positive manner,
contrasting Labour’s constructive policy with the Conservatives’ Euro-sceptic stance, which it saw as bad for British interests. In the accompanying text, Labour presented the more detailed case for making the EU competitive, supporting enlargement, developing a European Union defence capability for those cases where NATO decides not to take action, and presenting its preferences in the debate on institutional reform.

The principal source of difficulty for the second Labour Government’s European policy derived from how it reacted to international circumstances. Specifically, Tony Blair’s support for key aspects of President George W. Bush’s foreign policy opened up a variant of long-standing differences within the EU between ‘Atlanticists’ and ‘Gaullists’. In the words of US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, the new divide was between ‘old Europe’ and ‘new Europe’, where the UK, key accession states and other allies of US policy were in the latter group, whereas France and Germany were prominent in the former. These divisions derived from the medium-term response to the 11 September 2001 terror attacks in the USA. Initial unanimous condemnation by the EU gave way over the longer term. The divisions widened over whether to support Bush’s interpretation of United Nations resolutions and take military action to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein. The Blair Government found its efforts to act as a bridge between the USA and the EU impossible to sustain. It had to take sides and on Iraq chose that of President Bush.

The Iraq invasion (2003), the consequent division within the EU and the worsening of relations with France and Germany had two repercussions for the pursuit of utilitarian supranationalism. First, repercussions from the Iraq issue impacted adversely on the government’s efforts to shape the EU’s agenda. Bilateral relations with Germany and France were damaged. Secondly, the Blair Government’s domestic popularity gradually declined and that made it more defensive on areas of European policy where it realised that a predominantly Euro-sceptic press could create further problems for it in public opinion. Hence, while the government pressed ahead in the EU with its economic reform agenda, enlargement, defence and so on, these efforts were overshadowed by Iraq.

In the meantime Chancellor Gordon Brown announced on 9 June 2003 the outcome of the analysis of the UK’s readiness to join the Euro. After comprehensive analysis by the Treasury the conclusion was reached that only one of the tests was clearly met—that relating to whether Euro-membership would be good for UK financial services. While some progress was noted on the sustainable convergence and flexibility tests, it was deemed insufficient although key to meeting the remaining tests. This outcome has had the effect of taking this controversial issue off the Labour governments’ European policy agenda.
The same electoral tactic as that taken on the single currency in the 1997 manifesto was adopted by Tony Blair in April 2004 when he decided the government would put the EU’s forthcoming Constitutional Treaty to approval by referendum. He therefore sought to neutralise the Treaty as an issue in the June 2004 European elections and the UK general election (May 2005). Blair was taking a big gamble on being able to construct a domestic consensus from the fruits of his government’s constructive European policy but he certainly reduced the electoral salience of the Constitutional Treaty ahead of the 2005 general election.

Four key issues were highlighted in the 2005 manifesto. The first was to put approval of the Constitutional Treaty (a ‘good treaty for Britain and for the new Europe’) to a referendum. The second goal was to promote economic reform in Europe as part of a range of issues highlighted for the 2005 UK presidency of the EU. They included reducing regulation, progress in the Doha Round, promoting EU membership for Turkey, the Balkans and other Eastern Europe states, and improving the focus of EU aid to developing countries. Thirdly, the manifesto promised further leadership in European defence cooperation. Finally, it promised continuation of the ‘common sense’ policy on the Euro, that is, the need to meet the chancellor’s five tests, a positive vote in Parliament, and finally a referendum. Once again we find a balance between the external diplomatic and internal electoral agenda-management components of utilitarian supranationalism.

At the general election on 5 May 2005 Tony Blair’s government was re-elected with a much reduced parliamentary majority of 65. The more modest electoral performance increased concerns within the Labour Party that Blair himself was no longer an electoral asset, not least because of the unpopularity of the Iraq war. Eventually in September 2006 Blair announced that he would step down within 12 months. Gordon Brown succeeded him as prime minister on 27 June 2007.

The EU’s efforts at constitutional reform have been an intermittent concern for the third-term governments of Blair and Brown, starting with the French and Dutch rejections of the Constitutional Treaty in May/June 2005. At the EU’s June 2005 summit government heads decided to have a two-year pause for reflection on the Treaty. One of Tony Blair’s last EU functions was to attend a European Council in June 2007 at the end of this period of reflection. The German presidency of the EU had consulted the other member governments and advanced specific proposals for a way forward. Some hard bargaining was needed to ensure that subsequent negotiation (of what became the Lisbon Treaty) did not challenge the so-called ‘red-line’ positions, where the UK did not wish to cede power to the EU level. Prime Minister Brown sought concessions in order to justify a posture for domestic political consumption, namely that this was a more modest...
Treaty that did not necessitate a referendum. While this approach ultimately proved to be successful in that the government secured parliamentary passage of the legislation on 19 June 2008, the Lisbon Treaty was placed in question by the Irish electorate’s vote to reject it in its referendum on 12 June.26

Tony Blair’s government had one further opportunity to pursue its utilitarian supranationalism in EU arenas during his truncated third term. It came with the British presidency of the EU in the second half of 2005. Immediately ahead of the presidency, Blair made a major speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 23 June 2005.27 He sought in the aftermath of the two referendum results on the Constitutional Treaty to offer a new vision for the EU, calling for reform to its economic and social policies to make it more relevant to future global challenges. He criticised the still-prominent role of agriculture in the EU budget and questioned whether the constitutional debate had brought Europe closer to the people, as had been the intention. The speech was characteristically lucid and powerful but it arguably raised the stakes for the UK presidency.

The government’s objectives during its presidency (July–December 2005) were on securing economic and social reform (including the Services Directive and the Working Time Directive), agreement on the financial perspectives for the period 2007–13, reform of the sugar market, continuation of enlargement, and strengthening Europe’s role in the world including through combating poverty in Africa and elsewhere.28 Its performance was arguably less successful than in 1998, with agreement secured on opening Turkish and Croatian accession negotiations and reform of the sugar market. On aid the UK presidency—with both Blair and Brown personally engaged—succeeded in securing stronger commitments both from the EU and from the G-8 by virtue of holding the presidencies of both organisations simultaneously. Agreement was reached on the important EU financial perspectives for 2007–13 (albeit with German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s assistance in brokering a deal). The government had to agree to a decline in its budget rebate, given the country’s improved relative wealth in the enlarged EU compared to when originally negotiated by Mrs Thatcher in 1984. The Hampton Court informal summit on the EU’s economic competitiveness was not a success and key items of legislation were not agreed during the presidency.29 The 7 July 2005 terrorist bomb attacks in London undoubtedly distracted the early period of the UK presidency.

Gordon Brown’s first year as prime minister has seen a continuation of utilitarian supranationalism, but with four differences. First, he is a different kind of politician from his predecessor. He is less at ease at summit meetings than Blair. That much had been evident while he was Chancellor. Compared to his Conservative predecessor, Kenneth Clarke, he was less at ease in the Council of Ministers and more likely
to delegate attendance to another member of the Treasury ministerial team. Secondly, while initially perceived as a pro-European member of the New Labour team, this position was not borne out in practice. His position on the single currency cooled. He looked to the United States for policy ideas. His lecturing of fellow EU finance ministers on their need for economic reforms was seen as antagonising opponents of Anglo-Saxon economic policy in the EU. His hostility to increasing the size of the EU budget and insistence on retaining unanimous voting on tax harmonisation further underlined the impression that he was likely to be less constructive in his European policy than his predecessor. Thirdly, and doubtless a product of his lengthy wait for the premiership and of Labour’s smaller third-term parliamentary majority, he has arguably been more concerned than Blair at managing the electoral salience of the European issue. Finally, he has shown a willingness to leave more of European policy to his Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, thus stepping back from the presidentialisation of policy under Blair.

In late-October 2007 Brown and Foreign Secretary David Miliband published a pamphlet, Global Europe, which set out the following priorities: promoting productivity and competitiveness; a modern European social dimension; external economic openness; reforming the EU budget; strengthening the EU’s ‘Global Approach to Migration’; tackling climate change and energy security; addressing terrorism and organised crime; creating stability in Europe’s neighbourhood and beyond; and tackling global poverty. David Miliband echoed this constructive approach in a speech in Bruges in November, although Brown was reported as having toned down some of the content. This agenda showed potential to chime with the priorities of German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. In the event Gordon Brown’s main démarche to advance a positive agenda came with the state visit in March 2008 by the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy.

Constitutive politics: institutional reform and enlargement

Traditionally, British governments had supported enlargements but opposed, or at best dragged their feet on, institutional reform. The explanation for this posture lay in their opposition to a highly supranational EU. The shift under the Blair governments was to make a constructive contribution to institutional debates, although with an eye on the sustainability of its diplomacy in domestic electoral terms. This constructive period endured from May 1997 until the later stages of the Convention on the Future of Europe in 2003. During the brief period of negotiating treaty reform between the 1997 election and the Amsterdam Treaty, for example, the Labour Government adopted a nuanced approach by not opposing all moves to greater provision for QMV in the Council. In those areas where the UK wanted policy
reform it advocated QMV and secured change. But it remained implacably opposed to its introduction in areas such as taxation.

By the 2000 IGC a much more active contribution was being made to the reform debate. In part this was doubtless facilitated by the government’s greater openness to domestic constitutional reform: witness devolution to Scotland and Wales, reform of the House of Lords, the shift to proportional representation in elections to the European Parliament and to the devolved assemblies, and the incorporation of the Council of Europe’s Convention on Human Rights. Hence, apart from so-called ‘red lines’ on QMV, notably again on any extension in taxation, the UK government was arguably for the first time in any IGC not at the heart of the major contentious issues that had to be resolved at the Nice European Council. There was one exception. In parallel to the IGC a convention was set up to draft a Charter of Fundamental Rights. The UK played an active role in this process but ultimately blocked giving the Charter legal status.

Before the Nice Treaty had been ratified, and because its results had not really addressed all the challenges posed by the large forthcoming enlargement, a new round of constitutional reform got under way. The ambition was high: to draw up a constitution for the EU. For the first time the centrepiece of the process was not an IGC composed of government representatives but the ‘convention method’. To be sure, the European Convention, held from February 2002 to July 2003, included a representative of the government, namely the Minister for Europe, Peter Hain. But there were other UK members: MPs and Members of the European Parliament from across the political spectrum. The UK government’s position, as articulated by the Prime Minister, Jack Straw and Peter Hain, followed the pattern pursued at Amsterdam and Nice. Institutional/constitutional reform was not seen as an end in itself but as a vehicle for European economic prosperity and for action in other domains where the EU, by reason of scale, was better placed to deliver outcomes. In short, the government practised utilitarian supranationalism.

The British vision for the EU’s institutions was confederal rather than federal; governments should retain key decisional powers (through the Council of Ministers) rather than the Commission, Courts or European Parliament gaining major new powers. The government was prepared to move to QMV where it was in the UK’s interest, and asylum and immigration had now moved into this category. Tony Blair advocated a second parliamentary chamber, comprising representatives from the national parliaments, but this became an early casualty in discussions. During 2003, as Blair’s domestic popularity declined, the government’s posture in the Convention became more cautious. The downstream dimension of utilitarian Europeanism took on greater importance as the print media re-awakened popular concerns about the EU. Although Blair’s government was not unhappy with the outcome...
of the Convention, its defensive posture on ‘red lines’ regarding QMV and other issues increasingly came to the fore. As noted above, Blair announced in April 2004 that there would be a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty. This promise placed his successor under pressure once the less ambitious Lisbon Treaty emerged from re-opened negotiations from June to October 2007. Brown reportedly had been an advocate of the referendum choice made back in 2004.  

The Labour governments supported EU enlargement in principle and practice, conscious that a wider EU was likely to be less intrusive for the UK. Tony Blair made one of his keynote speeches on European policy at the Warsaw Stock Exchange in 2000, seeking to build links with an important applicant state ahead of its eventual accession (in May 2004).  

Economic policy

As already seen, the Labour governments have advocated that the EU should embrace a reform agenda such that it creates new jobs and competes on skill levels in a rapidly changing global economy. Blair actively sought out allies across the EU in order to promote this agenda, including centre-right politicians like the Spanish Prime Minister, Mr Aznar, and his Italian counterpart, Mr Berlusconi.  

The most obvious achievement in this policy area was the strategy agreed to at the Lisbon European Council in March 2000. The strategy’s overall approach is to set headline goals while deploying relatively soft policy instruments to achieve them. The so-called Open Method of Coordination avoids the harmonised, Commission-led approach of the single market and the CAP. Its use of benchmarking and peer review is in keeping with Britain’s conception of the EU. However, the real test of this policy lies less in getting the EU to sign up to structural reforms than in ensuring that they actually occur. The voluntary approach of the OMC means that it is much easier for slippage to occur in achieving results, notably to make the EU ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010’.

The Lisbon Agenda is wide-ranging, encompassing diverse strands: from research and development, entrepreneurship, industrial competitiveness through to employment participation rates of women and older people. Progress is reviewed at each spring’s European Council session, but the overall strategy was
subjected to a mid-term evaluation in 2004 by a High Level Group chaired by the former Dutch Prime Minister, Wim Kok. It concluded that progress had been disappointing over the first five years. Commission President José Manuel Barroso, whose candidacy was supported by Tony Blair, has given primacy to achieving the Lisbon Agenda’s goals. In Spring 2005 the goals were rationalised and re-focused around ‘Growth and Jobs’. Labour’s promotion of the economic reform agenda at EU level is a good illustration of its utilitarian Europeanism, for it was influential in the development of the Lisbon Agenda, while the resultant policy programme entails little than can be exploited by domestic political opponents to achieve electoral advantage.

Foreign and defence policy

The Labour Government’s policy in this domain has been both reactive and pro-active. Much of British foreign policy is now situated within an EU context, so an ongoing set of negotiations with EU partners has occurred on a range of foreign policy actions and démarches: from assuring civil and political stability in Kosovo to concerns at the nuclear status of Iran and North Korea. Alongside this largely reactive policy, in the sense of responding to international events, government has also sought to make a strategic contribution to the EU’s capacity, namely through strengthening its security and defence capability.

In the negotiations leading up to the Amsterdam Treaty, the Blair government was content to continue the orthodoxy of giving primacy to NATO and ascribing little if any role to the EU. However, the government had shifted, by the time of the St. Malo summit in December 1998, to a position which regarded a credible European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) as compatible with—if not indispensable to—a strengthened Alliance. Jolyon Howorth termed this shift a ‘revolution in military affairs’. Anne Deighton described St. Malo as ‘...the greatest change that New Labour has made in EU policy’. Underlying this policy change were various conclusions drawn from experience in the Balkans. One was that the EU could not achieve the tasks that it had already set itself—notably the ‘Petersberg’ peacekeeping or humanitarian missions—without American commitment. Another conclusion concerned the Americans’ reluctance to become involved on the ground during the Kosovo crisis of 1999, and the realisation that some form of Rapid Reaction Force was needed to support EU foreign policy.

Consequently, the Blair government was a major protagonist of achieving EU-level agreement to achieve such objectives. The pursuit of this initiative in tandem with France brought together the two key military powers in the EU. The policy was formalised at the European Council at Helsinki in December 1999. It included, to quote the communiqué, a commitment to facilitate the capacity by 2003 ‘... to deploy within 60 days and sustain for at least 1 year military forces of up to 50,000-60,000 persons capable of the full range of Petersberg
The need to have suitable command and intelligence capacity went with this goal. Strengthening such capacity has absorbed considerable time since Helsinki, with the government playing a key role in driving forward the objectives. Two specific illustrations of UK initiatives are the creation of a European Defence Agency and the EU Battlegroups initiative: both designed to concretise an EU defence capability. The policy requires a delicate balancing act: between the different perspectives on US-EU relations on the part of the UK and France; between these two states and more neutralist members, such as Ireland or Austria; and—not least—with a domestic tabloid press that is opposed to anything resembling a European army. Tony Blair himself played an important personal role in spearheading this initiative. Bilateral defence cooperation, as well as strengthening the ESDP, were central components of the agreements reached between Gordon Brown and President Sarkozy at the March 2008 summit.

The Labour government sought to place a different emphasis upon its foreign policy from its Conservative predecessor. It stressed three areas: adopting an ethical approach to policy (especially under Foreign Secretary Robin Cook 1997–2001), humanitarian intervention and development policy. Labour, like its predecessor governments, adhered to the Anglo-American special relationship, with Blair seeing the UK as a bridge between the United States and the EU.

The ethical approach to foreign policy under Cook found resonance in the EU: in the latter’s call for the creation of an International Criminal Court, in pressing for the banning of land mines and with agreement on an EU Arms Code of Conduct. In 1999 Tony Blair spoke in Chicago of a new ‘doctrine of the international community’, thereby qualifying the classical rule of non-interference. This new doctrine would justify action against genocide, dealing with massive flows of refugees, and dealing with regimes based on minority rule. What is interesting is that this aspect of UK foreign policy was not always pursued through the EU, as illustrated by the intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000. In 2003, by contrast, the EU deployed troops in the Congo on a humanitarian mission. The Chicago speech had doubtless been influenced by experience in the Balkans, including Kosovo, where Blair played a key role in persuading the US Administration to take a part in the action. The government’s decision to combine its ethical and humanitarian intervention policy principles in supporting US action against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq proved to be a crucial one for its second term in power. For major EU partners, notably France and Germany, there were concerns that the ‘United Nations route’ should be pursued to its logical conclusion, questions as to whether there was in fact evidence of WMD and whether the US Administration’s assertions of links between the Iraqi regime and Al-Qaeda were accurate. The result was a crucial division within the EU. The attempt to maintain the UK’s role as a bridge
between the UK and the EU proved highly problematic. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that the Blair and Brown governments have aligned with EU partners, and sometimes against the US, on a range of other issues, such as the Palestinian problem, nuclear concerns in North Korea and Iran, the Kyoto commitment on reducing greenhouse gases and trade talks.

In development policy there has been a gathering effort to write off Third World debt, combat global poverty and the problems of Africa in particular. This initiative started in Labour’s first term under Clare Short as Secretary of State for International Development. More recently it was championed by Gordon Brown (as chancellor and prime minister) and Tony Blair. The UK’s presidencies of both the G8 group of leading industrialised countries and of the EU during 2005 allowed the Labour government to use its agenda-setting options in both arenas so as to secure international commitments on debt relief. Vigilance continues to be needed to ensure delivery on the promises made at the G8 summit in Gleneagles, held in July 2005. At the same time as pursuing this policy in global arenas, however, the Labour government has been critical of the efficiency of the EU’s own development policy and has pressed for reforms.54 Richard Manning has argued that the results of these steps ‘showed that the UK could work effectively with an EU-wide agenda in the development arena’.55

Historically, the UK’s record in following a common European foreign policy line has been mixed; examples such as support for President Reagan’s bombing of Libya or opposition to sanctions against apartheid South Africa were just two of these exceptions. The Labour government’s record has broadly been one of alignment with the EU. But the divisions within the EU over Iraq obscured this development. And, while the UK was not isolated, owing to support from Spain (until 2004), Italy and accession states, it was the Blair government which was regarded by partners in ‘old Europe’ as the cause of the divisions in the EU. It is on the Iraq intervention where encapsulating Labour’s policy as utilitarian supranationalism becomes problematic. The primacy accorded to the transatlantic relationship took precedence over a utilitarian supranationalist approach.

**Justice and home affairs**

The Labour Government’s record on Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) has also witnessed a change in position, albeit not of the same magnitude as on defence. This change of policy is entirely consistent with utilitarian supranationalism. It departs from the efforts of the Major government to limit the development of JHA and takes a more calculating approach to the value of joint approaches. Furthermore, where joint approaches have been undertaken, they have often been out of view so as to avoid domestic opponents making electorally salient charges about giving up sovereignty to the EU.
The architecture of JHA policy is highly complex, characterised by opt-outs, opt-ins, a general lack of transparency and the use of arenas other than the EU. JHA was formally introduced by the Maastricht Treaty, implemented in November 1993. However, it was then based on unanimous decision-making and the Conservative government was unenthusiastic about this policy area. In the meantime a smaller group of EU member states had been pursuing closer cooperation through the Schengen Agreement. The 1997 Amsterdam Treaty incorporated the Schengen arrangements into the EU and other member states were keen on the EU developing an ‘area of freedom, justice and security’. However, the Labour government retained its predecessor’s commitment to maintaining border controls (unlike in the Schengen countries). Indicative of the complexity in this policy area was the fact that the government opted out of the totality of Schengen provisions that were absorbed into the EU at this time, while reserving the possibility to opt into individual measures—but only if all member states unanimously agreed to this.56 Over the period since the Amsterdam Treaty asylum, frontier and immigration issues have become more integrated into normal EU business. By contrast, police and judicial cooperation have remained more intergovernmental in character.57

The shift of policy under Labour and its first Home Secretary, Jack Straw, was to adopt a pragmatic approach and exercise the opt-in facility where it saw benefits in the national interest. For example, at a Council of JHA Ministers on 12 March 1999 Home Secretary Jack Straw announced that the UK wished to opt into the Schengen Information System for sharing intelligence. However, this step was not announced in the House of Commons and only came to light as a result of subsequent parliamentary questions.58 In October 1999 a special summit was held on JHA matters in Tampere, and the British government was active in preparing for this meeting. It issued a joint paper with its French and German counterparts on the future of EU asylum and immigration policy. In April 2000 the UK joined the Schengen Agreement’s provisions on police and justice cooperation. Further pragmatic steps have been made by the government, but the policy area lacks transparency and the Labour government seems to have hidden behind this characteristic as a way of keeping tabloid interest away from emergent common approaches to issues such as immigration and asylum. Nonetheless, by 2002 the government was pursuing a European approach to asylum policy and has pushed for strengthened external borders on several occasions. In most areas of asylum, immigration and civil law policy, qualified majority voting has been introduced from 2003 to 2005.59 The UK has opted into ‘most civil law measures, all asylum measures . . . and most measures concerning illegal migration. But they have opted out of most measures concerning legal migration or visas and border controls’.60
In judicial cooperation the 11 September attacks in 2001 provided momentum and the Labour government supported the introduction of a European-wide arrest warrant in addition to its established preference for mutual recognition of legal systems in securing arrest warrants and extradition and generally expediting justice. Following the July 2005 bombings in London, the Labour government was a major advocate of strengthened counter-terrorism measures.

The Labour Government has pursued a very nuanced policy in JHA policy, even agreeing to QMV on some issues. It is not an ‘opt-out’ state any longer, although it had to resort to this approach in the final stages of negotiating the Lisbon Treaty. Where it has pursued a constructive policy, it has nevertheless been very defensive about it in public (in response to concerns of the print media and aware of potential electoral salience). In some areas of JHA policy the G6, comprising the largest member states and including the UK, acts as an agenda-setter for EU policy as a whole. Few of these developments have been detectable for the public at large. The government’s covert approach has been criticised by the House of Lords. It is consistent with the utilitarian supranationalist interpretation.

Bilateral relations and European policy strategy

The UK has never had a bilateral relationship within the EU to compare with the long-standing Franco-German tandem that has provided so much of the momentum on European integration since the 1950s. Indeed, when Labour came to power the UK was rather isolated in the EU. During and following the 1998 presidency bilateral relations were reviewed, and the conclusion was reached that issue-based relationships were more feasible. But there were also ambitions over the longer term to pursue a more strategic approach to alliance-building. In the early period following the post-presidency review, the Labour government established league tables in order to see which ministries had performed well on undertaking bilateral visits. In fact, the pattern of bilateralism that followed has been issue-based in nature.

The Anglo-French St. Malo initiative was the bilateral initiative that made the biggest impact upon the EU’s development. By contrast, the attempt to form a ‘Third Way’ link with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was ultimately unsuccessful. In June 1999, ahead of elections to the European Parliament, a joint paper by the two government heads—‘Europe: The Third Way/Die Neue Mitte’—had suggested a way forward for European social democracy. However, it received mixed reaction elsewhere in the EU. Moreover, it caused controversy within the German Social Democratic Party and was dropped after domestic electoral setbacks. It is notable that Blair’s bilateral relationships have tended to be with politicians of the centre-right; thus with President Jacques Chirac in France, with José-Maria Aznar in Spain and Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. The last two were allies in joining in the
military action against Iraq but also acted as supporters of economic reform measures. Efforts to develop better relations with Poland had mixed results and were not helped by the government’s efforts to limit the size of the EU budget in the negotiations on the 2007–13 financial perspectives: a stance which put it at odds with the states which had recently acceded.

Overall, the stress upon multiple bilateralism has been a sensible complement to conventional Brussels diplomacy in pursuing a utilitarian supranationalist policy towards the EU. With enlargement of the EU to 25 states in May 2004 and to 27 in 2007, the centrality of the traditional Franco-German motor of EU integration is in question. The emphasis upon issue-based bilateralism may be judged as especially attuned to the current EU. However, \textit{ad hoc} bilateralism can be highly contingent, as shown by the decline in relations with Spain after Aznar’s defeat in 2004.

One final area of reform undertaken under the Labour government concerns the very machinery that facilitates the conduct of European policy. Additional resources and other reforms were targeted at underpinning the constructive European policy. The Cabinet Office European Secretariat was strengthened in staff numbers. With the appointment of Sir Stephen Wall as its head in 2000 this post was elevated to permanent secretary level and his office was moved into No. 10 Downing St. itself. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) integrated its EU policy and bilateral relations units into one large directorate: a measure which recognised the difficulty in distinguishing between these different aspects of European diplomacy. The creation of a public diplomacy section in the FCO’s EU Directorate suggested preparation for a forthcoming referendum on joining the euro. The overall impact has been of facilitating a constructive European policy with partner states while making negligible impact upon public perception of the EU within Britain. One part of the government appeared less than fully involved in this constructive policy: the Treasury.

It is striking, then, that Gordon Brown appointed Jon Cunliffe, formerly second permanent secretary in the Treasury as his ‘Head of the European Secretariat and International Economics and EU Advisor to the Prime Minister’. The inclusion of the international economics responsibility in this position is a novelty and presumably results from the way in which the former chancellor wishes to prioritise economic diplomacy as well as from having established good working relations with Cunliffe in the Treasury. The COES itself now also includes international economic issues in its remit. The Blair government’s efforts in 1998 to improve bilateralism and strategic capacity—known as the ‘step change’ initiative—subsided in his later period in office and it is not yet clear whether Gordon Brown’s changes to the machinery of government might jeopardise Whitehall’s resources for the pro-active pursuit of utilitarian supranationalism.
Evaluation: new European policy?

What judgement can be reached on 11 years of New Labour’s European policy? As the basis for analysis I use the party’s manifesto and other goals announced by Labour ministers.

Two preliminary observations are necessary. First, New Labour’s European policy was in large part about differentiating itself from its own policies prior to the modernisation under John Smith and Tony Blair. But it was also about bringing a change to the deterioration of relations with EU partners under the second Major government (1992–7). New Labour’s professed goals in fact contained many that may be considered bipartisan: completion of the single market, enlargement, reform of the CAP and retention of the veto over matters of national interest. However, there was a clear break from the Major government. The Blair and Brown governments have been able to pursue a European diplomacy reflecting the national interest as well as their own political objectives. Seldom in the period of UK membership of the EU could a government pursue such a utilitarian approach to policy owing to intra-party division or a small parliamentary majority. However, support for European solutions was not unconditional; it was mindful of British public opinion being among the most Euro-sceptic of all the member states. As Kai Oppermann has argued, Labour reduced the electoral salience of European policy through a four-fold strategy. It sought to contrast its policies with the Conservative opposition in terms of its greater competence for defending the UK’s interests; it sought to de-politicise thorny issues (e.g. through the five economic tests on the single currency); it isolated the most problematic issues from parliamentary politics by promising a referendum (single currency, Constitutional Treaty); and it used delaying tactics (the single currency again). Every effort was made to ensure European policy did not put at risk the parliamentary majority that was needed for Labour’s wider governing objectives.

New Labour’s strategy of utilitarian supranationalism was already evident from the 1997 manifesto, with its commitment to ‘lead reform’ in the EU, while isolating the single currency from the election campaign through the promise of a referendum. The first term of the Blair government was the most successful, assisted by the stark contrast with the troubled European diplomacy of the second Major government. Progress was achieved on all the detailed 1997 manifesto commitments (see Box 1) with the exception of the ‘thorough overhaul of the Common Fisheries policy’. The ESDP and the Lisbon Agenda illustrated the constructive diplomacy and success at placing a British imprint on the EU. Relations with EU partners were cordial despite initial concerns that Blair was simply John Major with a smile. Two rounds of treaty reform (Amsterdam and Nice) were concluded with no major isolation of the Blair government. This was a distinct contrast...
to the record of the Major government’s obstructionism in the 1996/7
IGC ahead of the Amsterdam Treaty, not to mention his government’s
opt-outs of the Maastricht Treaty on social policy and monetary union.

The second term saw modest successes. However, the Iraq war
revealed that Atlantic solutions may trump European ones on critical
issues of world politics. The consequently more fractious relations with
key partner states, such as France and Germany, impacted on British
European diplomacy on other issues. It was difficult to identify any
major achievement on the main manifesto commitment of leading
economic reform in the EU. Instead it was a matter of trying to
advance the Lisbon Strategy and relevant legislation on the single
market and competitiveness in day-to-day EU politics. The 2003 rec-
ommendation against joining the Euro was an important step in New
Labour’s European policy, deferring the issue into the future. Blair’s
declining popularity led gradually to greater caution on what became

The modest objectives of the 2005 manifesto encountered some
success but that on putting the Constitutional Treaty to a referendum
proved to be problematic. The commitment proved to be a poisoned
chalice for Gordon Brown’s government. His diplomatic efforts to
emphasise the difference between the Lisbon Treaty and the
Constitutional Treaty led some to regard Brown’s diplomacy as putting
the UK back on the margins of the EU. After Blair’s governments
had been effective at putting their views across: first in the Convention,
then in the run-up to the Constitutional Treaty, the Brown government
then demanded a further round of concessions: something which
rankled with negotiating partners.

Overall, there has been reasonable achievement of New Labour’s
manifesto objectives in its European policy. The UK has been much
less isolated in the EU. The EU itself has changed shape and is more in
line with British goals, notably with its more neo-liberal orientation, its
wider membership and with the addition of the Open Method of
Co-ordination to its policy instruments. The Lisbon Treaty itself has a
firm British imprint, should it be implemented.

Another development that is worth noting is that the UK has come
closer to European patterns of governance under New Labour, although
mainly as a result of developments that did not derive explicitly from
European policy. Devolution has brought the UK closer to the multi-
levelled patterns of government on the continent. Among other develop-
ments have been greater practice of proportional representation
(European elections, devolved assemblies); independence for the Bank
of England; and incorporation of the European Convention on
Human Rights. The implementation of the structural funds in the UK
became more partnership-based—as on the continent—under Labour.

Competition and environmental policies are two which have not been
considered in this paper but have moved closer to continental practice.\textsuperscript{74}

The real area of weakness for Labour, however, has been in respect of building any domestic consensus behind its European policy. Tony Blair’s own efforts to change domestic public opinion’s perception of the benefits of European integration were not sustained and not successful. A reluctance to confront the print media, which is predominantly hostile to integration, was doubtless an important explanation.\textsuperscript{75} Economic competitiveness, climate change, internal security, combating global poverty: these and other objectives of the government require active complementary action by the EU. Labour’s efforts to explain this situation to the electorate have been very weak, as reflected in Eurobarometer data. In spring 1997 just 36 per cent of respondents in the UK considered membership of the EU to be a good thing, while 26 per cent considered it a bad thing. In autumn 2007 the same questions delivered answers of 34 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively, with the last figure placing the UK in last position in the EU.\textsuperscript{76} An alternative interpretation of this failure to garner public support for the EU is to turn the argument on its head. For Kai Oppermann the main policy legacy of New Labour over the course of its decade in office may have been to transform the European policy to a ‘low-salience issue’.\textsuperscript{77}

In a speech in Aachen in summer 1999 Tony Blair remarked that, ‘I have a bold aim . . . That over the next few years Britain resolves once and for all its ambivalence towards Europe. I want to end the uncertainty, the lack of confidence, the Europhobia’.\textsuperscript{78} In its utilitarian supranationalism towards the EU the Labour governments largely proved able to reconcile national interests with European policy. However, and here I enter the realm of speculation, if Labour proves to have secured an \textit{enduring} reduction in the electoral salience of European policy as well a more constructive diplomacy, might it not have transformed the UK into a normal, less awkward member state and to have fulfilled Tony Blair’s personal aspirations as well?

\textsuperscript{1} I thank the anonymous referees as well as Ian Bache, Hussein Kassim, Neill Nugent, Roderick Parkes and Willie Paterson for their advice. I am also grateful for the comments received at presentations of earlier versions of this paper at the Université de Montréal, the Universität Trier and the University of Sheffield. The interview material was gathered as part of a separate book project with Martin Burch, to whom I am also grateful: S. Bulmer and M. Burch, \textit{The Europeanisation of Whitehall: UK Central Government and the European Union}, Manchester University Press, 2009. The paper was drafted while a visiting scholar at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin and on research leave from the University of Sheffield. I acknowledge the support of both institutions.

\textsuperscript{2} The reference here is to the influential terminology of Stephen George’s study, \textit{An Awkward Partner: Britain in the European Community}, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, 1994.

\textsuperscript{3} In this article I use the term supranationalism as meaning the pursuit of policy solutions \textit{at a level above the nation state}. The term supranationalism is used differently and more precisely in the analysis of EU politics as denoting institutional configurations where the European Commission, Parliament and Court of Justice have important powers over policy. In this article supranationalism is used to denote the use of the EU as an arena, regardless of the institutional power balance at that level, be it supranational or intergovernmental.


Interview, Cabinet Office, 15 July 1997.


The report is C. Grant, Can Britain lead in Europe?, Centre for European Reform, 1998.


For the full explanation of how the decision to call a referendum came about, see A. Seldon, P. Snowdon and D. Collings, Blair Unbound, Simon & Schuster, 2007, pp. 263–9.

For statistical data on the reduced salience, see Oppermann, ‘The Blair Government and Europe’, figure 4, p. 206.


At the end of June 2008 the UK’s formal ratification of the Lisbon Treaty had not taken place owing to litigation in the High Court brought by Stuart Wheeler. Although this case was lost, an appeal was still pending as this article was finalised.


As a Treasury official put it at interview: ‘he is not comfortable with the European process, he is not comfortable with his colleagues, he doesn’t like the cosying up that needed to be done and all that sort of thing, he loathes travelling’. Interview Treasury, 21 July 1998.


33 For the speech itself, see the provisional text at: http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&cc=Page&cid=1007029391647&ca=KArticle&aid=1194715986447, 5 February 2008; for the account of it being toned down, see G. Parker and L. Dixon, ‘Miliband Declares Death of EU-Superstate’ Financial Times, 16 November 2007.


36 For the final text, see Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union, Official Journal C 364,18 December 2000, pp. 1–22.


39 Seldon, Snowdon and Collings, Blair Unbound, p. 711.


42 For the text of Blair’s speech, see http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page1297.asp, 4 February 2008.
58 Interview, parliamentary clerk, 15 April 1999.
60 Pears, ‘British and Irish’, p. 4.
62 For more on this, see J. Smith and M. Tsatsas, The New Bilateralism: the UK’s Bilateral Relations within the EU, RIIA, 2002.
63 See Bulmer and Burch, ‘The Europeanisation of UK Government’.
65 See Bulmer and Burch, ‘The Europeanisation’; also Smith, ‘A Missed Opportunity?’
66 In 2004 Wall was replaced by Kim Darroch in this position. Sir Stephen Wall has published an interpretation of the Blair government’s European policy as part of a wider study: S. Wall, A Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair, Oxford University Press, 2008, see Chapter 8, entitled ‘“A New Dawn has Broken has it Not?” New Labour and the European Union’, pp. 161–84.
67 The No 10 website gives the European part of his portfolio an even lower profile by designating his role in the PM’s Office as ‘Head of International Economic Affairs, Europe and G8 Sherpa’, see http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/page12.asp, 15 October 2007.
69 On the step change initiative, see Bulmer and Blair, ‘The Europeanisation’.
71 For example, in the analysis of the informal Lisbon summit by Elmar Brok MEP (and representative of the European Parliament in the IGC on the new treaty), lunchtime seminar, Institut für Europäische Politik, 22 October 2007, Berlin.
72 See Bulmer and Burch, ‘The Europeanisation’, p. 862.
77 Oppermann, ‘The Blair Government and Europe’, p. 177. Oppermann’s article presents convincing data to support this finding.