Chapter 7

CONCLUSIONS

The Labour Party's attitude towards European Unity (particularly since mid-1960s) has been swinging from one extreme of outright opposition to the other of rather reluctant conversion. Perhaps, this evolutionary pattern could best be explained in relation to five specific factors, such as the socialist ideology, Commonwealth, Atlanticism, increasing economic strength of the EEC itself; and the party consensus. The impact of all these factors has neither been equal nor simultaneous.

The early years of the post-war period were the years of the socialist experiment by the Labour Party. Succeding to a war-ravaged economy the Labour Party was faced with a challenging task of not merely economic recovery, but also of building a new society based on socialist ideology. In the face of such a critical economic and political conjuncture, the call to unite the nations of Western Europe economically and politically looked excessively idealistic and impractical. Further, on the ideological plane, the movement for European Unity (be it the Schuman Plan or the Treaty of Rome) was viewed as anti-socialist, robbing the British people of the power to plan and build a socialistic society. The fact
that in the early years the major support to the European Unity came from the Conservatives and or Christian-Democrats made the Labour suspicious and even distrustful of the movement. It was this ideological factor that prompted the Labour Party to react emotionally in its brochure "European Unity". It said, "No Socialist Government in Europe would submit to the authority of a body whose policies were decided by an anti-socialist majority," for as Wilson believed that the "whole conception of the Treaty of Rome is anti-planning," the Schuman Plan and Treaty of Rome were feared as capitalist designs by Europe's post-war leadership.

Besides the socialist inhibitions, the Commonwealth connection was another factor in Labour's attitude to European Unity. Having granted self-rule to several colonies, the Labour Party felt that it was morally in an enviable position to understand the problems and interests of the poor developing countries of the new Commonwealth. It was a sentiment coupled with the British national interest, which found expression in Gaitskell's well-known statement that "In every respect except in distance we in Britain are closer to our Kinsmen in Australia and New Zealand...." Wilson's

"ten point" plan for development of the Commonwealth and his charge against the Tories for neglecting it could truly be a part of the same sentiment. This sentiment lasted right after Britain entered the Common Market when Labour attacked the Tory terms that the Commonwealth interests were not satisfactorily protected.

Also, as an important leg in Britain's 'tripod' relationship, Commonwealth was seen as the supplier of cheap essential goods, such as dairy products, as well as a wider market for Britain's exports. Also politically, in her capacity as the Head of the Commonwealth, Britain felt that it would add up to her international prestige. The diminishing value of the Commonwealth in political and economic terms, was accepted, however, belatedly and reluctantly. With radical changes in the world economic and political objective situation and the resultant drift of the Commonwealth countries, especially the Afro-Asians from the traditional framework of relationship, the Wilson Government had to shift its priority from Commonwealth to Europe.

The Labour Party's attachment to the "US-UK special relationship" was a strong element in its foreign policy. Right from the days of Ernest Bevin to his recent successor James Callaghan, the American factor was given a high priority in Labour's foreign policy.
An interesting facet of this relationship was that the Labour refused to join the European movement when the Americans strongly wanted it to take part in it, and when Britain, under the Labour Government, wanted to join the Common Market, she was kept out by De Gaulle on grounds of her Atlanticism. In making its attempt to enter the EEC, the Wilson Government in 1967 put the European option on par with its American relationship, but not above it. It may also be underlined here that Wilson's decision to lead Britain into Europe was taken after his disillusionment with the Johnson Administration, and, then too after giving due consideration to the NATO option.

Successive Labour leaders, in and out of power, never failed to emphasize the importance of American capability - political, economic and military - to peace and stability in Europe. Attlee and Bevin's dependence on America needs no repetition. Hugh Gaitskell, in Wilson's words, was "Passionately pro-American." Wilson's Foreign Secretary, Callaghan, did not forget to tell his European counterparts in his renegotiation speech at Luxembourg, how seriously his Government takes, and that Europe should take, Kissinger's 'Year of Europe'. Nevertheless the "special relationship" as a constraining factor in Labour's approach to Europe...

played its role until the decision to join the EEC in principle was taken. But once the decision was taken in 1967, it hardly influenced Labour’s European policy.

Labour Party’s reaction to European unity was, on balance, more psychological than political. The early Europeanists’ federalist attempts, frequent circulation of politically catchy terms such as ‘supranationalism’, ‘federalism’, ‘union’, ‘integration’, etc. met in Britain’s Labour circles with an instinctively reserved reaction. The fact that the European movement was mainly supported by Christian-Democrats in Western Europe (though as some European socialists also favoured it) and the opposition Conservative Chief Churchill and his partymen, also formed a part of this psychosis. It was out of this psychosis that the Labour, particularly the left and the moderates dubbed the Schuman Plan and the EEC as ‘anti-socialist’, ‘capitalist’, ‘richman’s club’, ‘inward-looking’, ‘protectionist’, so on and so forth.

This psychosis was further fortified by two more factors, socialism and nationalism. Socialist objections to European movement have already been discussed. From the nationalist point of view, membership in the European institutions was objected to on grounds of the British Parliament losing its sovereign power. It was considered tantamount to ‘surrender-
ing' Britain's control on vital sectors of national economy, and submission to an 'unrepresentative assembly', 'irresponsible bureaucracy' and 'authoritarian Commission' at Brussels. In other words, while theoretically the British Labour stood for socialist international, it sought to champion the nationalist conceptions, which, they otherwise considered as forming part of the capitalist/imperialist class framework. And it justified Britain's exclusion from the ESC. Out of the "five conditions", at least, two of them, planning one's own economy and freedom to pursue one's own foreign policy were truly in accord with the classical British conceptions of Parliamentary supremacy. Without doubt, the British Labour stance in regard to European Unity was not free from contradictions. And it may be said that it sought to promote only inter-governmental European cooperation, which permitted the framing of policy decisions through the principle of unanimity.

Eventually when the decision to join the ESC was taken, it was sought to be justified on the ground that the Treaty of Rome was after all not operating strictly according to the letter of the law. Luxembourg accord (of 1966) and Gaullism were quoted to show how diluted in practice the European Treaties were, and how much Britain by being a part of the Community, could contribute
to its further evolution so that it subserved the British mode of pragmatism. The irony of all this was that Gaullism which kept Britain outside the Community, was invoked to allay the Labour's fears that the European Community was 'supranational' and that its membership could take away national powers. When James Callaghan said that 'an ounce of practice is worth a ton of theory', he was able to influence the Community's policies by sitting in the Council of Ministers. Thus when renegotiation was recommended, it was argued by Wilson and Callaghan that it fairly satisfied the seven terms laid down by the Labour Party's 1974 manifesto. Assurances were given that the European Monetary and Economic Union (EMU) was almost a dead proposition; that there was no danger to the North Sea Oil from the Community; that Britain, at the Paris Summit (1974) reserved her right not to participate in direct elections to the European Parliament.

To sum up, the Labour Party showed its readiness to join the European Community after it was sufficiently assured that joining the Community would not amount to joining a 'federation' or a 'supranational' system and that its membership did not amount to losing control over its national affairs. Membership in the Community was the best policy option open but in seeking it, it should be seen
that as far as possible Britain could retain the national freedom to manage her own affairs.

The last factor, but equally important, was the need to obtain intra-party consensus in regard to the entry into the EEC. When the Schuman offer was rejected by Attlee, he was able to carry almost the whole party along with him. Moreover this was the period of a general national consensus on Britain's foreign policy objectives. Whether the Labour Government attended the Hague Conference or not, whether it accepted the Schuman Plan or not, it did not substantially affect the already laid down 'tripod relationship', in which, Europe, in any case was the least in the order of priorities. Thus the Attlee Governments' lukewarm attitude towards the European movement did not in any way affect party unity. Dalton's 'European Unity' was overwhelmingly approved by the Labour Party Conference.

On the other hand, it was the issue of Common Market membership that had ominous prospects for party unity. Common Market was a highly controversial issue both for the Labour and Conservative parties. But the Labour Party with its more democratic and broad-based character, debated the issue to the point of split. Next to unilateral disarmament and clause IV (relating to further nationalization
of industries) which seriously threatened the Labour Party's unity, the Common Market issue was as divisive as the earlier two. Moreover, while the earlier two issues were short-lived, the issue of British membership of the EEC dominated the British political scene for one and a half decade both when the Labour was in and out of power. Though it can not strictly be argued that the anti-marketeers belonged to the left and the pro-marketeers to the right of the Labour Party, they generally lined up according to the groups.

Whenever the Party was called upon to take a decision, the party leadership had to play the delicate role of balancing the warring factions on the issue in order to keep the party unity. In doing so either a compromise solution had to be evolved, or concessions had to be made to the dominant faction or decision had to be delayed until a more favourable time. In the process, the issue of Common Market became invariably embroiled in the intra-party politics of the Labour Party.

Right from Hugh Gaitskell to Wilson's renegotiation it was the major concern of each leader to reach a decision on Common Market without splitting the party. Gaitskell's "Five Conditions" was a tactical move to save the party unity. The party was seriously divided over the issue but he did not
want another clause IV acrimony or 'fight, fight and fight' challenge over the Common Market issue.

Harold Wilson, a staunch pragmatist, regarded keeping party unity as the highest concern of the leader. With this belief, often he did not hesitate from placing the party before the nation. Not being himself a European enthusiast, Wilson realized by 1966 that Britain could not afford to remain outside Europe. With the exhaustion of the 'special relationship' and the Commonwealth as policy options, joining the EEC seemed a logical necessity, and hence in the national interest as perceived by the Labour. But how to achieve this national interest with a divided party? He tried to do it with thorough deftness and managerial skill. Subsequently when he opposed the Conservative terms of entry, he in effect was reversing his own earlier policy. But since a great majority in the party was turning against the Common Market, he had to switch his role. Renegotiations and referendum were the solutions that could sink party differences and Wilson thought that referendum could provide "a lifeboat into which both the pro and anti marketeers could climb." And in the end once the referendum result was honoured by the anti-marketeers Wilson could safeguard his

party's unity and at the same time protect national interest too.

Once the Labour Party became converted, though reluctantly, to European Unity, the party had to struggle hard to remain in the Common Market and also preserve national interest. In the end it must be said to the credit of Harold Wilson that he did succeed in realizing the twin objectives of party unity as well as national interest. However, the former seems to have been only ephemeral in the sense that within less than five years thereafter the party has been split giving birth to the Social Democratic Party, thereby weakening the fabric of the Labour unity. At this stage, it is difficult to say what consequences this split would bring for the Labour, but as the recent bye-election results show the trend does not seem to be in favour of the Labour Party. The break-away party, the SDP seems now to trade on middle of the road policy which brings it closer to the Liberals. Thus the European question which seems to have caused tremendous confusion in all echelons of the British Labour finally resulted in the undoing of more or less what Wilson had succeeded though temporarily with regard to the party unity and its approach to Britain's role in the European Community.