

9 Wilton Park as a site of European debate from the 1940s to the 1980s

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Introduction

In the late 1940s, Sir Heinz Koeppler wrote in the *Wilton Park Journal* that “Europe could no longer afford ‘the luxury of thirty absolutely sovereign nation/states’”.¹ Debates about European integration became a central feature of Wilton Park’s discussions from that point onwards, with conferences looking at topics ranging from the more theoretical, such as the ‘form of federal government’ that might emerge in Europe, to the politically charged accusation that the UK was a reticent member of the European Community (EC), one of the predecessor organisations to the European Union (EU).² Moreover, Wilton Park’s role as a site of European debate became a key reason for the institution’s continued existence. When the closure of Wilton Park was considered in 1981, Nicholas Spreckley, the head of the European integration department in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), argued that such a decision would have a damaging effect on the UK’s credibility with its partners in Europe.³ The nature of the discussions about European integration that took place at Wilton Park’s events and the reasons why Wilton Park became an important symbolic representation of the UK’s commitment to the EC are the key concerns of this chapter.

This chapter begins by reconstructing the evolution of debates about European integration that took place at Wilton Park from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s. It then explores several key moments in Wilton Park’s history, when its role as a site of European debate was central to its survival as an institution. Crucially, Wilton Park was not simply a place where key developments in UK-EC relations were discussed. It was crucial to the efforts of several governments to explain the domestic perceptions of the EC, or as two FCO officials put it, the ‘British point of view’, to the other member states.⁴ This was especially important at times when the UK’s commitment to the EC wavered. Wilton Park’s influence in this matter was exerted not through the formal channels of powers, but instead through conferences and equally through conversations at the margins of the main events. It was a forum where successive governments sought to influence perceptions of the UK as an EC member state and as a result the institution’s very survival became intimately linked to its status as a site of European debate.

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'Britain and Europe' at Wilton Park

In the late 1940s Wilton Park shifted away from its focus on the 're-education' of prisoners of war (PoWs) and began to open up its courses and events to civilians.⁵ 'The Uniting of Europe' was the subject of an early edition of the *Wilton Park Review*, a publication first intended as an alumni magazine. Although it became a central theme for the conferences that took place in the four decades that followed, it is difficult to trace debates at Wilton Park in the 1950s. Although The *Wilton Park Journal* (originally called *Wilton Park Rundbrief* or *Wilton Park Review*) had been in publication since the early 1950s, more exhaustive conference reports were not circulated until the 1980s. Even rarer are detailed accounts of discussions; those that exist were often sent on a personal basis by Wilton Park staff members to conference speakers.⁶

Nevertheless, it is clear that European integration as a topic was important to Koeppler personally; he believed that Wilton Park had a crucial role to play in making the Federal Republic of Germany a 'good European' through European integration.⁷ One of the first proposals for creating new European institutions, the Schuman Plan, aimed to integrate Germany into a wider European whole through the pooling of Europe's collective coal and steel resources in a supranational organisation governed by a High Authority. Although it was not the only form of integration or postwar institution being discussed at the time, the plan, which was announced by the French government in May 1950, marked the beginning of a specific form of Western European supranational integration.⁸

The 1950s was important not only for the integration of Western Europe but also for the UK's role in it. In June 1950 the Labour government led by Clement Attlee rejected the French invitation to participate in the talks which resulted from the Schuman Plan and eventually led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).⁹ As Anne Deighton argues, it was a 'key moment', a 'parting of ways'.¹⁰ The UK's decision does not appear in any of the official records of Wilton Park conferences. A Q&A session with Attlee which took place shortly following his departure from the leadership of the Labour Party did not mention it, focusing instead on trade unionism, pacifism in the Labour Party and the prospect of further nationalisations under a future Labour government.¹¹ As will be discussed further, this was not the only time that a significant moment in the UK's relationship with European integration seemed to pass without comment at Wilton Park.

As 'the Six' integrated more closely during the 1950s and eventually formed the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, the subject grew in prominence at Wilton Park.¹² The idea of a federal Europe was explored in a lecture on Italy and Europe, given by University of Oxford Professor A P d'Entrèves in June 1954.¹³ Conferences later in the decade looked at the creation of the EEC in 1957, French President Charles de Gaulle's rejection of the British proposal for a free trade area in 1958 and the eventual creation of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1959.¹⁴ Major developments in UK-EEC

relations – especially the two failed applications for membership in 1961 and 1967 – were prominent conference subjects. The dominant theme in those discussions was the UK's relationship with the Commonwealth at the cultural, economic and political levels, and the reasons why those connections would keep the UK out of the EEC. An exchange between two participants at the April 1959 conference summarised the arguments well, with one speaker stating that the Commonwealth connection was 'infinitely stronger' than that with Europe, and another suggesting that such 'sweeping' remarks could 'create quite the wrong impression'.¹⁵

The discussions that took place during the 1960s tended to emphasise that British connections to the Commonwealth were not just utilitarian, but "ties with independent members of a family" and as such there were 'emotional factors' that would make it difficult for the UK to join the EEC.¹⁶ In addition, Wilton Park's speakers argued that there were important political features of the Commonwealth which stood in the way of EEC membership. Britain's 'individual sovereignty was seen to be the essence of the political link' with the Commonwealth.¹⁷ As the 'renunciation of sovereign right' was a 'pre-condition of integration' into the EEC, most speakers at the 12th Wilton Park Conference agreed that "British participation in an integrated Europe must be considered incompatible with her Commonwealth interests".¹⁸ A minority of speakers at the 19th conference, held just one year before Harold Macmillan's government launched its application, felt that "it would be possible for Great Britain to maintain her cohesion with her Commonwealth partners if she joined an integrated Europe".¹⁹ The ideas that were debated at Wilton Park were similar to those in circulation in the popular press at the time. For example, the *Daily Express*' opposition to the first EEC application was "focused primarily on Empire and Commonwealth sentiment ... it sought to gain support by evoking the reader's emotional identification with the old dominions, based on a shared history and kinship".²⁰

John W. Holmes, the President of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and former Canadian representative to the United Nations, spoke at the 36th conference and was especially critical of the first application. In his view, within the EEC there were "undertones which are both anti-American and anti-Commonwealth". He was worried, "about British foreign policy being too much dominated by the inward-looking powers in the continent" if the UK gained membership.²¹ His views were reflected in wider debates about the EEC in Canada, which he wrote about in an essay for *Foreign Affairs* in 1963. While the Canadian business Community "favoured Britain's entry and minimised the dislocations Canadian trade would suffer", the increasing trend towards economic regionalism inspired fear, especially within the Conservative government led by John Diefenbaker, that Canada would become 'the Outer One' ".²²

The importance of the first application and its potential ramifications for the UK's global role were clear from the discussions at Wilton Park. Although there was always a mixture of views, towards the end of the 1960s the majority

of speakers tended to view British membership of the EEC favourably and emphasised the potential benefits for Commonwealth countries, especially the trade advantages that could be gained once the UK was inside.²³ For some speakers, the application seemed inevitable. Alfred Mozer, a Commission official, spoke in 1962 about the ‘lesson learnt’ by the UK as a result of staying outside the EEC in the late 1950s and the ‘fact’ that the “successes so far attained by the EEC have in the end induced Great Britain ... to propose negotiations with a view to joining”.²⁴ For others, the attempt to secure membership could not have come sooner. One conference participant voiced regret at the original decision not to take part in the negotiations leading to the Treaties of Rome and the attendees expressed “unanimity in favour of entry of the United Kingdom into the Common Market”.²⁵

French President Charles de Gaulle’s rejection of the application, delivered in a press conference on 14 January 1963, took place shortly before the 49th Conference and produced a wide range of reactions.²⁶ A ‘member of the peerage’ who spoke at the conference was “unalterably opposed to Britain’s entry and agreed with General de Gaulle that the British, with strong ties to the Commonwealth, could not be good Europeans”. He also suggested that the political direction of the EEC would require a significant sacrifice of parliamentary sovereignty, an issue that would come to dominate British political debates about the Community in the proceeding decades. However, agreement with the General was not universal among the attendees. De Gaulle’s block on British entry was seen by some participants as a troubling situation because, in economic terms, there was ‘no clear alternative policy’ to EEC membership. There was also sense of disappointment at the ‘political motives’ which it was generally agreed had led to the breakdown of the negotiations.²⁷ De Gaulle’s veto was widely viewed as a tactic to maintain French dominance of the EEC, a view that was upheld by the General’s agriculture minister Edgar Pisani who claimed that should Britain join there would be an untenable situation – two cocks amongst the hens. Macmillan, no stranger to drama, echoed some of these concerns and wrote in his diary that “all our policies at home and abroad are in ruin” and described the rejection as a “great and grievous disappointment”.²⁸ The second attempt at entry, led by Harold Wilson’s Labour government of 1964–1970, received less attention at Wilton Park, partly because it was much more short-lived: it was announced in May 1967 and vetoed by de Gaulle six months later.

By the 1970s, the Commonwealth barely featured in Wilton Park’s discussions about European integration. One conference in 1970 explored the choice not between the Commonwealth and Europe but between the Atlantic Community and the EC.²⁹ The UK’s ties to Commonwealth countries received a few brief references in Edward Heath’s speech at Wilton Park’s jubilee conference in 1971 (Figure 9.1). He mentioned the trade advantages that the Commonwealth would gain from British membership. However, he pointed out that “Today the Commonwealth relationship, while no less real and no less valuable, is of an entirely different character from that foreseen” at its



Figure 9.1 Sir Heinz Koeppler greets UK Prime Minister Ted Heath before opening the Jubilee Conference on 21 June 1971 (Wilton Park Archives)

founding. It “did not develop into the kind of Commonwealth it was expected to become”.³⁰ Heath was referring to the major transformation in the nature of the Commonwealth over the previous decade – it became a more heterogeneous and looser organisation – and to the changing trade relationships between the UK and its former colonies. Yet the fact that the Commonwealth moved to the periphery of Wilton Park’s debates about European integration did not mirror the wider discourse of the time. If anything, debates about the Commonwealth became intimately tied to the UK’s relationship with the Community in the 1970s. A special deal for food imports from New Zealand was one of the more difficult aspects of the 1970–1971 entry negotiations and later formed one aspect of Harold Wilson’s 1974–1975 renegotiation of the UK’s membership.³¹ The Commonwealth was also a key feature of public discourse during the 1975 referendum and endorsements of EC membership from the leaders of Commonwealth countries were used in government propaganda to help convince the public to vote ‘yes’ to membership.³²

As the UK became increasingly determined to join the EC, the Commonwealth was seen less as a fundamental barrier to entry and more as an idiosyncratic aspect of the UK’s applications and then its eventual entry talks. As Jim Starkey of the Conference Staff (1976–86) explained in an interview, Wilton Park speakers and participants were constantly urged to avoid over-technical

discussions and instead seek to explore broader ideas and attitudes.³³ The details of the negotiations for special exemptions for the UK to import butter and lamb from New Zealand were thus unlikely to feature in the main conference proceedings. It is also worth noting that it was not just the Commonwealth that was absent from Wilton Park's discussions in 1974–1975, but the whole of the renegotiation and the 1975 referendum. The *Wilton Park Journal* does not reference the referendum, and even the more EC-centric European Discussion Centre (Discussion Centre), created in 1973 and the subject of further discussion in the next section, held its 1975 conferences on topics such as the development of social policy in Europe, the relations between the European Parliament and national political parties, and regionalism and nationalism in the Community.³⁴ The 1975 referendum was a significant moment in the history of the UK's relationship with European integration that was missing from Wilton Park's discussions. This does not, however, mean that it was not discussed. One reason for its absence may have been the divisions within the Labour Party over EC membership and a reluctance to discuss such a highly politicised issue.

The 1980s saw new topics emerge at Wilton Park. As the Community progressed towards the Single European Act (SEA), signed in 1986 and the first major revision of the Treaties of Rome, conferences at Wilton Park began to focus more on the EC's place in the world. This was partly because the SEA set out the objective of establishing a single market by 1992 and thus raised questions about whether the Community would become more inward-looking as a result. As one conference in 1985 asked: would the Community become 'Fortress Europe or Open-to-the-World [sic]'?³⁵ A conference hosted the next year considered the global context of the EC, this time in relation to developing a common foreign policy, another objective set out by the SEA. During the discussions a wide range of views emerged, including that any move towards a common foreign policy would be slow due to each EC member's 'special interests', such as 'the United Kingdom in the Commonwealth' and 'Germany with its Ost-politik and the inner-German question'. Overall, the conference participants were unconvinced of the practicality of a common foreign policy for the EC. As the official report bluntly put it: "it was difficult to see how a combination of inefficient States can be more efficient than the same States acting independently".³⁶ Indeed, as the next section shows, the 1980s saw not only new topics but also the emergence of more sceptical views about European integration at Wilton Park.

Wilton Park and the UK's commitment to the EC

Wilton Park was not at first glance an institution which stuck closely to a 'pro-European' line. Its attendees and speakers were a diverse mixture of politicians, civil servants, staff of international organisations, members of think tanks, business leaders and academics. For example, Wilton Park's 231st conference included delegates from Australia, Belgium, Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland,

the UK and the USA. The group was largely made up of civil servants and diplomats, but also included a prison governor, an executive from Shell, a clergyman from the Presbyterian Church of the United States, a journalist and several professors.³⁷ This list, taken from the 1980s, is indicative of the general level of diversity that Wilton Park's events attracted. The Discussion Centre's events were restricted geographically to delegates from EC member states, but the attendees still varied in terms of professional background. One Discussion Centre conference in 1976 included the editor of the Dutch morning paper *Algemeen Dagblad*, the Director of British Petroleum, a member of the Belgian delegation to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and a professor of population statistics from the University of Rome.³⁸

However, a closer look reveals Wilton Park's clear links to the EC and, by the 1970s, a more pronounced pro-European outlook. By that time most speakers and senior staff within the institution shared the belief that the UK should join the Community and supported its subsequent membership. One reason for this was the link between Wilton Park and the Discussion Centre, established at Wiston House in 1973 to mark the UK's entry to the EC that same year. The Heath government hoped that the Discussion Centre would help "strengthen ties in the sphere of human and cultural contacts" and encourage the "general exchange of ideas between people of different nationality, background and disciplines, yet having in common a position of some weight in the affairs of their own country".³⁹ It was part of a larger package of initiatives, such as sponsorship for British participation in the Europalia arts festival in Belgium and grants for exchange programmes with civic organisations on the continent, designed to boost cultural contacts between the UK and the Community.⁴⁰

The creation of the Discussion Centre was not without controversy. The wider package of measures was seen as a potential target for politicians who were against British membership of the EC, thus in 1972 an update on the government's progress in setting up the Discussion Centre was deferred in order to avoid 'tiresome questions from anti-Market MPs'.⁴¹ In addition, Wilton Park's International Advisory Council was concerned that the creation of the Discussion Centre might mean that non-EC countries, and their interests, would be excluded from vital discussions. One member of the Council, the Canadian High Commissioner, hoped that the "wider circle of countries with common interests would not be forgotten".⁴² The Discussion Centre's conference topics were, naturally, focused on the EC; the first year of events explored subjects such as 'Steps on the way towards a common foreign policy'; 'the relationship between monetary unity and economic unity'; and 'Common agricultural policy and Common regional policy within the Community'.⁴³ In 1975 the programme looked at regional and national identity with the Community, as well as the bureaucracy and democracy in the EC's institutions.⁴⁴ Although the Discussion Centre tended to focus on narrower aspects of policy within the Community, the global context in which the EC operated was not absent from the wider discussions at Wilton Park.

Officially, Wilton Park and the Discussion Centre were separate entities and 'in no way rivals', but in practice they overlapped considerably.⁴⁵ Koeppler was warden of both institutions, and Tim Slack, his successor, served in the same dual roles. Furthermore, Koeppler was closely involved with the selection of the Discussion Centre's Advisory Council and proposed Sir Con O'Neill, lead negotiator at official level during the talks which led to the UK's entry to the EC, as chairman. The council also included Shirley Williams, a prominent Labour pro-Marketeer, and Ernest Wistrich, the director of the UK branch of the European Movement.⁴⁶ Added to this was the frequent attendance of EC insiders at Wilton Park and Discussion Centre events. After the UK gained EC membership, senior British officials and politicians who worked in the Commission became regular participants. The most well-known of them was the Labour politician Roy Jenkins, who addressed Wilton Park while he was President of the European Commission.⁴⁷ Crispin Tickell, Jenkins' *chef de cabinet*, spoke about the institutions of the EC at the Discussion Centre's 64th conference. That same event was attended by Simon Nuttall, employed by the Commission in the Secretariat, and Dick Taverne, who had served on the Spierenburg Committee (a body established in 1979 to review the Commission).⁴⁸

The links between Wilton Park and the Commission also extended outside conferences. At the beginning of the 1980s, as the Commission prepared for the beginning of Gaston Thorn's presidency, the UK's Permanent Representation to the EC (UKREP) suggested that Slack travel to Belgium for meetings with the new team of Commissioners. This followed an introductory visit that had already taken place in 1978 and was expected to facilitate 'a new initiative at political level with the outgoing Commissioners' in addition to building relations with the new Commission. Slack's proposed programme included courtesy calls with Ivor Richard and Christopher Tugendhat, the UK's two commissioners, both of whom had supported Wilton Park in the past.⁴⁹

The frequent attendance of Commission staff from the UK at Wilton Park events continued into the 1980s. Benedict Meynell, a civil servant who had taken a job in the Commission in the Directorate-General for External Relations, came to the 231st Wilton Park conference on the internal cohesion and external relations of the EC.⁵⁰ A Discussion Centre conference in that same year was attended by Michael Emerson, a British official who joined the Commission in 1973 and was by the 1980s a director in the Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs.⁵¹ These connections were in part built by Wilton Park's director from 1983, Geoffrey Denton, a staunch federalist who was hired to improve the academic quality and management of the institution.⁵² This is not to say that critics of the Community were not excluded. Barbara Castle, a prominent Labour anti-Marketeer who had joined the European Parliament in 1979, was invited to speak in 1983 and, as Chapter 10 discusses, so were a number of prominent Eurosceptics.⁵³ Wilton Park has always been home to a variety of opinions on UK-EC relations, even if more sceptical voices were often in the minority.

Wilton Park's generally pro-European outlook meant that it became part of wider government efforts to reassure the other member states of the UK's commitment to the Community. The Heath government did this through establishing the European Discussion Centre, and it was also something that Wilton Park facilitated during the Thatcher government's row with the EC over the UK's contributions to the budget. Thatcher's mission to get 'our own money back' began in 1979 and was not resolved until the Fontainebleau Summit of 1984 at which the member states agreed to a rebate worth approximately two-thirds of the UK's net contribution.⁵⁴ During this period, the government initiated a parallel propaganda campaign to combat impressions of the UK as an uncooperative member state, including a pamphlet titled 'Britain in the European Community: A Positive Approach'. Launched in early 1983, it was timed with the 10th anniversary of the UK's membership and was distributed by UKREP to the UK's embassies in the Community.⁵⁵ Although the British press chose "virtually to ignore the launch of the booklet", it had a positive reception in other countries. It was especially valuable, according to UKREP, as a document which reassured the UK's partners "particularly given our need to persuade all and sundry that we are ... not simply concerned with our budget contribution".⁵⁶

The efforts of civil servants participating mirrored the government's endeavour. Discussions at a Discussion Centre event in early 1981 were used by Andrew Edwards, an assistant secretary in the European Policy Division of the Treasury, and Derek Andrews, an under-secretary in charge of EC and agricultural policy in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, to try and explain to delegates from the other EC member states why the UK's contributions to the Community budget were problematic. Although the subject was not on the formal conference agenda, it is clear from Edwards' report that it was discussed in detail. The Labour MP Donald Anderson's remarks at the conference were viewed as helpful in this regard, as he explained "how the injustices of the Community's budgetary system rankled" with his party. Yet, as Edwards argued, the "value of the Conference lay in contacts made outside formal meetings". Their discussions with Michel Drouet, a former Commission official from France who had recently returned to Paris as head of the agricultural bureau in the Ministry of Economy, were particularly valuable. Drouet expressed some sympathy with the UK's position, saying that he "saw the costs to the UK of Community membership as being a massive problem".⁵⁷

Wilton Park's utility in this regard during the 1980s built upon its long-established status as a symbol of the UK's commitment to European integration. When Wilton Park's transformation from a 're-education' centre was considered by the government in the immediate postwar era, Koeppler emphasised the role it could play in building a 'Western Union' and anchoring Germany to the institutions of the West. These goals would, in his view, demand a particular state of mind which Wilton Park could help to instil.⁵⁸ In the early days of Harold Macmillan's government, the Cabinet considered closing Wilton Park largely due to the cost of running the centre. However, in April 1957 that proposal was rejected due to "the need to demonstrate this

country's intention to remain closely identified with Western Europe".⁵⁹ This was a particularly sensitive moment. It was two years after the UK had withdrawn from the Messina negotiations which eventually led to the signing of the Treaties of Rome in March 1957 and the eve of Europe's division into 'sixes and sevens': the phrase used to describe the competition between the six members of the EEC and the seven members of the soon-to-be-created EFTA (originally made up of Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK).

Wilton Park's relevance to the ability of the government to demonstrate its commitment to the EC became especially apparent when the merger of the Discussion Centre and Wilton Park was discussed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The proposal for the merger was the product of trends that started in the late 1970s, including faltering attendance and near cancellations of whole conferences. It had, according to the FCO's explanation of the merger, become increasingly difficult to find 'leading personalities' to speak at events and Wilton Park carried 'greater prestige'.⁶⁰ This account, however, was not the complete picture. As British Ambassador to Denmark Anne Warburton explained, the Danish representation at the Discussion Centre "while sometimes falling short of the ideal ... has been consistently higher than at Wilton Park", and included high-profile attendees such as the leader of the Danish Conservative Party and the editor of *Politiken*, a leading daily newspaper.⁶¹

Moreover, participation in Wilton Park conferences, not just the Discussion Centre, was depressed in the early 1980s: Slack reported a fall in the annual total of participants from 335 to 303 in 1981.⁶² Ronald Arculus, the British Ambassador to Italy, pointed out the "considerable difficulty in recruiting good Italian candidates for Wilton Park conferences", for reasons including language and cost.⁶³ Indeed, Wilton Park staff had already noted the decrease in Italian attendance and attempted to remedy this by developing a network with Italian academia. David Spence, one of Wilton Park's conference advisors, planned a trip to Florence in spring 1984 to meet with Professor Antonio Cassese at the Università degli Studi di Firenze, a speaker at Wilton Park in May 1983, to discuss ideas for boosting the numbers of Italian participants.⁶⁴ The British embassy in Paris also reported problems, pointing out that the length of Wilton Park conferences was a deterrent – "few French political participants seem willing to spend a whole week away from their desks" – and suggested that shorter, Discussion Centre-style conferences be adopted by Wilton Park.⁶⁵ Juliet Campbell, Information Councillor in the Paris Embassy charged with recruiting French participants for Wilton Park, recalled a reluctance to attend events, especially among *fonctionnaires*, many of whom viewed their careers and events in Paris as a much higher priority. However, there was no outright hostility.⁶⁶ As one member of staff at the British embassy in Paris put it: "I certainly would not claim that it would do much harm to our European image in France if Wilton Park ceased to exist altogether".⁶⁷

The consultations surrounding the merger highlight the symbolic importance of both the Discussion Centre and Wilton Park. Arculus raised

concerns about the possible reaction in Italy. It might be seen as a 'reversal', he warned, which "would be regrettable at a time when there is growing concern here at the threat that would be posed to the Community by a further Labour administration".⁶⁸ The 1975 referendum campaigns had accelerated the division within the Labour Party over the question of British membership of the EC. By the 1980s these tensions had reached a boiling point. In 1981 the party split with four of the party's most outspoken 'pro-Marketeters' – Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams – leaving to form the Social Democratic Party. Labour's manifesto for the 1983 General Election called for withdrawal from the Community.⁶⁹ The Discussion Centre became part of diplomatic efforts to counter the potential impact of Labour's stance on relations with the other member states. For example, when Rudiger Theile, the Counsellor in charge of European Affairs in the Kanzleramt, was due to attend a Discussion Centre conference, the British Embassy in Bonn suggested to the FCO that this be used as an opportunity to counter some of the more negative views of EC membership presented by the Labour Party at the time.⁷⁰

As such, FCO officials were concerned that the closure of the Discussion Centre would be seen as 'un-European'.⁷¹ Spreckley argued that the subsequent and even more sweeping proposal to close Wilton Park, recommended by the Treasury due to the cost of maintaining Wiston House, would have a "damaging effect ... on our credibility amongst our partners, following as it (would) on the heels of the abolition of the (Discussion Centre) conferences".⁷² In the end officials in the FCO agreed to merge the Discussion Centre and Wilton Park in the summer of 1981. Following this agreement, two sets of measures were taken to mitigate any damage to the UK's reputation as a committed EC country. First, it was decided that there would be a set number of conferences with a European theme, to demonstrate that the merger did not represent a dwindling of the UK's commitment to the Community.⁷³ Second, the merger was carefully managed. Assistant Under-Secretary in the FCO Nicholas Gordon-Lennox felt that "presentation (would) be a very important factor if we are not to attract criticism for doing something which could appear to indicate a lack of European enthusiasm".⁷⁴ Thus, some of the letters explaining the merger to other EC members were sent at the ministerial level, from Ian Gilmour, the Lord Privy Seal, in order to avoid the impression that the decision indicated 'a weakening of the UK's attachment to the Community'.⁷⁵

The merger came into effect in 1982, and the proposed list of subjects for that year included four EC-specific conferences out of a total of fifteen: 'The European Community as a force in international affairs'; 'The security of European in a multipolar world'; 'The politics and economics of an enlarged European Community'; and 'The European Community and the Mediterranean focus'.⁷⁶ In the years that followed, the EC remained prominent in conference programmes. Possible themes for 1984, for example, included the problems faced by Community following the enlargement to Greece, Spain and Portugal, EC environmental policy, and 'Are the EC institutions adequate for the 80s?'.⁷⁷

Conclusions

The question of the UK's relationship with the EC/EU was central to Wilton Park's discussions and its survival as an institution from the 1940s through to the 1980s. The official conference proceedings explored a range of issues, from the implications of EC membership for the UK's links to the Commonwealth, to the future development of the Community's trading relationships with the rest of the world. These were fruitful discussions in which a range of views were expressed, even if most of Wilton Park's speakers and participants tended to view the UK's membership of the Community favourably. However, Wilton Park's greatest value was often found in the conversations that took place at the margins of the main conference events. It was through these discussions that Wilton Park's role as a site of European debate, a place that reaffirmed the UK's place in the EC, especially during difficult moments in UK-EC relations, was realised. In 1982 Tim Slack justified Wilton Park's continued existence with this argument:

Wilton Park plays a worthwhile role in giving lie to damaging notions quite common even amongst intelligent foreigners, regarding Britain today. It is a living refutation of misconceptions such as British insularity, bland unconcern and ignorance about others' approaches to common problems.⁷⁸

This message was consistent with the way Wilton Park's existence had been supported for decades.

Notes

- 1 Richard Mayne, *In Victory, Magnanimity, In Peace, Goodwill: A History of Wilton Park* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p. 130.
- 2 Wilton Park Archives (WPA), C/J1, Pietro Quaroni, 'The Common Market and the World Outside', *Wilton Park Journal (WPJ)* 31 (June, 1964): pp. 3–12, quote on p. 5; and see Nick Hopkinson Archives (NHA), David J Spence, Report on Conference 273: 14–18 January 1985. *The United Kingdom in the 1980s: Domestic and International Evolution*.
- 3 The UK's National Archives (TNA), FCO30/4595, Spreckley to MacInnes, 'Future of Wilton Park', 4 August 1981.
- 4 TNA/FCO26/1108, Crosby to Chapman, 3 October 1978 and TNA/FCO30/4595, Evidence given at the Foreign Affairs Committee, 10 June 1981. This chapter builds on recent historiographical trends that incorporate domestic debates into the history of the UK's relationship with the EC. For examples, see: Lindsay AQUI, *The First Referendum: Reassessing the UK's Entry to Europe, 1973–75* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Mathias Haeussler, 'The Popular Press and Ideas of Europe: The *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Express*, and Britain's First Application to Join the EEC, 1961–63', *Twentieth Century British History* 25:1 (2014): pp. 108–131; and Robert Saunders, *Yes to Europe: The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

- 5 Koeppler felt that the term 're-education', especially in its pejorative late-1940s context, never appropriately explained Wilton Park's work. See Mayne, *In Victory*, p. 131.
- 6 The records of the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU) in Florence were particularly helpful here.
- 7 Mayne, *In Victory*, pp. 130–132. In this chapter Germany refers to the FRG.
- 8 On the Schuman Plan proposals see William Hitchcock, *France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for the Leadership of Europe, 1944–1954* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1998) and John Young, *Britain, France and the Unity of Europe, 1945–1951* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984).
- 9 For different interpretations of this decision, see Edmund Dell, *The Schuman Plan and the British Abdication of Leadership in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Christopher Lord, 'With but not of: Britain and the Schuman Plan, a Reinterpretation', *Journal of European Integration History* 4:2 (1998): pp. 23–46; and Alan Milward, *The UK and the European Community vol 1: The Rise and Fall of a National Strategy 1945–1963* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).
- 10 Anne Deighton, 'Brave New World? Brave Old World', in *Contemporary European History* 28:1 (2019), pp. 31–34, quote on p. 32.
- 11 WPA, C/J, 'Traditionen und Entwicklung der Labour Party', *WPJ* 17 (December, 1956).
- 12 The Six refers to the original members of the EEC: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.
- 13 WPA, C/J, Professor A. P. d'Entrèves, 'Italien und Europa', *Wilton Park Rundbrief* 10 (June, 1954).
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