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BRITISH PUBLIC OPINION AND THE
COMMON MARKET ISSUE

Robert Boardman

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They're a funny lot, foreigners.

Anthony Powell, *Venusberg*, 1932.

Political scientists have rarely felt fully at ease with the notion of public opinion. This diffidence has usually failed to deter practitioners of the political arts from granting it an eminent role in their vocabulary. "We are a democracy", Lord Morrison writes in his memoirs, "and there is clearly an obligation on Ministers to take public opinion into account".¹ Even in the world of diplomacy, politicians and statesmen, especially those immersed in the Wilsonian tradition of peacemaking, have tried to make public opinion a pivotal concept. Britain's delegate to the First Assembly of the League of Nations affirmed confidently that "By far the strongest weapon we have is the weapon of public opinion."²

Yet it is in relation to foreign policy that the analytical difficulties tend to sprout into an unmanageable undergrowth. The democratic principle has to do battle with the demands for secrecy, and for diplomacy unhindered by the glare of television lights, that Foreign Office officials are apt to insist on. Distinctions have to be made, as in domestic policies, between various categories of publics: between, as Lord North carefully noted when Prime Minister in 1770, "men of judgment, morals and property" on the one hand, and "the drunken ragamuffins of a vociferous mob" on the other.³ The distinction permeated one of the earliest publications on the subject, Mackinnon's *On the Rise, Progress, and Present State of Public Opinion in Great Britain*, which first appeared in 1828. Something of the unease remains. Not surprisingly, therefore, the textbooks commonly relegate public opinion to a marginal role in the formulation of foreign policy. It is seen to oscillate between an emotional extremism blind to the subtleties of the particular case ("My mind is

made up; don't confuse me with facts"), and a dedicated apathy, indifferent to all things remote and foreign. Its one positive influence is argued to be negative: the mood of the people sets a limit to what Governments can get away with.

The British decision to join the European Economic Community, confirmed in principle by Parliament in October 1971, is an interesting case in point. The Common Market question was never a single clear-cut issue in British politics. Complex diplomatic problems mingled with urgent domestic disputes on inflation and unemployment; intricate webs of economic reasoning were thoroughly meshed in with the political argument. But it was apparent that the move towards Europe would affect fundamentally Britain's future relations with other States. Foreign policy considerations were a pervasive theme in British debates on the EEC issue. There was agreement, from critics and supporters alike, on its importance. "Our historic decision has been made", was how the Prime Minister summed up the Parliamentary vote. *The Times* had to reach back to Wall Street in November 1929 and to Westminster in June 1832 to find historical parallels with the momentous turning-point.

The move was preceded by widespread calls for the more active participation of public opinion. It is the aim of this essay to probe the network of relationships linking public opinion with the political parties, news media, pressure groups, and official policies. In a word: how did the so-called and much-heralded "great debate" on the Common Market shape up?

It has been all too reminiscent of the Warsaw boy in the international essay competition on Elephants who sent in a piece entitled 'The Elephant and the Polish Question.'

Andrew Shonfield, *Encounter*, 1971.

A hotchpotch the Common Market issue might have been, but argument on the economic repercussions of entry for Britain seems to have had the most stamina. Bread-and-butterism is, of course, not a new phenomenon in British politics. The Government's first approach to Brussels, in 1961-63, nearly ground to a halt in discussions of kangaroo meat; and the 1970 General Election—ostensibly a crucial one in view of the imminence of the EEC decision—was fought largely, one outraged newspaper correspondent pointed out, over the price of jam. In 1971 *The Economist* warned that the future of Europe should not hinge on a few thousand tons of New Zealand butter. Although these judgments are at least partly apocryphal, the Common Market Safeguards Cam-

paign knew clearly that this was the point where most leverage could be gained. The EEC threatened many venerable British institutions, from "our usual kippers" and "our jelly marmalade" at breakfast to "our type of beer" in the evening. (Sex differences between British and French hops became at one point a source of heated debate.) Even "the British sausage" did not conform to EEC regulations, the Campaign's literature warned, "and would have to change".

The concerns of managerial and business elites were somewhat different. Here the crucial economic argument was whether or not the dynamic effects of entry would adequately compensate for costs in the initial years. The "cold shower" effect on the competitiveness of British industry could, some felt, be bracing. Sir Peter Allen, a former head of Imperial Chemical Industries, spoke of the "over-protected domestic market" of British industry. But firms were not all equally resilient. A London stockbroking firm, Phillips and Drew, prepared and distributed lengthy lists of likely "gainers" and "losers" in the event of British entry to the EEC. Each list was extensive, from woollen fabrics to vapour generating boilers in the former, and from computers to animal feed in the latter. There were other costs to consider: the problematic role of sterling, and the impact of far-reaching structural changes in the agricultural sector. The Government would also have to pay its contribution to the Community budget, a figure given in its White Paper as £100 million in 1973 rising to about £200 million by 1977. Overall calculation was far from an easy matter, and academic economists, stating their judgments in two famous letters to *The Times*, appeared equally divided on the merits of entry.

Wider public debates developed a high degree of immunity to such complexities. More salient were the obvious facts of the present. The rate of inflation in 1970-71 was already high; and even the Government's presumably optimistic White Paper forecast a 15% rise in food prices during the early transitional years of British membership. Unemployment, moreover, was rapidly approaching the one-million mark as Parliament took the EEC decision, the symbolic point being finally passed in January 1972. Trade Union members expressed fears that the situation could only be exacerbated by entering the Common Market, either because of an influx of cheap southern Italian labour, or because of a resulting concentration of economic growth on London and the Southeast to the further detriment of the Northeast, South Wales and Scotland. Public antipathy to the Market interacted with growing unrest at the Conservative Government's economic policies in a spiral of mutual reinforcement.

The process accentuated the dilemma of the leadership of the Labour Party. The commitment to join Europe, accepted while in Government from 1964 to 1970, conflicted with the clear duty of a Labour Opposition to fight economic Toryism. To compound the embarrassment, a solid group of pro-Market M.P.s—including Roy Jenkins, deputy leader of the Party—made plain their intention of voting in Parliament with the Conservatives. The move was branded as tantamount to treachery in some Labour circles. Britain under the Tories, ran the argument, simply could not stand up to the battering its economy would receive in Europe. Nicholas Kaldor, a professional economist and a senior party adviser, predicted that Britain could become “the Northern Ireland of Europe”. Further to the left, condemnation of the EEC was voiced in the name of socialist principles. The Common Market, an article in the *New Left Review* declared, was simply a new rallying-call for the British ruling class, as the symbols of nationhood had been for nineteenth-century Tories. While right to oppose such a capitalist grouping, the Labour Party leadership was refurbishing nationalism at just the time it should have been taking up arms in the class struggle. By July 1971, the Labour Party emerged officially opposed to the terms of entry negotiated by the Government.

‘Help, help!’ cried Piglet, ‘a Heffalump,
a Horrible Heffalump!’

A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, 1926.

The Common Market issue was never “merely” a matter of economics. To set alongside the economic calculus was a second and in some ways more profound set of considerations. Britain’s constitutional future in the EEC was unknown. Anti-Market lobbyists, however, had little difficulty in discerning the ominous shape of a supranational monolith, a European super-State directed by foreign bureaucrats and quashing every expression of antiquated British nationalism and sovereignty.

This same notion, viewed from a very different perspective, had indeed constituted one of the chief rationales for the Common Market, and its predecessors in the early 1950s. Closer economic and political ties within Europe might, it was argued, lessen the chances of a recurrence of war between France and Germany. Either unity: or a Europe in which man, to use Hobbes’ apt phrase, “hath his heart all the day long gnawed on by feare of death, poverty or other calamity; and has no repose, nor pause of his anxiety, but in sleep”. Defending in the House of Commons the terms he had negotiated in Brussels, Mr. Rippon concluded:

I believe in this House this week we stand to gain for future generations through peace that unity of Europe which our forebears vainly if heroically, sought by arms.

British entry to the EEC, the Prime Minister reiterated early in 1972, marked "an end to divisions which have stricken Europe for centuries". The theme was recurrent in American thinking from Washington to Kennedy, and something that the latter clearly believed he was promoting by supporting Macmillan's first application in 1961. More recently, other European conflicts have been suggested as likely beneficiaries of greater economic integration. A leading Belgian journalist has written that British entry could expand the teaching of English in Belgian schools, and so ameliorate that country's Fleming-Walloon conflict. Others have speculated that the Quebec and Ulster situations could improve as Britain worked more closely with France and Eire in an EEC framework.

This genre of rhetoric did little to still the doubts of critics. Michael Foot, on the Labour Party's left, spoke of Britain having to accept a whole series of decisions which were disliked intensely, because of threats by one country to destroy the Community. Even the pro-Market *Economist* referred to "the hard and slightly over-emotional reactions which are the hallmarks of France's dealing in the Community". The left wing of the Labour Party competed with the right of the Conservative in the fight to protect British sovereignty. Enoch Powell was a leading contender for battle honours. Undertaking a well-publicised European tour to add weight to his case, he developed the argument previously outlined in connection with racial tensions, West Indian and Asian immigration, and the decay of inner cities: that the very existence of the British nation was threatened. In sum, Powell's speeches echoed and amplified the historian Carlyle:

Consider all that lies in that one word *Past!* What a pathetic, in every sense *poetic*, meaning is implied in it. . . .

But the main stream of Conservative opinion, as expressed at the Annual Conference of the Party, followed solidly the European line of the leadership. In general it was the Monday Club group and *The Spectator* that felt less constrained by the imperatives of duty and party unity. On a broader mass level, the *Express* group continued in the tradition set by its two anti-Market campaigns of the 1960s, although it missed the convenient figure of General de Gaulle, previously caricatured as a bewigged and haughty Louis XIV. An anonymous protestor even exploded a bomb in the headquarters of the Royal

Tank Regiment as a gesture "against the Government's taking the British people into the Common Market".

It was not only that the national identity was at stake, it was that the British system of government would be undermined. It is perhaps a significant detail that Powell himself is a student of the early historical evolution of the House of Lords. As Tolstoy commented in the last century:

An Englishman is self-assured as being a citizen of the best organized state in the world, and therefore always knows what he should do and that what he does is undoubtedly correct.

Common Market debates reverberated with constitutional questions. How could signature of the Treaty of Rome be reconciled with the principle, articulated by Dicey, that no Parliament could bind its successor? Did the notion of sovereignty imply Parliament's right to transfer sovereign powers to another body? Would British courts of law be obliged to enforce decisions made in Brussels? Was there a need for some procedure for the judicial review of legislation, as in Germany and Italy? How rapidly would the Common Market develop effective and representative democratic institutions? What of the special constitutional position of the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man?

For the bulk of pro-European opinion, however, the bottle was seen as half-full rather than half-empty. By joining the Community, British sovereignty would be augmented, not diminished. Since Britain was in any case expanding her *de facto* links with Europe, it was only appropriate that formal representation should ensue. Britain, Mr. Rippon argued in Parliament, was not joining a static community. From the outset she would have a full and influential voice in the decision-making process of the Community. The fears of those who foresaw a European super-State were unrealistic; while those who looked to the past, and away from Europe, would turn Britain into "a sort of latter-day Sweden or a greater Venice".

Old England is dying.

James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922.

The term "latter-day Sweden" is revealing. Such a model for Britain's future was anathema to most shades of opinion. Circumstances had changed since Churchill conceived of British foreign policy in terms of three overlapping circles of Commonwealth, United States and Europe. But the concept of a British world role was not easy to reject.

The "special relationship" with the United States was certainly no dominant

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force in 1971. Britain alone, argued the advocates of the EEC, could not expect to be heard in a Washington whose chief foreign preoccupations were its relations with Peking, Moscow and Tokyo. And official American statements increasingly referred to "Western Europe" as an entity. Trading patterns were changing in the Commonwealth, with Australia, for example, looking more and more to the United States and Japan. Politically and diplomatically, the Commonwealth had evolved into a very different animal from that envisaged in the late 1940s. In the 1960s some black African States responded to British policies towards southern Africa by suggesting that Britain be expelled from the Commonwealth. The "kith and kin" ties with the old white Commonwealth remained, but with much of their former potency evaporated. Canada even had a Prime Minister who, to quote Professor Eayrs, spent the Second World War "speeding playfully about rural Quebec on a motorcycle, in the garb of a German soldier."⁴

But for or against the EEC, the criterion in this third arena of the debate was remarkably similar: the envied "seat at the top table" of global diplomacy. Economic growth and expanded social services on the Swedish model were just not good enough. That membership of the EEC would be the best means to this goal was, however, far from widely accepted. The idea of a North Atlantic grouping was much discussed for a time. Never far beneath the surface was the suggestion that tangible links with other Commonwealth countries should be consolidated. The Government itself proposed in 1959 a free-trade arrangement with the Six to avoid the political implications of full membership and the necessary changes in British agriculture; it was rejection of this scheme that led to Britain's creation of the European Free Trade Association. There was advocacy also of the virtues of rugged individualism or "Little Englandism".

Critics of the "inward-looking" nature of the Common Market thus arrived at the European option by eliminating alternatives, while supporters of the idea claimed that it would arrest the decline of British influence in the world. "We have the chance of new greatness", Mr. Heath declared; "we must go in if we want to remain Great Britain, and take the chance of becoming Greater Britain".

One implication of this train of thought, not always explicit, was that Britain was preordained to lead the new Europe. The *Daily Express*, never a paper to hide its prejudices, had no doubts on this score. If Britain had to go into the Market, it stated bluntly, then the Market must be fashioned to Britain's will. This orientation towards European questions prompted in turn

a more sophisticated version of the anti-Market case. Britain's membership of the EEC would jeopardise even more the chances of there arising a United States of Europe. While fear of such an entity nourished much of the anti-EEC propaganda, the impossibility of achieving that goal was at the same time put forward as a reason for the futility of British entry. Richard Crossman, who in his role as editor of the *New Statesman* sustained a long and forceful attack on the move, concluded one article with this argument:

If Britain goes in, she will do so as an insular community as determined to retain her insular institutions as the French government is to defend French interests. Our historical function therefore will be to join the French in frustrating the development towards a European superstate, without which the Community will soon be deadlocked by its inner contradictions. On balance rather than perform this wrecking role I would rather stay outside.

It's a funny old Great Debate, if you can manage to find it.

Norman Shrapnel, *The Guardian*, 1971

The state of British public opinion on the Common Market issue appears an odd blend of hostility and resignation; a mixture of angry apathy and fatalistic fervour, as one observer characterised it. A *Guardian* survey saw the two as linked, citing a "furious Conservative" at an anti-Market meeting:

Why it's all been so apathetic is because everybody thinks it's a foregone conclusion. We're going in regardless.

Opinion polls in the early summer of 1971 revealed about two-thirds to three-quarters of the public against entry. The impact of a series of events—the Heath-Pompidou summit meeting in Paris at the end of May, the successful conclusion of Britain's negotiations in June, and the publication of the Government's White Paper on the agreed terms of entry in July—was to raise the percentage in favour to a slight majority over those still opposed. But as in previous British applications in the 1960s, the proportion of "don't know's" remained high; and a majority also believed, long before the Parliamentary vote, that the matter was already neatly cut and dried.

It comes as no surprise to find two politicians as astute as Harold Wilson and Enoch Powell picking up this feeling. Powell, shortly after Parliament's decision in October 1971, spoke of the mass of correspondence coming in to him and indicating a "high level of frustration". There was, he maintained,

. . . prevalent conviction, that the majority are unrepresented and that a con-

spiracy of "the best people" in Parliament and the media is determined to see to it that they do not have their will.

The feeling was "colossal", and there had been nothing on the same scale in British politics "since manhood franchise, and quite possibly not for long before". From the opposite Party, Wilson spoke in almost identical terms:

What we have seen is a classic confrontation of the establishment against the common sense of the people, and it will continue.

There had been in the Commons debate on the EEC "what was tantamount to a conspiracy aimed at discounting the Commonwealth". Certain people were in favour of the Common Market, he continued:

The Confederation of British Industries, the Chamber of Commerce, the employers, and the merchant bankers, no doubt. But not the trade union movement. Not the pensioners. Not the unemployed. Not the housewife.

From the Government's point of view, the timing of the EEC decision was a little unfortunate. A variety of other discontents were already bubbling away: not only inflation and unemployment, but also such diverse issues as immigration control, currency decimalisation, increased postal charges, the law-and-order complex, and changes in the BBC's music schedules.

As in the Ulster situation, the news media were occasionally forced into the role of scapegoat. It was claimed that the strength and extent of anti-Market sentiment in the country was badly represented. The contention has an element of truth. Elite press editorials—in *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Sunday Times*, *Economist*, even the *Telegraph*—tended with various degrees of reservation and enthusiasm to endorse the Government's position. Of the mass-circulation press, the *Mirror* group—which had undergone a sudden conversion to the EEC in the summer of 1961—shared in 1971 many of the doubts articulated throughout the decade by the *Express*. Newspaper economics, however, dictated a different emphasis. Particularly under the fierce competition of the revived daily *The Sun*, editors tacitly acknowledged that obscure negotiations in Belgium on Commonwealth sugar won less advertising revenue than soccer or naked ladies.

If the news media were not in a position to sustain a persistent and effective anti-Market campaign, neither were any of the major political parties. Anti-EEC candidates stood as independents in the 1970 election, but fared badly. Enoch Powell was unable to mobilise more than a small minority of supporters within the Conservative Party; in all, 39 Tories voted against

the Government in the Parliamentary vote, and another two abstained. His campaign in the country likewise failed to take off. One reason was the Labour Party's adoption of an anti-Market stand. Yet even here, opposition was muted and contradictory, and lacked the vigour of a total commitment. The Party was an agglomeration of differing views on the EEC. The trade unions, Annual Conference, and Parliamentary Labour Party retreated from positions taken in the 1960s and shifted into an anti-European gear. With the leadership's hands free of official responsibilities, gut feelings of nationalism at the grass-roots level were able to percolate through into the realm of policy. But the transformation was neither easy nor complete. As many as 68 Labour M.P.s defied the Whips and voted in the Government lobbies for British entry; a further nineteen abstained. One leading pro-EEC member, Dick Traverne, told the Commons that he would vote this way despite the formal decisions of the Labour Party, and despite an opinion poll in his own constituency which had showed it to be strongly opposed to entry. Roy Jenkins, deputy party leader, had even taken a leading role in the inter-party Common Market Campaign of 1961-63. The party also included some of the fiercest opponents of British membership of the EEC. So although motives of party unity swayed Wilson into an anti-Market position, more long-term considerations of Labour's role as a party of government confined his critique to the terms negotiated by the Conservatives, and stopped him short of a full-fledged opposition to the principle of British membership *per se*.

Despite these constraints on political parties and the media, there was no lack of propaganda. The Government's own White Paper of July 1971 urged Britain to "accept the challenge, seize the opportunity and join the European Communities", but was more of an explanation of the terms of entry than an attempt at mass conversion. *The Economist's* booklet *Britain into Europe* followed a similar pattern. On the other side, the *New Statesman* produced a free pamphlet, *The Case Against Entry*, aiming at detailed criticism of the official White Paper. The advertising, literature and meetings of the European Movement ("Joining Europe means More Jobs in Britain") competed with those of the Common Market Safeguards Campaign. Groups with special interests secured some publicity through the columns of the more committed press. But it is difficult to avoid the impression that attempts at persuading public opinion were fewer and more insignificant in their impact, and the groups making them less confident of success and more doubtful of the advantages of changing attitudes, than on the occasions of the two bids for Common Market entry in the 1960s. Minds were for the most part already

made up, or else bored by a second replay of 1961; and the determined pro or anti would not be exposed to much contrary argument in his daily life.

The farmers and industry for the most part looked elsewhere to achieve their goals, working on the hunch that a reliance on public opinion was a risky investment. And indeed the real source of the momentum sustaining Britain's European policy from 1961 to 1971 was Whitehall, both the Foreign Office and the Treasury. Even if Harold Macmillan, at least in his mobilisation of the Conservative Party towards Europe, conceived of Britain's role in terms of regional leadership and "greatness", the more crucial factors were economic. Towards the end of 1971, two books appeared, each from different authors and publishers, but each bearing the title *Can Britain Survive?* The Duncan Report on diplomacy stressed in 1968 what had long been accepted as conventional wisdom: Britain's overriding foreign policy need was an expansion of exports. Given the external tariff of the Six, this could be secured only through close and formal ties with Europe.

Each British application for EEC membership, then, was coupled with official soundings among various elites and interest groups. With the important decisions taken, checks were made through party machinery, the press and the polls, to ensure that policies would not trigger a fundamental opposition from the general public. No assessment of the public mood in 1971 could have reached such a conclusion. And unlike Denmark, a co-applicant for EEC membership, Britain was not hampered by constitutional obligations to take public opinion formally into account. The demands from leading figures in the Labour Party, for a referendum or a General Election on the Common Market issue, could therefore be safely ignored by the Government.

Perhaps the most serious indictment of democracy is made for the lack of support the governmental system obtains from the public on Foreign Policy.

D. J. Devine, *The Attentive Public:
Polyarchival Democracy*, 1970.

In Britain as in other countries, an absence of persistent public attention is endemic in the field of foreign policy. The Common Market issue, though having extensive ramifications for domestic British policies, displayed many features of the general pattern. As such, it threw into sharp relief a number of distinctive traits of British politics.

Indifference to foreign affairs in some ways reflects a more subtle and elusive orientation towards reality. In a 1932 essay, Harold Laski elaborated on the values associated with British ruling elites:

The gentleman is, rather than does; he maintains towards life an attitude of indifferent receptivity. He is interested in nothing in a professional way. . . . He should know nothing of political economy and less about how foreign countries are governed.⁶

Paradoxically, such admired attributes, for long pervasive in British diplomacy, have gradually been edged to the sidelines as the Foreign Office has followed the Treasury's lead in a commitment to professionalization. It is rather in the wider public that something of the attitude lingers. The resulting style of political discourse is itself a substantive statement. For all its apparent importance for Britain's future, the Common Market issue tended to be discussed in tones of bemused detachment. Commentary on the Heath-Pompidou summit of May 1971 hinged a good deal on Mr. Heath's unfortunate grasp of French idiom and accent. The code is not always easy to identify; a distinguished American observer, George Ball, at one point in the summer of 1971 referred in a *Times* article to Britain's agonising over its EEC decision, a turn of phrase that could hardly have been less appropriate for a British commentator.

This is not to deny that the issue was taken seriously by public opinion. It was, though in varying degrees by different publics. But the nature of the British political system is such that broadly-based public feeling can only rarely achieve sustained articulation in policy-making circles. The English, noted Bagehot, have a genius for deference, a judgment supported by recent empirical research into working-class Toryism. And when its target is transferred to a modern Whitehall, staffed by economists and professional administrators and not by Laskian gentlemen, deference easily spills over into a profound unease at the handling of the nation's affairs. Yet as the Common Market issue indicates, it is difficult even then for political parties, the media, or non-specialised propaganda groups, to make much of a dent in the decision-making process. Even in the field of domestic policy, the executive branch of government is well-endowed with a panoply of weapons to guard the virginity of decisions from the encroachments of public opinion. The Labour Party, it is intriguing to note, only proposed solutions—referenda and elections—that would serve to protect the essential features of existing policy-making procedures.

"The British people", Harold Nicholson wrote in 1937, "have not yet acquired the habit of judgment in regard to foreign policy".⁶ In the case of the Common Market, the inertia of public opinion was compounded of several elements: lack of conviction that the outcome could be changed by more active participation, traditional deference, suspicion that the terms of entry negotiated by the Conservatives were—despite Labour's criticisms—the best possible in the

circumstances, and sheer lack of interest. The early years of British membership of the EEC might change some of these, as decisions come to be taken on British problems by as many as ten countries. In that event, particular discontents with Brussels policies might well spark off more vociferous public demands than were in evidence in 1971. Happily it is not a task of the present essay to speculate on the desirability or the consequences of such developments.

NOTES

1. Herbert Morrison, *Government and Parliament*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 180.
2. E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919-1939*, New York: Harper and Row, 1964, p. 35.
3. William Albig, *Modern Public Opinion*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956, p. 21.
4. James Eayrs, "Canada and the enlarged Community", *The Round Table*, 244, October 1971, p. 544.
5. Harold J. Laski, "The Danger of Being a Gentleman: Reflections on the Ruling Class in England", in *The Danger of Being a Gentleman, and Other Essays*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1939, p. 13.
6. Harold Nicholson, "British Public Opinion and Foreign Policy", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1, January 1937, p. 55.