

Book review

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ROY JENKINS AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION PRESIDENCY, 1976-1980: AT THE HEART OF EUROPE

Author: N. Piers Ludlow

Abstract

A fine piece of research and writing on a pivotal figure in British and European political history. Using previously untouched archives, this work on Roy Jenkins and his period as president of the European Commission is a valuable addition to the scholarship on Britain's storied relationship with the European project.

Keywords

European Union, European Economic Community, UK

It is difficult to contest the assertion that Britain has had – and continues to have – a complex and often fraught relationship with both the reality and the idea of European integration. The many instances of this have only been brought into even sharper relief by the UK's 'Brexit' referendum. The fallout from the supposed democratic will of the British people is for future historians to analyse, but the vote to leave the EU was also bound up in questions of sovereignty, deep-seated concerns about immigration, and ephemeral notions of national greatness (or a lack thereof).

This being the case, it is more vital than ever that historians continue to explore and chart not only the evolution, nature, and outcomes of integration, but the role played by Britain and British individuals in advancing or retarding the integration process. The London School of Economics' N. Piers Ludlow's latest book *Roy Jenkins and the European Commission Presidency, 1976-1980: At the Heart of Europe* offers a timely and fascinating account of British influence at the centre of the European Economic Community (EEC) maelstrom.

One of the leading historians of post-war European integration, Ludlow has previously written and edited impressive works on the subject, ranging from European reactions to the UK's first EEC membership application, through the challenges posed by Gaullism, to questions of identity's place within visions of integration. As a scholar he is thus eminently well placed to explore and analyse Roy Jenkins, one of Britain's most fascinating pro-European politicians. Not only does the book set out to assess the perspectives, talents, and priorities that Jenkins brought to the role of European Commission President, it also seeks to shine a light upon the role itself, enquiring into its nature and history, and the ways in which the European Community sought to face up to the economic turbulence of the 1970s.

This is not, it must be noted, a book for the casual reader. Aimed at an informed audience, it is deeply researched and highly detailed, frequently offering microscopic detail of policy, process, and personality. It forms part of Palgrave Macmillan's 'Security, Conflict, and Cooperation in the World Series', which covers topics as diverse as US-Iranian relations, the Falklands Conflict, and a number of works on the diversity of European Community politics in the twentieth century. This being the case, it is priced at the academic end of the spectrum, placing it beyond the reach of all but the most dedicated amateur.

Very helpful for the reader is Ludlow's opening sketch of Jenkins's storied career as Labour Party politician, crusading Home Secretary, forceful Chancellor of the Exchequer, frustrated would-be leader of his party, and Prime Minister that never was. This first substantive chapter helps to place Jenkins in context: frustrated with the thwarting of his domestic ambitions, staunchly pro-European, and the kind of political heavyweight that the European Commission sought as a leader in the crisis of the 1970s. The author then goes on to offer chapters on Jenkins's preparations for the presidency, his battle to ensure his participation in the G7 summits (a fight that he won), his critical participation in the European Monetary System's launch, Community enlargement, and international relations, and the President's eventual return to British politics as a driving force behind the new Social Democratic Party.

At the heart of Ludlow's research sits an impressive source base. As the first historian to access the voluminous papers of Jenkins's *chef de cabinet* Sir Crispin Tickell, this volume breaks new archival ground. As Ludlow recounts, Tickell's papers are quite different to the normal European Commission sources. They are detailed and highly informative, quite unlike the "highly patchy" and often 'Delphic' (to use the author's own words) European Commission archives. This archive – and Ludlow's scrupulous attention to it – is of immense value. It permits the author to construct a picture of the ambitions, work, and travails of a Commission president in more detail than ever before. And this thus throws greater light on the workings of the Commission, the Community as a whole, and the interactions of Commission and Community with the wider world. If anything deserves highlighting regarding this impressive volume, it is this particular archival aspect.

Aside from the Tickell papers, Ludlow also draws upon a wide range of interviews, memoirs, diaries, and a significant body of secondary material. This gives the book impressive scope and weight. It also aids in avoiding the perils of the political biography by providing a granular, sometimes raw, portrayal of Jenkins and his work.

Ludlow's new work will appeal to a variety of scholars. For those interested in a moment where it appeared Britain might take a genuinely formative, leading role in European institutions, it offers an impressive analytical account. Those who study the role of the individual in European affairs will find much food for thought, especially in regard to the nature and influence of the European Commission President since Jenkins's tenure. Finally, it adds to our knowledge of the 1970s in an international context. Since this decade is currently the subject of increasing scholarly attention, this can only be a good and valuable thing.

One aspect that could have been drawn out a little more explicitly is the role played by globalisation – broadly defined – during Jenkins's tenure. This is an expanding, vibrant field of study, with historians using the concept of globalisation to offer new analyses of domestic and foreign policies, transnational organisations, religion, and so on and so forth. Within the context of external relations between the EEC and the wider world, it would have been interesting to examine how the currents of globalisation affected the president's work and the role of the Commission in both intra-European and international contexts.

Another related area which receives brief attention is energy policy. As Ludlow points out, the Commission did not begin to substantively grapple with the complexities of energy until the 'second oil shock' following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. However, given the warm relationship between Jenkins and US president Jimmy Carter, it would be interesting to know if and how the Commission reacted to Carter's global nuclear energy and non-proliferation initiatives (such as the International Fuel Cycle Evaluation Program) that he proposed in the first few months of his administration. Was it the case that the Commission simply did not engage with these matters? With Jenkins present at the G7 summits where energy and non-proliferation were extensively discussed (although he was excluded from the 1977 meetings of national leaders), are these factors present in the Tickell files? If they are present, this could be a fruitful avenue for future research. If they are absent, this seems to represent an interesting omission worthy of further consideration. This is not to say that increasing global interdependence and energy concerns go unremarked in the volume. However, a wider exploration of these themes may have been useful (if indeed the archival sources make such wider exploration possible, which may not be the case).

In the end, any criticisms are minor. Ludlow has taken his extensive experience and applied it to a fascinating new set of sources that demonstrably enhance a previously patchy archive. To return to Britain's relationship with Europe and with those who study it, it demonstrates – if any demonstration were needed – the absurdity of certain pro-Brexit politicians' statements that experts should just keep quiet.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION:

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N. Piers Ludlow

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