

**From ‘Empire Shopping’ to ‘Buying British’: the public politics of consumption,
1945-63**

David Thackeray and Richard Toye (University of Exeter)

During the 1920s and 1930s tens of thousands of Britons participated in campaigns which encouraged shoppers to buy goods from the UK or other parts of the empire. And yet the cause of empire buying appears to have died out rapidly after 1945 as consumer movements became increasingly national and insular in focus. Consumer campaigns such as ‘I’m Backing Britain’ (1968) were notable for their economic nationalism and neglect of the (post)imperial economy. This paper traces post-war shifts in the politics of consumption, showing how government and civil society groups articulated competing consumer appeals of Empire/Commonwealth preference, economic nationalism and Europeanism at a time of geopolitical uncertainty. Addressing the debates surrounding the negotiation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1947, the paper considers why this very important development – which involved scaling back imperial preference – generated little of the controversy that surrounded trade in the first decades of the twentieth century. It then explores how decolonization and the turn to Europe affected the discourse of the ‘citizen-consumer’ (to use Frank Trentmann’s term).¹ The rise of the concept of ‘economic underdevelopment’ was not matched by a sense that consumers – as opposed to governments and NGOs – should take responsibility for tackling the problem. The paper examines the British government’s efforts to win over public opinion at the time of the first (failed) bid to join the EEC in 1961-3, exploring the interplay between consumer interests and strategic

¹ Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2008).

considerations in pro- and anti-common market discourse. It is our hypothesis that the period as a whole was one in which the public representation of the idealised consumer emerged as a figure with loyalties which were now primarily national rather than imperial, or post-imperial. Our story provides a challenge to histories of the consumer which neglect the story of patriotic consumption. It also questions histories of post-colonial Britain that have focused on media representations of Empire at the expense of the issue of how people mobilised in civil society organisations to promote visions of Britishness through trade. We seek to build on recent work that has highlighted the ways in which ideas of markets are influenced by how economic identities are rationalised by civil society and business groups.² We believe that in order to understand these shifting identities they must be placed within the context of major geopolitical shifts, including, in the British case, the rise of international organization, the Cold War, decolonization, and the turn to Europe.

I

Recent work has highlighted the substantial role that trade links played in strengthening the ‘British world’ as a cultural and economic unit, particularly in the years after the First World War. Between 1871 and 1938 the proportion of Britain’s exports that went to the Empire rose from 26.8% to 41.3%, whilst there was a fall in the relative share that went to America and western Europe. Trade links grew with the Dominions. Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa accounted for more than a quarter of Britain’s exports by the 1930s.³ This period saw a concurrent rise in support for a protectionist economic system, which would foster preferential trade with the Empire. High interwar unemployment gave credence to the

² See, for example, Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY, 2012); Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c.1850-1914* (Cambridge, 2010); Neil Rollings, *British Business in the Formative Years of European Integration, 1945-1973* (Cambridge, 2007); Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*.

³ Gary Magee, ‘The importance of being British? Imperial factors and the growth of British imports, 1870-1960’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 37 (2007), 341-69 at 342.

idea that free trade had failed. The role that business groups played in promoting imperial preference and safeguarding tariffs for British industries has been discussed by historians at length.⁴ However, civil society groups also played a major role in encouraging the public to ‘Buy British’ in the 1930s, by which they meant the preferential purchase of goods from home and imperial producers. Influential newspapers were also involved. The *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* ran a joint campaign for ‘Empire Free Trade’, that is to say, a system of imperial tariffs. The *Mail* argued that the British housewife should exercise her consuming power in patriotic fashion:

There is no actual tariff yet. But at all costs she must, wherever possible, buy British, thus setting up an imaginary tariff wall for herself ... Every woman should spend as much as she can afford, always remembering, however, that every pound expended on foreign scents, cosmetics and clothes is contributing to a trade balance that is already weighted against her country.⁵

‘Foreign’ in this context of course meant ‘outside the Empire’. There was an interesting tension in the argument, which played up the role of the citizen-consumer whilst at the same time promoting government action. For one might ask: if patriotic citizens really could build ‘an imaginary tariff wall’ through their collective choices, where was the need for a real tariff? It was, however, clear that citizens could not be expected to ‘Buy British’ if the goods were not clearly labelled as such: hence government concern with marks of origin.⁶

⁴ See, for example, Forrest Capie, ‘The sources and origins of Britain’s return to protection, 1931-2’, in Andrew Marrison ed., *Free Trade and its Reception 1815-1960, Freedom and Trade: vol. 1* (1998), pp. 246-59; Andrew Marrison, *British Business and Protection, 1903-1932* (Oxford, 1996), chs.10-12; Frank Trentmann, ‘The transformation of fiscal reform: reciprocity, modernization, and the fiscal debate within the business community in early twentieth century Britain’, *Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), 1005-48

⁵ *Daily Mail*, 18 Sept. 1931, quoted in Adrian Bingham, ‘Enfranchisement, Feminism and the Modern Woman: Debates in the British Popular Press, 1918-1939’, in Julie Gottlieb and Richard Toye (eds.), *The Aftermath of Suffrage: What Happened After the Vote Was Won?* (Basingstoke, forthcoming).

⁶ As Philip Cunliffe-Lister put it, ‘The counterpart to creating a desire to buy British goods is some method of ensuring to the consumer that he is, in fact, carrying out his desire.’ ‘Unemployment Policy and Trade Revival: Memorandum by the President of the Board of Trade’, 27 July 1925, CP 366 (25), CAB/24/174, The National Archives, Kew, London (henceforward TNA). The Merchandise Marks Act (1926) meant that goods had to be labelled ‘foreign’, ‘Empire’ or ‘British’ made (David Clayton, ‘Buy British: the collective marketing of cotton

Seeking to tap into popular enthusiasm for the cause, advertisers made heavy use of the ‘Buy British’ slogan. It was quite possible to use it without invoking the Empire, which was, however, often present (see Figures 1 and 2). It could be used to knock competitors (Figure 3) Empire shopping was portrayed as a duty to help kith and kin, as the Conservative magazine *Home and Politics* noted in 1928: ‘What would be said of a woman who went down the street, marketing-bag on arm and who passed her son’s grocery shop to make her purchases in the establishment of a stranger’.⁷ Readers of this publication were encouraged to support the cause through Empire fetes, shopping weeks and pageants.⁸ A ‘Buy British’ campaign was launched by the Conservative-dominated National Government shortly after its landslide election victory in October 1931. Organised through the government-sponsored Empire Marketing Board the campaign gained the active support of over 400 organisations ranging from business groups like the Federation of British Industries, National Union of Manufacturers, National Chamber of Trade and Incorporated Association of Retail Distributors, as well as civic organisations including the British Legion, Rotary and Women’s Institutes.⁹ Amongst the more zealous supporters of the campaign was a clubman who complained about being invariably supplied with foreign shark fins, which stirred the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* to provide the following commentary: ‘We, of course, have no sympathy with foreign sharks. If these misguided fish choose to leave the freedom of British waters for the slavery of alien seas, then their fins should not go down British gullets. British sharks for British teeth, every time. If the Empire Marketing Board convinces everyone at

textiles, 1956-1962’, *Textile History*, 41 (2010), 217-35, at 227.) Consumers were encouraged to look for these trade marks when carrying out their purchases. See, for example, ‘Mrs. Maggs goes shopping and speaks her mind’, *Home and Empire*, June 1930, p. 16.

⁷ *Home and Politics*, May 1928, p. 9; Empire Marketing Board literature likewise often presented the Empire as a family whose bonds needed to be strengthened through trade. Stephen Constantine, *Buy and Build: The Advertising Posters of the Empire Marketing Board* (1986), p. 12.

⁸ See for example ‘Food for thought: the dinner table and the Empire’, *Home and Politics*, May 1926, p. 9; NUCA, *Handbook on Constituency Organisation* (1928), p. 117.

⁹ Circular letter from Stephen Tallents to the managers of Ministry of Labour Employment Exchanges, 28 Oct. 193, ICS79/6/3; Empire Marketing Board, “Buy British” campaign, ICS79/6/4; Memo., “Buy British”. A nation-wide, official drive’, ICS79/6/8, all Tallents MSS, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London.

this rate, Britain will have no alternative but to annex the world'.¹⁰ This suggests that, if the idea of 'Buying British' achieved considerable resonance at this time, it also generated some scepticism.

In the 1920s and 1930s imperial preference did not solely rely on the appeal of emotional attachment to Empire, rather it offered a modern language of internationalism based around the need to shore up the British Empire as an exemplary commonwealth of 'free peoples'. One programme for an Empire Shopping Week argued that trade would further the ability of the Dominions to stand as 'bulwarks of peace around the world' at a time of growing social unrest and political extremism.¹¹ Building on the rhetoric of the Edwardian tariff reform campaign, Empire Marketing Board propaganda highlighted the growing modernity of Empire as a result of advances in agricultural science and economic investigation.¹² As one of its leading figures Stephen Tallents noted in an unpublished memoir written in the 1940s: 'We were concerned to show the British Empire as a practical and forward-looking institution and to avoid sentimental accounts of its past glories and present attractions'.¹³

National Government propaganda was keen to present the Empire as vital to Britain's trade. In a 1934 film produced for the Conservative party's film unit Britain is presented as being too small to be self-supporting and the Dominions are portrayed as major customers for British manufactures. A concluding monologue invokes kinship rhetoric, describing the Empire as a 'great family linked together in a blood brotherhood of loyalty and service....by

¹⁰ 'Penalty of Empire', *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 25 May 1932, cutting in Tallents MSS, ICS79/31/2.

¹¹ Coulsdon Chamber of Commerce, *Coulsdon Empire Shopping Week 1st October- 8th October 1927 programme* (1927); One Empire Marketing Board (EMB) poster displayed in November 1929 contained the caption 'The Empire stands for peace', Public Record Office (PRO), CO956/127-31.

¹² EMB, 'East African transport- old style' (1930), CO956/211; 'East African transport - new style' (1930), CO956/215, 'The Empire is still in building' (1930), CO956/225, all TNA.

¹³ Stephen Tallents, 'Empire Experiment', prologue (version 2), p. 5, n.d. [c.1945], Tallents MSS, ICS79/25

helping our Dominions, we are benefitting ourselves'.¹⁴ Similarly, the Empire Marketing Board was keen to be seen as aiding the home producer, instructing consumers: 'Ask first in your daily shopping for the produce of your own country. Ask next for the produce of the Empire overseas ... [if] it is satisfactory in price and quality, choose it in preference to foreign produce'.¹⁵ In the 1930s the 'Buying British' cause appears to have sustained a significant popular movement, which outlived the disbandment of the Empire Marketing Board in 1933.

II

In the late summer of 1940, an analysis by government censors of mail sent abroad found that:

References to 'our own Island' are startlingly frequent. The value of slogans as an aid to morale appears to be considerable: 'Digging for Victory' and 'There'll always be an England' are constantly quoted, but the phrase 'Our Island Fortress' is used more often and with more gusto than any other. Writers, for the most part, completely ignore the British Empire as a composite unit, and there are only bare references to the presence of colonial troops in this country, or to the help given by Dominions and Colonies. This would suggest that another and more imperial slogan would be of value, provided that it caught on.¹⁶

But it seems that efforts to promote an empire consciousness did not catch on. In recent work David Edgerton has argued that conceptions of British economic identity were reconceptualised during the Second World War and its aftermath. Ideas of Britain as an 'island nation' were voiced by politicians during the 1945 election and economic nationalism was fuelled thereafter by the Attlee government which encouraged domestic food production

¹⁴ Conservative and Unionist Film Association, *Empire Trade* (1934): <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/1312>. The film appeared in the 'Britain under the National Government' series.

¹⁵ EMB, 'Empire Marketing Board - May 1928 to May 1929' (1929), p. 22; see also EMB, 'Empire Marketing Board- May 1927 to May 1928' (1928), pp. 35-6.

¹⁶ 'Home Opinion as Shewn in the Mails to the USA and Eire', 5 Sept. 1940, WP (40) 359, CAB 66/11/39, TNA.

and encouraged manufacturing through the purchasing power of nationalised industries.¹⁷ What seems striking is that this change in state policy was mirrored by a more insular and national focus amongst civil society groups. Whereas the consumer was implored that it was their duty to sustain the Empire through preferential buying in the 1930s, a new language emerged after 1945 which instructed the housewife to perform their patriotic duty through economical buying and saving ration coupons.¹⁸

New consumer groups like the British Housewives' League, which attacked austerity and rationing, were noticeably insular in their identity. Their campaigns influenced the Conservative party, which developed a new consumer politics in the late 1940s focused on the idea that an abolition of controls was necessary to revive living standards.¹⁹ A similarly inward-looking approach appears to have been adopted by other leading civic associations. Whereas the Women's Institutes had been keen supporters of Empire shopping in the 1930s, attention shifted in the Attlee years to 'Operation Produce', the growing of food on allotments and smallholdings to cut down the dollar bill, increase exports, and supplement home supplies.²⁰ As Megan Lloyd George noted at the WI's conference in 1948: 'Empire and Argentine meats are all right. We are glad of them. But it is the roast beef of Old England that has made you what you are'.²¹ This nationalistic approach to food production was also encouraged by propaganda documentaries, which focused on the need to export more to deal with Britain's balance-of-payments crisis. Such approaches are apparent in Paul Rotha's *The*

¹⁷ David Edgerton, 'War, reconstruction and the nationalization of Britain, 1939-1951', *Past and Present*, supplement 6 (2011), pp. 29-46 at pp. 30, 36-7, 40.

¹⁸ See for example Tintex advert, *Home and Country*, Sep. 1948, p. 170; 'A job for Jiffy' advert, *Home and Country*, July 1948, p. 126.

¹⁹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 119, 128, 207-8, 214-5; James Hinton, 'Militant housewives: The British Housewives' League and the Attlee government', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), 129-56.

²⁰ For WI support for Empire shopping in the 1930s see for example *Home and Country*, Dec. 1931, p. 607; Jan. 1932, p. 6; Mar. 1932, pp. 110-11.

²¹ Megan Lloyd George, 'The world food situation', *Home and Country*, June 1948, p. 92.

Balance (1947), which makes no distinction between the role of the Commonwealth and the rest of the world in Britain's food imports, and *United Harvest* (1947), which highlights the vitality of British agriculture and makes no mention of imperial food imports.²²

Interestingly, research surveys conducted in the 1940s demonstrated an uncertainty about the future of the Commonwealth trade relationship and a degree of support for the concept of a European free trade agreement, although such surveys should be treated with some caution given the lack of comparable opinion poll data for previous decades. In a 1943 BBC Listener Research Department survey eighty six percent of respondents replied that most of their contacts regarded the Empire as an economic asset. However, the report claimed that there was 'an abundant sense of uneasiness, at any rate among that section of the public which has a sense of social responsibility, about the present state of [the] economic and social development of the Colonial Empire. It is clear that nothing has done more to bring this about the fall of Malaya, which caused widespread questioning of our Colonial policy'.²³ Moreover, whilst the development of the Sterling Area was the key factor in the development of intra-imperial trade in this decade a Colonial Office survey conducted in 1948 found that only twenty one percent of participants knew that the colonies helped to earn US dollars for Britain.²⁴ Intriguingly, a Research Services Limited survey conducted the same year, around the time that the Treaty of Brussels was being signed, found that half of informants had heard of plans for some kind of union of Western European countries. Seventy six percent of all

²² Edgerton, 'War, reconstruction', pp. 41-2.

²³ BBC Listener Research Report, 'The British Empire. Some aspects of public opinion on the British Empire, and in particular, the Colonial Empire, January 1943', (1943), pp. 2, 5, LR/1558. The survey was based on a sample of 895 correspondents. See also Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 26, 28-9; Richard Toye, 'An imperial defeat? The presentation and reception of the fall of Singapore', in Brian Farrell (ed.), *Churchill and the Lion City: Shaping Modern Singapore* (Singapore, 2011), pp. 108-129.

²⁴ The report was based on a survey of 1921 participants. G.K. Evens, *Public Opinion on Colonial Affairs* (1948), p. iii. It should be noted that the Sterling Area and the Empire-Commonwealth were not coterminous. Catherine R. Schenk has recently argued persuasively against the view that the Sterling Area was propped up by nostalgic Commonwealth sentiment: *The Decline of Sterling: Managing the Retreat of an International Currency 1945-1992* (Cambridge, 2010).

participants were in favour of a European free trade area.²⁵ Whereas ‘Buying British’ had been imbued with ideas about Empire co-operation before the war, public interest in the imperial economic project appears to have flagged in the 1940s when more immediate issues of national food production, and state control over access to consumer goods, dominated the politics of consumption.

III

The increasingly domesticated nature of post-war economic discourse helps explain why debates around the negotiation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1947 generated little of the controversy that surrounded trade in the first decades of the twentieth century, even though signing the GATT was a major departure in British trade policy and involved the scaling back of imperial preference. The GATT marked an important stage in the shift between two contrasting types of trade liberalism. Late nineteenth century free trade arguments were strongly influenced by *moral internationalism*, the assumption that global economic well-being was best secured by governments reducing trade barriers unilaterally out of enlightened self-interest. Attempts at regulation – though there were some - were contested, even if they sought to tackle anti-competitive behaviour. The 1902 Brussels Sugar Convention was an agreement by ten countries, including Britain, to work together to tackle export bounties that destabilized the international market. The effort was a success, but it was opposed by Liberals who, prizing cheap sugar for British consumers above all else, portrayed involvement in an international commission as an attack on British sovereignty. In 1912 the Liberal government denounced the convention. After 1945, by contrast, arguments for freer trade were almost always based on *institutional internationalism*

²⁵ Research Services Limited, Public Opinion Survey, Marshall Plan, (Mar. 1948), pp. 5, 7, Abrams MSS, Churchill College, Cambridge, ABRMS3/8.

which assumed that successful liberalization required an international regulatory framework in order to avoid free riding and enforce good behaviour.²⁶ The Conservatives accused Labour of having done too little to safeguard imperial preference during the GATT negotiations but, in spite of some Labour and Tory internal divisions, there was sufficient common ground between the three main parties to ensure that international trade did not become a zone of major political strife.

Part of the reason for that relative consensus was that the emerging international economic settlement flowed to a considerable degree from commitments made, to the Americans in particular, during the period of the wartime coalition. A commitment to some form of international trade organisation that would work towards a reduction in barriers had also been a condition of the post-war US loan, for which Churchill as Leader of the Opposition had given crucial backing, albeit behind the scenes.²⁷ It is also notable that there is surprisingly little evidence of coordinated industry lobbying, or of civil society engagement with the negotiations. The Empire Economic Union sent to Geneva its Research Secretary, Ronald Russell, who wrote reports deploring ‘any surrender of Imperial Preference’, and the veteran Tariff Reformer Leo Amery continued to hope that the Labour government would be driven by events ‘straight on to the Empire path’.²⁸ Although a substantial part of the Conservative Party remained sympathetic to Amery’s brand of constructive imperialism, few were prepared to give imperial preference the priority he did. The fact that the government managed – against heavy American pressure – to ensure the continuation of imperial

²⁶ For the distinction between the two types of internationalism, see Casper Sylvest, *British Liberal Internationalism, 1880-1930: Making Progress?* (Manchester, 2009), p. 10. For their application to trade issues see Richard Toye, ‘The International Trade Organization’, in Amrita Narlikar, Martin Daunton and Robert Stern (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the World Trade Organization* (Oxford, forthcoming). On the Sugar Convention, see Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*, pp. 154-61.

²⁷ Richard Toye, ‘Churchill and Britain’s “Financial Dunkirk”’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 15 (2004), pp. 329-60.

²⁸ Ronald Russell, ‘Third Report From Geneva’, n.d. (July 1947?), FO 371/62310, TNA; Leo Amery diary, 22 Aug. 1947, Leo Amery Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge.

preference, whilst reducing its scope and committing against its further expansion, helped neutralize it as a political issue.²⁹ Mass-Observation found that amongst the public at this time: ‘Commonwealth Preference is ... strongly approved. In this case, however, there is a very high proportion of people who give no answer and it seems probable that agreement is, to some extent, due to vagueness as to what Commonwealth Preference really is.’³⁰

If active support for Empire trade links was somewhat lacking, it was also the case that advocates of freer trade did little to invoke the language of the citizen-consumer. The government’s justifications for the Geneva process did not depend on the benefits that liberalizing trade would bring to individuals. It was not inherently desirable for Britain to cut its trade barriers; doing so was simply the necessary quid pro quo to get other countries to reduce theirs, thus boosting British exports so that the country could pay its way.³¹ There was, nonetheless, an element of Cobdenite language in Sir Stafford Cripps’s claim that ‘a new economic international organisation was absolutely vital for the future peace of the world.’³² This claim reflected a recognition of the ideological proclivities of the US negotiators, not a faith in the power of free enterprise to heal political rifts, a suggestion which was at any rate fast losing credibility as the Cold War began in earnest. The Attlee government did believe in the virtues of international exchange, but also in the power of governments to manage it. Hence its continued enthusiasm for bilateral deals and governmental bulk purchase, even as it put its signature to the (cautiously) liberalizing GATT.

²⁹ For the detail of the negotiations, see Richard Toye, ‘The Attlee government, the imperial preference system, and the creation of the GATT’, *The English Historical Review* 118 (2003), pp. 912-939.

³⁰ ‘A Report on The Industrial Charter’ (File Report 2516), Mass-Observation Archive.

³¹ See for example, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 5th Series, Vol. 435, 24 March 1947, cols. 885-898: speech of Sir Stafford Cripps.

³² Speech by Sir Stafford Cripps, ‘Second Session of the Preparatory Committee of the International Conference on Trade and Employment; Verbatim Report: Third Meeting: 11 April 1947’, GATT Archive, E/PC/T/PV. 2/3.

This was a time, of course, at which the British consumer was radically disempowered by shortages, rationing and controls. One might attempt to demonstrate one's citizenship through cheerful economy, but there were limits to how far it was possible to do so through the patriotic exercise of consumer choice when the government played such an important role in determining what was available to buy. There does seem to have been popular support for the idea that British agricultural products should be favoured, even if they cost more. This view was likely influenced by the fact that a strong farming sector could be seen as a security measure in case of future war.³³ (Agriculture was effectively excluded from the GATT.) In a 1947 report, Mass-Observation found that workers in the agricultural sector resented the government's management of fruit purchases from abroad, which seemed to contradict its messages about the importance of domestic production. The following comment was cited as typical:

Naturally we want to raise more food at home, that's what we're in the farming line for – the Government doesn't have to tell us that and then stab us in the back by glutting the country with pineapples and peaches when the orchards are heavy with fruit. This year's been an exceptional fruit year, and yet we read of the Government buying apples from abroad. Just look at these boxes of apples, they're Worcesters, and they're being sent to Brentford and we're being paid a very low price for a bushel because the market's flooded with foreign fruit instead of giving home grocers the opportunity.³⁴

³³ BBC Listener Research Report, "Jobs For All": Eight Broadcasts on Full Employment and its effect on individuals at home and abroad', January 1945, LR/3164.

³⁴ 'A Report on The Industrial Charter' (File Report 2516), Mass-Observation Archive.

At a time of had currency shortage, importing in general tended to be seen as inherently suspect.³⁵ Although buying UK goods in preference to others was thus implicitly desirable, the great patriotic activity was participation in the export drive.

There was, then, nothing especially virtuous about buying a British motor-car at a time when a) there were few non-British ones available to buy, and b) it might have been better if the car had been sold abroad. An advert for Nuffield encouraged consumers to be grateful for the fact its workers went ‘shopping for you with their spanners’ by earning hard currency that paid for food imports.³⁶ One for Thermos explained why it could not keep up with home demand for its vacuum flasks: it was exporting to India and Pakistan, seeing off Japanese competition, and establishing a long-term market. This was in British consumers’ own best interests, although it meant putting up with scarcity in the meantime.³⁷ In the 1950s, however, the political economy of deferred gratification gave way to a culture that was at ease with consumerism. This also involved a revival and a reconfiguration of the figure of the citizen-consumer.

IV

The rise of ‘affluence’ was accompanied by considerable questioning of consumerism, as well as celebration of it. The 1957 launch of the Consumers’ Association (CA) and its magazine *Which?* was representative of this societal ambivalence. As Lawrence Black has argued, CA’s leadership sought to promote ‘a citizenship critically aware of the risks and possibilities of the market and with international and radical leanings.’ Furthermore, ‘CA was

³⁵ For example, an advert for Ford in the *Illustrated London News*, 22 May 1948, said that while in the old days the Dagenham marshes had been the haunt of smugglers who brought ‘black, forbidden imports’, the area was now dedicated to a better purpose: a Ford factory building for export.

³⁶ ‘Nuffield Products’, *Illustrated London News*, 23 Oct. 1948.

³⁷ ‘Thermos’, *Illustrated London News*, 17 Dec. 1949.

all for aiding the British economy, but by improving quality and value not through patriotic purchasing.’³⁸ There was a post-imperial dimension to citizenship/consumption issues. The concept of ‘economic underdevelopment’ had emerged by the mid-1940s, and played a significant part in the international trade negotiations surrounding the GATT.³⁹ The representatives of the developing countries were concerned to retain the right to employ quantitative import restrictions and the like; they were not demanding that Western consumers change their individual purchasing decisions to favour their goods (which would hardly have been appropriate in inter-governmental talks). The idea of a pro-welfare trade policy had existed prior to the Great War. In 1903, Ramsay MacDonald defined Labour’s policy as that of ‘buying in the best market, and the idea of the best must include some consideration of the circumstances under which the product on the market has been made.’ This could justify government discrimination against imports produced under ‘sweated’ conditions.⁴⁰ It was not until the 1960s that the fair trade movement as we now understand it – based on positive decisions to buy ‘ethically produced’ goods - began to take off in Britain. But before this there was an important attempt to use negative consumer power for the purposes of good. In 1959, anti-apartheid activists launched a campaign to boycott South African products. This was a continuation of the older idea of the trade boycott, a tool used against slave-produced sugar at the end of the Eighteenth Century and, less effectively, against Germany in the 1930s.

³⁸ Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation. 1954-70* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 16-17. For the CA see also Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in twentieth century Britain: the search for a historical movement* (Cambridge, 2003), chaps. 6-9.

³⁹ H.W. Arndt, *Economic Development: The History of an Idea* (Chicago, 1987); John Teye and Richard Teye, *The UN and Global Political Economy: Trade, Finance and Development* (Bloomington, IN, 2004), Chapter 1.

⁴⁰ Frank Trentmann, ‘Wealth Versus Welfare: The British Left between Free Trade and National Political Economy before the First World War’, *Historical Research* 70 (1997), pp. 70-98, at 77, quoting Ramsay MacDonald, *The Zollverein and British Industry* (1903), p. 163.

So the concept of the citizen-consumer did have an international dimension at this time – but the context was being continually reshaped as the British Empire entered its death throes. Unsurprisingly, the term ‘Commonwealth’ progressively crowded out ‘Empire’ and related terms from British political discourse during the post-war period. This can be seen from an analysis of the manifestos of the main parties. For this purpose, the following words were designated the ‘Empire word-group’: Empire, imperial(ism), colony, colonies, colonial(ism). The word ‘Commonwealth’ was counted separately.⁴¹ Figure 4 shows the usage of words in the whole Empire-Commonwealth group in Conservative, Labour and Liberal manifestos between 1945 and 1970. Predictably, Conservative use of these words significantly outstripped that of the other parties up until the end of the 1950s. More surprising is the fact that the position changed dramatically in the 1960s. In the 1964 manifesto, Labour’s usage of Empire-Commonwealth group language dramatically increased over previous elections and, furthermore, was now significantly greater than that of the Conservatives. Although its usage then fell back in 1966 and 1970, it still maintained a clear lead over the Tories. When the analysis is broken down further, and the parties’ use of the term ‘Commonwealth’ is considered alongside their use of Empire-group words, another clear pattern emerges. As Figure 5 shows, the Conservatives continued to use Empire group words fairly generously up to 1955, and those words collectively were always used more than ‘Commonwealth’ was until that point. However, in 1959 – post-Suez – there was a sudden change. Although ‘Commonwealth’ continued to be used, Empire-group words went into near total abeyance. (The position for the Labour Party can be seen in Figure 6.)⁴² Meanwhile, Labour sought to present itself as the true party of Commonwealth, and to challenge the Conservatives’

⁴¹ One reference, in the 1945 Labour manifesto, to the party’s intention to establish ‘the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain’ was omitted from the count.

⁴² Across the period, Liberal manifestos included relatively few words from the Empire-Commonwealth group, and so are omitted from the further analysis, but it is clear that ‘Commonwealth’ was generally preferred to words from the Empire group. It may not be a coincidence that the Liberals, as apparently the party least concerned with Empire/Commonwealth, were also the most enthusiastically pro-European in 1961-3.

credentials on this score, as was seen in the debates about immigration that unfolded in the early 1960s.⁴³

V

Simultaneously, the slogan of ‘Buy British’ was being reinvented in a more insular way than had prevailed before the war. If the *Illustrated London News* and the Women’s Institutes’ journal *Home and Country* were in any way typical, the phrase all but disappeared from British advertising in the 1940s. In the next decade it saw a revival, but the interwar concern to promote the sale of Empire (as well as UK) goods had gone. David Clayton has examined the Cotton Board’s use of the ‘Buy British’ theme. He notes how its campaign followed the failure of its efforts to shift government policy towards quota and tariff protection. The Board’s

strategy aimed for informal protectionism, an imperfect substitute for formal protectionism. It was hoped that the collective marketing campaign would reduce the price elasticity of demand for cotton textiles made in Britain by differentiating them from cotton textiles imported from abroad. This ‘Buy British’ campaign also had the potential to increase the pressure on politicians at home and industrialists overseas to institute schemes to manage the growth of international trade in cotton textiles.⁴⁴

The campaign appears to have been a failure. What is interesting is that India, Pakistan, and Hong Kong - although within the Commonwealth – were now seen as dangerous overseas rivals. This, it must be said, was not a complete novelty: tensions between Lancashire and India had been present from the late Nineteenth Century.⁴⁵ Still, it is clear that ‘Buy British’ encompassed a narrower range of meanings than had been the case twenty or thirty years before.

⁴³ Philip M. Williams, *Hugh Gaitskell: A Political Biography* (London, 1979), pp. 676-9.

⁴⁴ Clayton, ‘Buy British’, p. 223.

⁴⁵ P. Harnetty, ‘The Indian Cotton Duties Controversy, 1894-1896’, *English Historical Review*, Vol. 77, No. 305 (Oct., 1962), pp. 684-702.

A further twist to decolonization discourse was given by Britain's first (failed) bid to join the EEC in 1961-3. There is a tendency in the literature to stress public ignorance of European institutions in the early 1960s.⁴⁶ Lack of basic knowledge, however, did not necessarily preclude benign feelings towards the EEC; the same was true in fact of attitudes towards the Empire-Commonwealth.⁴⁷ We are comparatively well served with information about attitudes to the EEC during the period in question, in the form of Gallup polls. As Figure 1 shows, approval of the idea of Britain joining the EEC outstripped disapproval by a clear margin throughout the lifetime of the application, although there was an overall increase in disapproval rates too. Importantly, the Gallup polls on attitudes to Europe included some questions about the Commonwealth. However, the same questions were not asked consistently across the 1961-3 period, and most were put in the single month of September 1961. The evidence that we do have suggests the following: 1) voters felt that the Commonwealth was more important to Britain than either Europe or the USA; 2) they tended to prioritise the Commonwealth over the interests of British agriculture or EFTA as a point of importance in the EEC negotiations; and 3) nonetheless, relatively few of them felt *either* that accession would cause the Commonwealth to collapse *or* that it would strengthen the Commonwealth in the long-term. This evidence must also be read in the light of the low priority voters gave to 'Colonial affairs' in the scale of their concerns, although, as no specific question was asked about the Commonwealth, it may be that they subsumed Commonwealth issues within 'international affairs', which sometimes scored quite highly.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ John W. Young, *Britain and European Unity, 1945-1992* (Basingstoke, 1993), p. 77, citing Lieber, *British Politics and European Unity* (1970), p. 207.

⁴⁷ Mass-Observation evidence from the 1940s would suggest that the same was true of the Empire-Commonwealth. See Peter Clarke, *The Last Thousand Days of the British Empire*, Allen Lane, London, 2007, pp. 506-7.

⁴⁸ 'British Attitudes to the EEC 1960-63', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 5 (1966), pp. 49-61; Anthony King (ed.), *British Political Opinion 1937-2000: The Gallup Polls*, Politico's, London, 2001, pp. 262-3.

Where, though, was the citizen-consumer? The political parties had a strong tendency to use geopolitical terms when discussing Europe and struggled to relate the Common Market debate to everyday concerns. ‘Up till now we have used “statesmen’s language”; talked about “economic divisions”, “political advantages”, “changing patterns of trade”’, noted one member of the Conservative Research Department in 1962. ‘Such phrases mean very little to the average man and as we enter the final phase of the period leading up to the ratification debate we must stop using them whenever possible.’⁴⁹ Anti-Europeanism, as much as pro-Europeanism, tended to be cast in moral/strategic language rather than that of consumer or producer utility. This can be seen in Harold Wilson’s famous observation that ‘we are not entitled to sell our friends and kinsmen down the river for a problematical and marginal advantage in selling washing machines in Dusseldorf.’⁵⁰ Those opposed to the EEC did raise the cry of ‘dear food’, but they did not put it at the forefront of their campaign.⁵¹ This was perhaps partly because Conservative anti-marketeers tended to come from the imperial preference wing of the party, which of course implied a tolerance of dearer food in the interests of Empire unity. It was also slightly awkward for Labour anti-Europeans to complain about EEC ‘food import levies’, whilst at the same time defending Commonwealth preference, although some of them did try it.⁵²

⁴⁹ Peter Minoprio to Michael Fraser, ‘Common Market Publicity’, 6 Sept. 1962, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford, CRD 2/43/2.

⁵⁰ Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 5th Series, Vol. 645, 3 Aug. 1961, col. 1665.

⁵¹ See, for example, R. Hugh Corbet (ed.), *Britain, not Europe: Commonwealth Before Common Market*, London, 1962.

⁵² For Douglas Jay’s attempt, see Douglas Jay and Roy Jenkins, *The Common Market Debate* (London, 1962), pp. 4-5.

VI

The failure of the application was followed by a brief but fruitless turn towards the Commonwealth under the Douglas-Home government. Harold Wilson was elected in 1964 on the back of a rhetoric of technocratic modernisation, but the Wilsonian project quickly ran into difficulties in the face of balance of payments problems and industrial unrest. Devaluation in 1967 was quickly followed by De Gaulle's second veto of British EEC membership, and by the announcement that British forces would withdraw from their post-imperial role East of Suez. Thus an air of desperation and gimmickry hung about the next major excursion in 'Buying British'. In early 1968 an 'I'm backing Britain' campaign was launched followed the well-publicised decision of five Surbiton secretaries to work for an extra half hour each day without pay to boost productivity. The campaign received government support as it appeared to offer Britain a way to ease its balance of trade problem without introducing protectionist measures which might lead to retaliatory measures in Britain's export markets. (In 1966 Harold Wilson had rejected the publisher and Labour MP Robert Maxwell's suggestions that import controls should be introduced, citing the need to fulfil Britain's commitments under GATT and EFTA.)⁵³ Whilst the campaign received the endorsement of all three main political parties, it was a far cry from the 'Buy British' campaigns of the late 1920s and early 1930s, which were widely supported by a variety of civil society and business groups. For example, whereas the Women's Institutes had been keen supporters of Empire shopping before the war, their executive took a much more lukewarm attitude towards the idea of backing a patriotic buying campaign in the late 1960s. Following discussions with the government-sponsored British National Export Council (BNEC) in early 1968 it was decided to limit official WI involvement in the campaign to

⁵³ Parliamentary Debates, house of Commons, 5th Series, Vol. 732, 20 July 1966, col. 649.

support for a national savings drive. Significantly, the emphasis was on voluntary restraint in spending, thereby aiding the balance in trade, rather than promoting any specific form of patriotic purchasing.⁵⁴ Protectionist sentiment appeared to risk further weakening Britain's economy. The BNEC's director-general advised Lady Anglesey, the Women's Institute's chairperson, that 'we could not, as a trading nation, risk mounting Buy British campaigns which would inevitably have countervailing effects in the markets in which we would sell our exports'.⁵⁵

Concerns with the direction that the campaign was taking mounted after Robert Maxwell launched a 'Think British - Buy British' movement in mid-January 1968. It was claimed that if shoppers chose to 'buy the home product or service first' then this would result in a saving of about £200m on imports. However, both the British National Export Council and the Confederation of British Industry were quick to express concerns over how the campaign might damage trade relations with Asia and America.⁵⁶ Maxwell's campaign to have more labelling of 'British foods' to guide the consumer's purchases was also criticised due to the problems of defining a 'British' product. As an article in the *Times* noted, Heinz baked beans were classified by the Board of Trade as a British manufacture despite the beans coming from North America, the tomatoes from continental Europe and the sugar coming from the West Indies or Australia (which now appear to have been categorised as 'foreign' countries

⁵⁴ Executive Committee minutes, Jan.1968; 'Backing Britain - WI members offer practical help', NFWI press release, 6 Feb. 1968, both National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) MSS, Women's Library, London, 5FWI/A/3/058; 'Backing Britain', *Home and Country*, Mar. 1968, p. 92.

⁵⁵ P.F.D. Tennant to Lady Anglesey, 30 Jan. 1968, NFWI MSS, 5FWI/A/3/058; see also 'Not sold on 'Buy British' campaign', *The Times*, 12 Jan. 1968.

⁵⁶ Philip Howard, 'Colt workers defy union ruling', *The Times*, 11 Jan. 1968; 'Not sold on 'Buy British' campaign', *The Times*, 12 Jan. 1968. For business criticism of the Maxwell campaign see also Joe Hyman, 'Harmful effects', *The Times*, 13 Jan. 1968.

for the purposes of patriotic consumption).⁵⁷ Reports published in the *Times* in March suggested that the campaign was having little effect on buying patterns.⁵⁸ Perhaps it is significant that the first ever episode of *Dad's Army*, filmed the following month, began with an elderly Alderman Mainwaring addressing his elderly colleagues at the launch of the Walmington-on-Sea 'I'm Backing Britain' campaign, patriotic buying now seemed like the cause of a bygone generation. Ultimately, the failure of 'I'm Backing Britain' in 1968 demonstrates how the idea of 'Buy British' had lost cultural purchase in a world where protectionism was under challenge and Britain's economic orientation was becoming increasingly global.

VII

Andrew Thompson has observed, 'the terms "empire" and "imperialism" were like empty boxes that were continuously being filled up and emptied of their meanings.'⁵⁹ So too it was with 'Buy British'. The slogan never had a fixed meaning, but in the 1920s and 1930s it had a strong imperial dimension. Dormant for a long time as a consequence of wartime and postwar developments, which encouraged thrift and a nationalistic approach to consumption, it re-emerged in the 1950s stripped of its Empire connotations. Yet it is also striking that, even in the 1960s era of 'techno-nationalist' government procurement, Maxwell's Buy British campaign succeeded in uniting a considerable number of business leaders against it.⁶⁰ (It did however have some business support.) But how was 'Britishness' actually sold? Patriotism was rarely enough: it was generally acknowledged that consumers needed some other

⁵⁷ Valerie Knox, 'Buy what is a British buy?', *The Times*, 2 Feb. 1968.

⁵⁸ 'Business diary', *The Times*, 6 Feb. 1968.

⁵⁹ Andrew Thompson, 'The Language of Imperialism and the Meanings of Empire: Imperial Discourse in British Politics, 1895-1914'. *Journal of British Studies* 36 (1997), pp. 147-177.

⁶⁰ David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Edgerton, 'War, Reconstruction', p. 36; David Davis, 'Sell, not buy British - CBI chief', *The Times*, 30 Jan. 1968.

incentive to buy British goods, be it economy or (more usually) quality. In the 1920s and 1930s the Empire/Commonwealth was regularly presented by the supporters of Imperial Preference as a unit which had vast potential for economic growth through the application of modern forms of scientific research and marketing. Moreover, in the context of economic depression British consumers were helping themselves by buying imperially, as greater prosperity in the Empire would foster greater demand for British manufactures in the Dominions and colonies.

Nonetheless, geopolitical changes and shifts in the culture of British politics from the 1940s onwards led to a change in the discourse of virtuous consumption. Preferential trade with the Empire had played an integral role in the Conservative party's consumer politics for much of the Edwardian and inter-war periods, and was a central policy of the party's original women's organisation.⁶¹ However, the austerity of the Attlee years meant that the importance of Empire trade was superseded by the more pressing issue of attacking government controls on food supply and encouraging choice for housewives. Furthermore, international trade agreements such as GATT placed limits on the government's ability to promote Commonwealth trade, at a time when the Commonwealth countries themselves were becoming ever less satisfied with their traditional role as exporters of primary products to the metropole in exchange for manufactures.

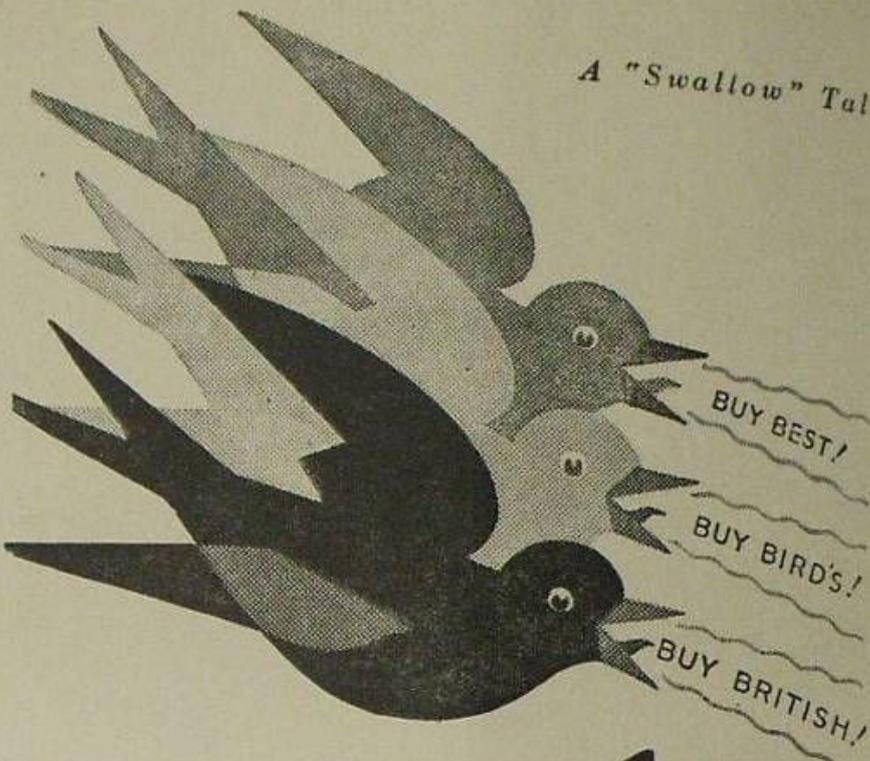
The citizen-consumer, whose support was regularly invoked by supporters of 'Buying British' in the inter-war period played little role in debates about international trade during after the Second World War. The bungled 'I'm Backing Britain' campaign

⁶¹ See David Thackeray, 'Home and Politics: Women and Conservative activism in early twentieth century Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 49 (2010), 826-48.

demonstrates the problems which the concept of patriotic consumption faced within the context of Britain's geopolitical position in the 1960s. By this time 'Buying British' had been superseded by a variety of different languages of the citizen-consumer, such as the Consumer Association's drive for improved standards and testing of household commodities and the emergence of ethical buying through the fair trade movement. Meanwhile, the question of what constituted a 'British' product was consistently problematic in an era of globalization – as problematic, in fact, as British national and imperial identity as a whole.

Figure 1: *Home and Country*, July 1932, p.318

A "Swallow" Tale!



BUY BEST!
BUY BIRD'S!
BUY BRITISH!

BIRD'S CUSTARD

has no rival for creaminess, nor for its clean fresh taste. These wonderful qualities of Bird's Custard, its texture and taste, make "just all the difference" to enjoyment.

The abundant nourishment in Bird's Custard is of importance to everyone's welfare. Children, especially, should only be given really nourishing foods. *When you buy "Bird's" you are buying the nourishing Custard ; that is why it is cheapest to buy "Bird's."*

Family Tins $1/3\frac{1}{2}$. Cartons — $10\frac{1}{2}$ d. $6\frac{1}{2}$ d. $2\frac{1}{2}$ d. $1\frac{1}{2}$ d.



Figure. 2: *Home and Country*, Dec. 1931, p.635

TORO

BRITISH EAST AFRICAN

COFFEE

DIRECT FROM THE GROWERS

FIRST QUALITY BRITISH EAST AFRICAN COFFEE
freshly roasted and ground, or in the berry
at

ONE AND EIGHTPENCE PER LB.
for parcels of 3 lbs. and over
(smaller quantities 1/11 per lb.)

POST FREE

From The **TORO** British East African **COFFEE** Co.
ASTON TIRROLD
BERKSHIRE - ENGLAND

BUY BRITISH AND ECONOMISE

Figure 3: *London Illustrated News*, 25 July 1925

BUY BRITISH GOODS

A STATEMENT OF *FACT*.

The crude oils from which are obtained the petrols sold in the British Isles are perforce largely derived at present from territory outside the British Empire. But, of those petrols which are derived from British sources, *SHELL distributes more than all the other petrol-distributing companies combined.*

The production of Shell and its transport from overseas *employ many thousands of British subjects.* A further number is employed in the refining processes carried out by Shell in this country, though admittedly up-to-date methods of performing these operations on however large a scale do not admit of the employment of labour to any great extent.

Finally, the marketing and distributing organisation of Shell, and the manufacture of the British-made Shell pump, employ many thousands more British subjects. **IN FACT—**

There is more British labour employed in the Shell organisation—

There is more British Capital invested in Shell interests—

There are more British vessels engaged in transporting Shell products—

than in any other concern dealing in Petroleum Products.

SHELL-MEX LTD

G.P.O. BOX 148, SHELL CORNER, KINGSWAY, LONDON, W.C.2



Figure 4

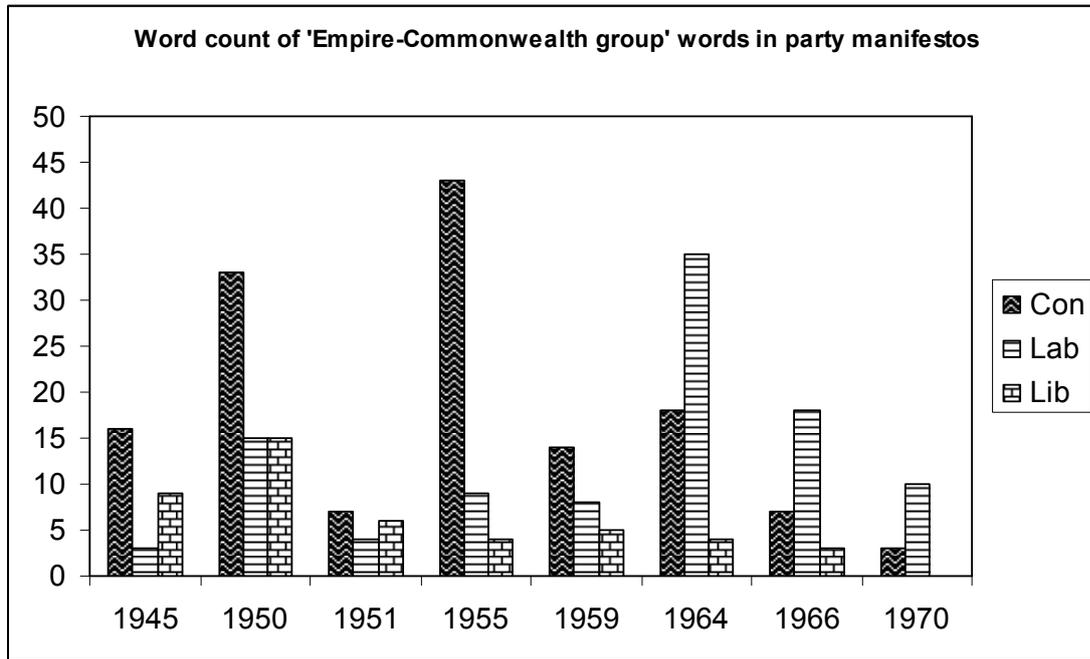


Figure 5

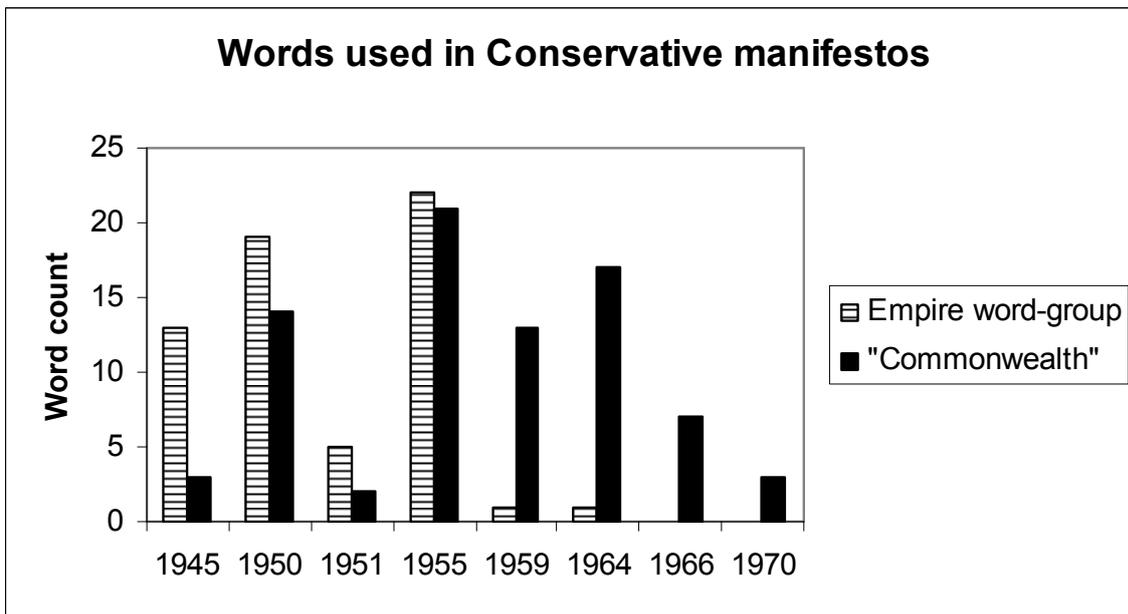


Figure 6

