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Daniel Hucker. "Franco-British Relations and the Question of Conscription in Britain, 1938-1939"; **Ben Clift and Jim Tomlinson.** "Negotiating Credibility: Britain and the International Monetary Fund, 1956-1976, *Contemporary European History*, 17.4 (2008), 437-456, 545-566.

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Reviewed by **David J. Dutton**, University of Liverpool

It falls to historians to evaluate and make sense of the multitude of sometimes conflicting determinants which lie behind the decisions made by the political elite. The task is a fascinating, but often frustrating and necessarily inexact, one. In the nature of things the decision-maker is unlikely to leave behind him a hierarchical list of the array of pressures that prompted a particular course of action. Even if he does so, it is surely right to question the individual's ability accurately to rationalise his own motivation in the decision-making process. Undeterred, the articles under review seek to determine the key motivating forces behind two important sets of policy decisions – the introduction of a limited measure of conscription by the British government in April 1939 and the adoption by later British governments of economic policies designed to establish international 'credibility' in the two decades before the IMF crisis of 1976.

Britain's relationship with France in the late 1930s was, by any definition, curious. On the one hand the bottom line for all thinking British policy makers was that the French partnership was the *sine qua non* of British involvement in an increasingly probable European war. Yet, on the other, Britain refused to offer France the degree of commitment for which the latter longed and never looked upon her nearest neighbour as other than a second-rate ally. The experience of the First World War – on the surface an outstanding triumph for Anglo-French co-operation – left neither party with the feeling this was something they wanted to repeat; quite the reverse. As Robert Graves put it: 'No more wars for me at any price! Except against the French. If there's ever a war with them, I'll go like a shot.' So Britain needed France and France needed Britain, but neither was satisfied with what was on offer. Throughout the inter-war years Britain behaved, as the Canadian historian John Cairns once wrote, like 'a nation of shopkeepers in search of a suitable France'. When the Anglo-French military partnership collapsed after just a few weeks of actual fighting in the spring of 1940, the British government had to contemplate

what it could hope to achieve in 'a certain eventuality' – its euphemistic description of military isolation. Survival seemed the best that could be hoped for; victory in the war no more than a remote possibility. Yet at the same time many, from the King downwards, expressed their relief at being freed from an unwanted association with the French. 'Personally', wrote George VI, 'I feel happier now that we have no allies to be polite to and to pamper.'

Before the war Britain had hoped that any contribution she had to make to a future military conflict would be limited to the same scale of 'limited liability' that had quickly been shown to be inadequate in the opening months of the First World War. The British view, conditioned by the experience of Passchendaele and the Somme, was entirely understandable, but so too was the unsympathetic French reaction. Indeed the French and others reflected ruefully that the British seemed prepared to fight the next war 'to the last Frenchman'. In the quest, therefore, to secure a British commitment to an 'effort du sang', the introduction of peacetime conscription occupied a place of special importance. Daniel Hucker seeks to evaluate the role of French pressure in the making of this British policy, or more particularly to show how that pressure was timed to coincide and interact with an increasingly favourable public opinion inside Britain. The author concludes that without French pressure it is highly unlikely that conscription would have been introduced by the British government prior to the outbreak of hostilities with Germany. At the same time neither that outside pressure nor domestic opinion on its own would have been sufficient to persuade Chamberlain's government to take this step. But 'the two factors working in tandem – a deliberate ploy on France's part – provided a compelling argument for the introduction of British conscription'. If the evidence for the interaction of these two factors is not quite conclusive, Hucker provides a thoughtful and illuminating discussion of the processes leading to this important policy initiative.

In the post-war era, when the Nazi threat had been replaced by a Soviet one, Britain remained a significant, if diminished, player on the international stage. Her foreign and defence policies were, however, increasingly circumscribed by the chronic difficulties of the national economy. As is well known, this situation came to a head in 1976 when the Labour government headed by James Callaghan was forced to appeal to the International Monetary Fund to rescue the country from economic collapse. Less well known is that Britain's dependant relationship with the IMF was of long standing. Borrowing had also taken place in 1956, 1961, 1962, 1967, 1969 and 1974-5. The position of the IMF as the lender of last resort is obviously one of enormous potential influence. As Ben Clift and Jim Tomlinson put it, by providing large amounts of finance to national governments, the organisation 'paying the piper' has the capacity to 'call the tune'. And governments in financial difficulty need more than cash; the stamp of IMF approval can be crucial in establishing the credibility of their economic strategies. Taking an authoritative overview of Britain's twenty-year borrowing relationship with the IMF, and focussing on the issue of 'credibility', the authors explore the extent to which Britain was able to determine its own economic policies. Once again, the precise delineation of determinants is not easy to ascertain. As one Treasury official put it in 1959, 'we knew what policies would be

acceptable to [the Fund]; and when framing our policies we knew that we wished to make a drawing from the Fund. In these circumstances the distinction is a little subtle between submitting our policies for the Fund's approval and choosing policies we knew the Fund would approve.'

At the beginning of the period under review the British government's position *vis-à-vis* the Fund was undoubtedly stronger than it later became. As a reserve currency sterling occupied an important role in the world's trading structure and the IMF was never going to allow the world's second most important currency to collapse. This meant a policy of 'low conditionality' on the part of the Fund and, as Clift and Tomlinson conclude, 'any idea that British governments in this period [pre-1965] were forced into significant policy concessions in return for IMF help would be unsustainable'.

The position was inevitably different thereafter. The notion of 'conditionality' in the awarding of IMF loans became stronger, while the Fund's willingness to treat Britain as a special case weakened. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that the Labour government of the late 1960s still maintained an essential autonomy in the construction of its economic strategy. 'Pressures from the IMF cannot plausibly be said to have fundamentally shaped British domestic policy.' In this way the authors reinforce the earlier finding of Alec Cairncross and Kathy Burk that, even in 1976, the question for 'credibility' did not force policy makers to take up options, at the behest of the IMF, that they would not otherwise have followed. Overall, 'the price of IMF credibility was small'.

On the evidence presented, then, these two studies reach contrasting conclusions. In the late 1930s British policy on conscription was significantly modified by external French pressure. In the twenty years after 1956, on the other hand, the British government pursued economic strategies of its own creation, which may have coincided with IMF prescriptions but which were scarcely dictated by them. At all events, our understanding of two key episodes in government policy is significantly illuminated.

David Dutton is Professor of Twentieth-Century British Political History at the University of Liverpool. His most recent books are *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (2004); *Paris 1918: The War Diary of the 17th Earl of Derby* (editor) (2001); *Neville Chamberlain* (2001), and *The Politics of Diplomacy: Britain and France in the Balkans in the First World War* (1998).

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