

<b>Institution:</b> King's College London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 28 History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Statecraft, 'Realpolitik' and Global Britain		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2010–2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
John Bew	Professor of History and Foreign Policy	From 01/09/2010
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015–2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		

### 1. Summary of the impact

Through his research on 'realpolitik', Britishness and Britain's place in the world, Professor John Bew has provided the intellectual resources for new policies and thus informed politicians across the political spectrum on several defining issues of statecraft. Bew's work fed directly into government policy on Brexit and Anglo–Irish relations and on the future direction of foreign policy more generally. Most notably, Bew's historical expertise played a crucial role in securing both the Withdrawal Agreement in 2019 and the restoration of the devolved assembly in Northern Ireland in 2020. In addition, Bew's arguments have also shaped the reorientation of the Labour Party, (particularly with regards to his acclaimed work on Clement Attlee) informing its turn towards 'progressive patriotism'.

### 2. Underpinning research

Professor John Bew's works on the mechanics and ideology of statecraft were written as a form of 'applied history', where historical knowledge is used to reflect on contemporary political challenges. Bew's research thus has two interrelated purposes: to challenge preconceived historical views and to use these new histories to inform present-day politics.

Through this approach of 'applied history', Bew provided politicians across the political spectrum with unique historical expertise on several key issues of statecraft:

- his work on 'realpolitik' [1] led to a greater focus on balancing ideals and interests in the crafting of Britain's foreign policy;
- his expertise in UK–Irish relations [2,3] helped to broker an agreement for the October 2019 Withdrawal Agreement and restore devolved government to Northern Ireland in January 2020; and
- his arguments about 'progressive patriotism' demonstrated in his biography of Clement Attlee [4] have played a crucial role in the recognition, amongst some senior party officials, of the need for and the resource to undertake a reorientation of the Labour Party.

#### Rethinking realpolitik

A rethinking of 'realpolitik' is a key strand running throughout Bew's research [1,3]. Although 'realpolitik' has traditionally been associated with the narrow and cynical pursuit of self-interest, Bew has shown that Anglo-American 'realpolitik' has been at its most effective when it looks beyond short-termist and naked self-interest. Bew argued that 'realpolitik' should not be viewed as an amoral standpoint, or a form of chauvinistic nationalism, but rather as something that can take a broad, long-term view of geo-politics: a balance between ideals and interests.

#### Biography and statecraft

In many ways, Bew's biographical works on Lord Castlereagh [3] and Clement Attlee [4] are concrete examples of these arguments about 'realpolitik'. They show these figures to be exemplars of an enlightened statecraft: as politicians who could strike a balance between national interests and a rules-based international order.

Biography has been a particularly fruitful and important method of research and writing for Bew, allowing a detailed reconstruction of the issues and decisions that politicians faced. Whilst fully-

aware of the importance of structural and social approaches to diplomatic and political history, Bew's research has explored the ways in which policymakers in modern Britain framed foreign policy issues, focusing both on the ideas that informed these political actors and how they responded to Britain's changing geo-political position.

### **Lord Castlereagh: a force for reconciliation, not reaction**

Contrary to the view of Lord Castlereagh as a reactionary figure, Bew's revisionist biography [3] stressed his deep desire to reduce sectarian tensions in Ireland and to bring reconciliation to the Anglo-Irish relationship, as well as his contribution to forging the modern system of European and global inter-state relations. The book suggests that his Enlightenment values were more important in creating the European Congress system than the hard realist motives sometimes ascribed to him.

Such work has allowed for a new, more celebratory view of Castlereagh to flourish, especially in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It was a crucial backdrop to Bew's discussions throughout 2019 and 2020 with the Irish government and the devolved assembly in Northern Ireland (see Securing Anglo-Irish relations below).

### **Clement Attlee, 'progressive patriotism' and the international order**

Compared to previous biographies on Attlee, Bew's work [4] places more emphasis on the 'international' aspects of Attlee's life, especially his support for liberal internationalism and Britain's central involvement in the creation of the so-called rules-based international order after the end of the Second World War. Bew also shows that Attlee combined this internationalism with a 'unobtrusive progressive patriotism', for he believed that a 'love of country' could unify the country in common endeavour.

This mix of nationalism and internationalism, of celebrating Britishness and promoting its international role, has gained much currency in contemporary politics, on both the left and the right, but it has been particularly important in the shifting internal debates and rhetorics of the Labour Party (see 'Progressive patriotism' and the remaking of the Labour Party below).

## **3. References to the research**

1. Bew, J. (2016). *Realpolitik: A History*. London and New York: Oxford University Press..
2. Bew, J. (2015). Ireland under the Union, 1801–1922. In R. Bourke and I. McBride (Eds), *The Princeton History of Modern Irish History* (pp.74–108). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
3. Bew, J. (2011). *Castlereagh: A Life*. London and New York: Oxford University Press.
4. Bew, J. (2016). *Citizen Clem: A Life of Attlee*. London and New York: Oxford University Press.

## **4. Details of the impact**

Bew's work on statecraft – his arguments about 'progressive patriotism', 'realpolitik' and Britain's place in the world – have changed the ways in which policymakers, at home and abroad, have thought about crucial issues of our day, from Brexit to the future of the Labour Party, from Parliament to the Taoiseach. Likewise, his two biographies of the leading politicians Lord Castlereagh and Clement Attlee of their respective days have exerted a significant influence on contemporary politicians.

### **Reframing 'realpolitik'**

Bew's research on 'realpolitik' led to a major attitudinal shift on the part of prominent UK policy makers, contributing to the re-shaping of UK policy on the world stage. As the media report shows, many reviewers stressed how the book provided a new focus for foreign policy concerns, such as Douglas Alexander, the former Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's former chief of staff and director of Inter Mediate, a charity working on armed conflicts around the world [A].

Of particular note were the comments of Lee Howell, the Managing Director and Head of Global Programming at the World Economic Forum, who cited *Realpolitik* as shaping the agenda for the World Economic Forum's 2018 summit at Davos. In October 2017, he wrote: "*Bew's survey also reminds us that the singular pursuit of national interests — the type of worldview championed by Trump — is not Realpolitik at all if it is uncoupled from a transformative idea or normative purpose ... That is why next year's WEF annual meeting will seek to rededicate leaders to the development*

*of a shared narrative, one that strengthens cooperation for this generation and every generation to come” [B].*

While the policymaking process is still very much ongoing, Bew’s revised notion of ‘realpolitik’ is also set to have a domestic impact across multiple portfolios. In February 2020, Bew was tasked by the Prime Minister to lead a No. 10 task force to drive forward the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. As Lord Frost, the Prime Minister’s Representative for International Policy, has explained: *“Although the Integrated Review has yet to report, there are tangible changes in the way central government is thinking about and approaching international affairs — with a shift, as recommended in Realpolitik, to a longer-term approach to pursuing the national interest in a more competitive world. These are ideas from Bew’s work that have already influenced my own viewpoint as I prepare for the role [of Prime Minister’s Representative]” [C].*

### **Securing Anglo–Irish relations**

Since Britain voted to leave the European Union in 2016, Bew’s expertise on the history of Anglo–Irish relations [2,3] has played a central role in keeping alive constructive negotiations between the Republic of Ireland and the British government. In particular, Bew provided a vital historical context that helped to broker the Withdrawal Agreement in 2019.

Bew’s scholarship was well-known to many of the key actors involved in the negotiations, even before Bew himself took an active role in them. In December 2017, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar wrote in Northern Ireland’s best-selling newspaper, the *Belfast Telegraph*, about his desire to seek a more conciliatory approach to Brexit negotiations, citing Bew’s book [3] as inspiration: *“Bew wrote that the essence of Castlereagh’s approach to the Irish question was that it was better to ‘remove causes’ than to ‘punish effects’. I think that would be Castlereagh’s approach today and it should be ours” [A].* Professor Patrick Geoghegan, who worked as a special advisor in the Office of the Taoiseach at the time, further explained how he brought Bew’s book to the attention of Varadkar and how it formed a crucial basis for his approach to the Brexit negotiations: *“Those of us on the Irish Government side recognised that Professor Bew’s research has had a very beneficial and positive impact, helping to shape British-Irish relations” [D].*

After joining the British Government in July 2019, as part of the No. 10 Policy Unit, Bew became central to the negotiations between the Republic of Ireland and the UK, accompanying Boris Johnson to these summits. Throughout these talks, Bew emphasised that it would be (in his own words) a *“failure of statecraft”* if a compromise could not be found to allow the UK to leave the EU with a deal. Bew’s historical research was a crucial backdrop, stressing the historic importance of seeking conciliation between Britain and Ireland, and he remains centrally engaged in these in-progress negotiations with the EU. He spoke with Leo Varadkar in July 2019 about his book on Castlereagh. Bew’s historical perspective thus helped to prevent both a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland and the prospect of a ‘no deal’ scenario at that time. Will Gelling, the Foreign Affairs Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, said of Bew’s influence: *“I can testify that his knowledge of modern Irish history, Anglo–Irish relations and the unionist tradition in North Ireland, as evidenced in his book on Lord Castlereagh, played an important part in shaping the context for an agreement” [E].*

Bew’s academic work on British–Irish relations [2], and particularly on Castlereagh [3], was also crucial in the political agreement that led to the restoration of devolved institutions in Northern Ireland during January 2020. Partly due to the difficulties caused by the Brexit referendum, Northern Ireland had been without devolved government for almost three years, endangering the peace process that started with the Belfast Agreement of 1998. The signing of the Withdrawal Agreement provided the context for intense negotiations between the British and Irish governments and local Northern Irish parties, culminating in the New Decade, New Approach agreement in January 2020. Bew once again advised the Prime Minister on this negotiation. The impact of his scholarship was also seen in the creation of a new body, called the Castlereagh Foundation, as part of the deal (*“a fund to support academic research through Universities and other partners to explore identity and the shifting patterns of social identity in Northern Ireland” [F].* The First Minister of Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster, cited this outcome as particularly important to her own support for the deal and Bew’s influence on the establishment of the organisation. In the same letter where she made these points, she said: *“I look forward to the Castlereagh Foundation becoming a platform for historical research and educational material in a way that contributes to a shared identity in Northern Ireland in the tradition outlined in Dr. Bew’s book” [G].*

### **‘Progressive patriotism’ and the remaking of the Labour Party**

John Bew’s biography of Clement Attlee, *Citizen Clem* [4], was a highly acclaimed and widely read book. It won the Orwell Prize for Political Writing, the Elizabeth Longford Prize for Historical Biography and was shortlisted for the Duff Cooper Prize for Historical Biography. It was named as a book of the year in many newspapers and periodicals [A]. *The Observer* included it as one of the best 100 political books of all time [A]. The biography was a particular favourite among politicians. It won the Parliamentary Book Awards for the best work by a non-parliamentarian. Most crucially, *Citizen Clem* has been a cornerstone in debates about the future of the Labour Party.

When the book was published in 2016, Labour politicians and journalists understood that Bew had unearthed a new, unfamiliar side of Attlee: especially his ‘progressive patriotism’ and his central role in building the rules-based international order. Such arguments fed directly into the claim that the contemporary Labour Party needed to embrace Britishness and the nation’s international obligations at least as much as the politics of class. For instance, Tristram Hunt, then a Labour MP, said: *“one cannot help reading this magisterial biography and reflect just how far we, in the Labour Party, have fallen ... Jeremy Corbyn’s metropolitan liberalism, unthinking anti-Americanism, distaste for nationhood, contempt for parliamentary democracy and rigid socialist orthodoxy represents a complete betrayal of Attlee’s purpose”* [A].

After Labour’s election defeat in 2019, Bew’s arguments about ‘progressive patriotism’ and Britain’s role in the world had a direct influence on the Labour leadership. They help to explain Sir Keir Starmer’s rhetorical embrace of Britishness, national security and national renewal that defined his speech to the Labour Party Conference. As Starmer told the Conference, *“We’re under new leadership. We love this country as you do”* [H].

Both those inside and outside the Labour Party have noted the connection between its shifting rhetoric and Bew’s research. For instance, Tom Watson, the former MP and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, explained: *“When deputy leader of Labour Party, and thinking about the party’s political direction, I found myself returning to Citizen Clem. John Bew’s biography made it clear that central to Attlee’s political success was a combination of nationalism and internationalism: a devotion both to the British nation and to its role in supporting a liberal rules-based international order. These themes fed into a speech I gave to the Fabian conference in January 2019. Moreover, such ideas, I believe, are clearly influencing the Labour leadership today, as it seeks to recover and adapt from the election defeat of 2019”* [I]. Writing in *The Telegraph*, Charles Moore suggested: *“If I had to identify one unmentioned intellectual influence on Sir Keir’s stance, I would say it was the youngish historian John Bew. His outstanding 2016 biography of Attlee is almost a handbook for current, moderate Labour thinking”* [A].

### **Summary**

In his speech to Parliament about the Integrated Review of foreign, defence, security and development policy, Boris Johnson suggested that: *“The defence of the realm is above party politics and we all take pride in how British resolve saved democracy in 1940, and British internationalism — directed by Clement Attlee — helped to create NATO and preserve peace through the Cold War ... Britain tipped the scales of history and did immense good for the world”*. He concluded by suggesting that Britain in 2020 was similarly poised, ready to follow in this *“great tradition”* and regain its *“global influence”*. He urged that was both to *“protect our people”* and to *“defend the free societies in which we fervently believe”* [J], in large part influenced by his reading of Bew’s book.

In this single speech, we thus see many of the different ideas Bew has worked to promote over the past decade. The recasting of Clement Attlee as internationalist and a crucial believer in a ‘Global Britain’. A revised notion of ‘realpolitik’ that sees no contradiction between the pursuit of national self-interest and an idealist belief in preserving a rules-based international order. A sense that Britain has serious geo-political commitments to honour, something that Bew has emphasised not only in the context of defence policy, but with Brexit and Anglo-Irish relations too. The Prime Minister, however, is not the only audience for such arguments. Bew’s research on ‘realpolitik’ and Britain’s place in the world has also influenced the way politicians across the parties have thought about key issues of statecraft in the 21st century.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

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- A. Media Report on Bew's work.
- B. Lee Howell, W. (2017). The false narrative of realpolitik, World Economic Forum website, 10 October 2017.
- C. Letter from Lord Frost.
- D. Letter from Professor Patrick Geoghegan.
- E. Letter from Will Gelling.
- F. New Decade, New Approach, January 2020.
- G. Letter from Arlene Foster.
- H. Sir Keir Starmer speech to Labour Conference, Labour Party website, 22 September 2020.
- I. Email from Tom Watson.
- J. Prime Minister's statement to the House on the Integrated Review, Gov.uk, 19 November 2020.