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A Prime Minister Under Constraints: An Analysis of James Callaghan's Prime Ministership

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Abstract

This article analyses the unique features of James Callaghan's political career. He is the only politician to have served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary, and Prime Minister in UK history. The analysis situates his career within key national and foreign policy challenges. Callaghan did not really achieve significant success during his four different political appointments. He was often viewed as the subject of some of the political and economic failures that British society still remembers today. This article suggests that his failures were mainly due to complex parliamentary dynamics, national political landscape, the economy, and global actors, which severely constrained his ability to act. Additionally, Callaghan's successes and failures were evaluated within the broader context of the period, rather than through a purely "results-oriented" lens, which is often used in political history. From this perspective, the article examines both the internal and external challenges of Callaghan's premiership. It also highlights the obstacles he faced in decision-making and the factors that shaped his actions.

Keywords: James Callaghan; the Winter of Discontent; Labour Party; the UK's foreign policy; the UK's politics

1. Introduction

Callaghan had a long political career, serving as a Member of Parliament (MP) from 1945 to 1987. He is the only politician in the UK to have served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary, and Prime Minister. His succession of these four key positions in British politics made him a unique figure in British political history. Although Callaghan had a significant impact on British politics, his premiership is mainly remembered for economic and political turmoil, as well as for his handling of the Winter of Discontent. A politician's legacy, which is shaped by their successes and failures, ultimately defines how they are remembered by both scholars and the public. Throughout his career, Callaghan failed to achieve notable success in any of the four offices he held. In fact, on some issues, he is often regarded as a figure associated with political and economic failures that continue to be remembered today.

This article argues that Callaghan's failures in his political positions stem largely from limitations on his decision-making. In other words, the article claims that Callaghan, constrained by parliamentary dynamics, national political landscape, the economy, and global actors, failed to fully reflect his leadership potential in his political decisions. Thus, the term "constraints" used in this article refers to limiting factors arising from parliamentary



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dynamics, national political landscape, the economy, and global actors, surrounding both internal and external sources of limitation. At this point, the article identifies its distinctive focus as the constraints shaping Callaghan's decision-making process, thereby seeking to offer an alternative perspective to the existing literature on his political legacy. Specifically, the current body of scholarship tends to adopt an outcome-oriented approach, generally assessing Callaghan as either successful or unsuccessful. Beyond these, there are also studies that provide more balanced evaluations of his political career.

Departing from a strictly outcome-based framework, this article aims to contribute to the literature by examining the significant constraints that influenced Callaghan's decision-making across four major state offices he held. In other words, rather than portraying Callaghan as a "good" or "bad" politician, the article foregrounds the challenges he encountered in the decision-making process and seeks to reassess this pivotal figure in British politics within the context of the conditions of his time.

Considering the length and complexity of one of the longest political careers in British history. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to examine all aspects of Callaghan's political life and decisions. Accordingly, the study concentrates on the key domestic and foreign policy challenges of his tenure. To better understand Callaghan's "legacy", this article also examines his early life and trade union activities. By doing so, it analyzes how Callaghan's personal characteristics shaped his decision-making process. Additionally, adopting a leader-centered analytical approach, the article briefly discusses his terms as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary, and Foreign Secretary.

However, it should be noted that the article primarily concentrates on Callaghan's tenure as Prime Minister. Using this holistic approach, the article evaluates Callaghan's political career in terms of his successes and failures, highlighting the recurring notion of "constraints".

The article is divided into three main sections, excluding the introduction, method, and conclusion. The third section starts with a brief review of Callaghan's childhood and youth, which shaped his mindset and personality. It further explores the challenges during his time as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary, and Foreign Secretary, which were discussed in the context of Callaghan's constrained position. The fourth section focuses on Callaghan's tenure as Prime Minister between 1976 and 1979, delivering a comprehensive analysis of the foreign, domestic, economic, and parliamentary challenges of this period. Callaghan's leadership is interpreted, particularly within the framework of economic and political constraints. The fifth section of the article discusses the period leading up to the Winter of Discontent, detailing the reasons for his failure to address this crisis, and it concludes with a brief assessment of Callaghan's foreign policy during his time.

2. Method

Moving beyond outcome-based evaluations that categorize political leadership as simply successful or unsuccessful, the article adopts a constraint-centered approach that situates decision-making within its broader institutional, economic, and international contexts. In doing so, it combines a leader-focused analysis with a systematic examination of the structural limitations that shaped Callaghan's actions across different offices. To support this approach, the study draws on a diverse and carefully curated body of primary and secondary sources, employing a methodology that prioritizes empirical rigor while remaining attentive to historical and political context.

This article employs a diverse range of sources, including books, memoirs, biographies, scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed articles, and primary parliamentary materials, most notably Hansard debates. It draws on Hansard debates as primary sources, selecting them particularly within the framework of case-based discussions to evaluate the policies of the

period through parliamentary proceedings and to analyze the political discourse of the time more effectively. It also integrates primary and secondary sources in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner.

This methodological approach reflects a deliberate effort to ground the analysis in both empirical evidence and contextual interpretation. By prioritizing Hansard debates, the article captures contemporaneous political discourse and decision-making dynamics as they unfolded within Parliament, thereby reducing reliance on retrospective or interpretive biases. At the same time, integrating primary and secondary sources allows for a more comprehensive and balanced analysis, where firsthand accounts are contextualized and critically assessed through existing scholarship. This combination enhances both the analytical depth and the credibility of the study.

Finally, the constraints Callaghan encountered in his decision-making process demonstrate that leaders make decisions within a wide range of limitations imposed by factors such as parliament, the economy, the international system, and global actors, as well as their own personal characteristics. Moreover, considering that Callaghan was not a dominant leader in his decision-making process, his premiership can be understood not merely as an instance of individually constrained leadership, but more broadly as an example of how leadership itself is shaped by multiple and overlapping constraints.

3. Callaghan's Journey to Prime Ministership: Facing Early Challenges

It would have been hard to imagine that a child born in humble circumstances in 1912 would one day become the Prime Minister of the UK. His father was an Irish immigrant and served in the British Navy. Tragically, his father passed away shortly after being discharged from the military following World War I, marking the end of the happiest years for Callaghan, who had a deep bond with him. After his father's death, Callaghan and his family faced severe poverty.¹ Although Callaghan was eligible to attend university,² the financial struggles of his childhood compelled him to seek paid employment instead. This decision marked the beginning of his career in the civil service. Shortly after becoming a civil servant, Callaghan also began engaging in trade union activities. He joined his first union, the Association of Tax Officers, and gained practical experience through active and sustained involvement in this field. At the same time, his trade union activities strengthened his ties with the Labour Party and played a crucial role in the emergence and development of his subsequent political career within the party. Considering this background, it is evident that Callaghan's early experiences greatly influenced his work as a politician (Conroy 2006, pp. 1–6). In other words, he carried the hardships of his childhood and adolescence throughout his life, which also influenced his policies as he empathized with disadvantaged people in society (Morgan 1999, p. 133).

Another factor that shaped Callaghan's mindset was that, despite having two children and some hesitations, he joined the Navy³ during World War II and continued his military service in the Army until 1945. Following his return to the UK, Callaghan contested the general election and was elected as a Labour Party Member of Parliament, marking the beginning of a new phase in his career (Conroy 2006, pp. 9–13).

Having served in the shadow cabinet as early as 1952, Callaghan possessed greater experience than the other contenders for the premiership. He previously held the offices of Chancellor of the Exchequer (1964–1967), Home Secretary (1967–1970), and Foreign Secretary (1974–1976) (Shore 1993, pp. 113–14). Accordingly, Callaghan holds a unique position within twentieth-century British politics. He was the only individual to have served in all four of the UK's major offices of state (Laybourn 2002, p. 54). He was also unique for another reason: he was the last UK Prime Minister to have served in the armed forces, and the only one to have served in the Royal Navy (Alexander et al. 2020).

Another important aspect of Callaghan's political career is that he served as the Member of Parliament for Cardiff for 42 consecutive years, from 1945 to 1987. During his final term, he was recognized as the Father of the House because he was the longest-serving MP (Waller and Criddle 1999, p. 170). By briefly addressing the difficulties encountered by Callaghan in his capacities as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary, and Foreign Secretary, a more comprehensive understanding of his premiership can be achieved.

The analysis begins with Callaghan's tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Economic hardship was a significant challenge throughout his political career, and during his time as Chancellor between 1964 and 1967, he inherited a substantial balance of payments deficit (Laybourn 2002, p. 56). In response, he sought to stabilize the economy and pursued support from the United States (US) to help alleviate the financial crisis.

Expanding on this point, Callaghan used the UK's strategic and security leverage to obtain financial assistance from the US. In 1965, in order to prevent a possible devaluation, Wilson and Callaghan reached a secret agreement with the US to maintain the UK's military presence in the East of Suez in exchange for US financial support (Reynolds 2000, p. 214). Despite the economic support received from the US in 1967, following speculation regarding the pound, the Wilson government devalued the currency by 14% for the first time since 1949, despite strong opposition from the US (Engdahl 2008, p. 177).

Only two days after the devaluation decision on 20 November 1967, Callaghan faced considerable criticism in Parliament, including calls for his resignation. He defended the decision, explaining that the devaluation was necessary and would increase UK exports, reduce unemployment, and lower personal consumption and public spending. Regarding the stance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the US, Callaghan emphasized that the decision had been made with the IMF's approval and expressed his belief that the US government would ease its protectionist economic policies following this decision against the UK. He argued that the US was already uneasy with the UK's import incentives. Since devaluation would lower UK export prices to the US, the government would no longer need to maintain these incentives, making the policy more acceptable to the US.

Although Callaghan announced that he would continue his efforts to find a solution (House of Commons 1967), he was soon forced to resign amid the backlash. Callaghan opted for devaluation, a decision he had long resisted, and accepted responsibility by resigning from his position. Despite the negative impacts of the devaluation, he was able to retain his prominence within the Labour Party and was subsequently appointed Home Secretary (Laybourn 2002, p. 56).

The devaluation of the British pound did not quickly resolve the UK's economic difficulties. Instead, it resulted in a notable outflow of the country's reserves. Furthermore, financial markets lost confidence in the economy. The persistence of economic difficulties was so severe that it prompted debate over the potential need for a second devaluation (Bennett 2013, p. 100).

The challenges faced by Callaghan as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the UK forced him to compromise his socialist beliefs. This constraint also continued throughout his tenure as Prime Minister. The expectation of financial assistance from the IMF and the US also placed constraints on his economic policy, particularly due to pressure from the American side.

This decision, taken by Callaghan during his tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer, can be evaluated through a neo-realist perspective. Neo-realists argue that, in formulating foreign policy, states must take into account the structure of the international system and the relative power of actors within it. According to this view, actors make decisions within the constraints imposed by the international system; in other words, their decision-making processes operate within the limits of the opportunities available to them. The distribution

of power among actors within the international system ultimately shapes these limits and the range of possible policies. In this context, more powerful states can pursue relatively autonomous policies and exert influence over less powerful actors (Efegil 2018).

When this neo-realist framework is considered alongside the decline in the UK's power, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War, it becomes easier to understand how Britain's autonomy was constrained in Callaghan's decision-making process. This observation is particularly useful for explaining how the UK's policies were shaped (and constrained) by the US during Callaghan's tenure as Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister.

As mentioned earlier, Callaghan's resignation from the Chancellorship was followed by his appointment as Home Secretary. It is important to note that Callaghan became interested in the Northern Ireland issue while serving as Home Secretary in the Wilson government. He emerged as a key political figure, particularly during the British–Irish crisis over Northern Ireland in 1968–1969 (Fanning 2001). Callaghan's speech to Parliament on 21 April 1969 marked a new phase in the issue. Callaghan informed Parliament about the sabotage of infrastructure in Northern Ireland and announced the deployment of military forces to assist local police:

"The Northern Ireland Government requested the assistance of military units stationed in Northern Ireland for the specific purpose of supporting the local police in safeguarding certain key installations essential to the community.

Her Majesty's Government immediately authorised the General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland to give such assistance, and troops are today being posted to safeguard certain installations in remote areas, mainly electricity and water supply installations." (House of Commons 1969)

However, Callaghan's deployment of the British Army to address the Northern Ireland issue in 1969 did not resolve the problem. It should be considered a significant turning point in the Northern Ireland issue.

In a 1973 speech to Parliament on Northern Ireland, while serving as Shadow Foreign Secretary, Callaghan stated, "Britain cannot bleed forever," referring to the ongoing deployment of British troops and the challenges of the conflict. In this speech, he also underlined that Parliament had to decide on this issue (House of Commons 1973). He used a similar phrase in his 1973 book "A House Divided," stating: "But Britain cannot be expected to sit patiently and bleed indefinitely if her best efforts face deliberate sabotage by the elected majority of the Province." Callaghan also stated that a united Ireland could only be achieved based on a freely negotiated and voluntary agreement (Callaghan 1973, p. 187).

Following Wilson's reappointment as Prime Minister in 1974, he considered the possibility of the UK withdrawing from Northern Ireland. It is worth noting that during these discussions, Callaghan opposed Wilson's idea that the UK should withdraw from Northern Ireland and allow it to become an independent state (FitzGerald 2006, pp. 142–43). While it might seem like a dilemma, Callaghan argued that the British Army could not "bleed" forever, but at the same time should not withdraw from Northern Ireland without a freely negotiated process. As mentioned earlier, Callaghan's Irish heritage (his father having been an Irish immigrant) likely influenced his genuine desire to find a resolution to the Northern Ireland issue, yet his efforts did not yield the desired outcome. It could be argued that Callaghan was particularly constrained by his party and the national political landscape on the Northern Ireland issue. His endorsement of the decision to deploy the military in Northern Ireland provoked strong criticism from the left wing of the Labour Party as well as from Catholic members within the Party. To defuse this anger, he preserved channels of negotiation. However, he encountered criticism from the opposition Conservative Party for his perceived soft/weak approach to the issue. Ultimately, his attempts to balance the demands of both his party and the opposition were unsuccessful.

It is evident here that institutional constraints shaped by the stance of Parliament and intra-party dynamics significantly limited the leader's room for maneuver. Nevertheless, Callaghan's efforts to resolve the issue suggest that he avoided ideological rigidity, remained attentive to changing conditions, and considered alternative policy options in pursuit of the most feasible solution. From this perspective, it can be argued that Callaghan adopted a pragmatic approach to the Northern Ireland issue.

It should be acknowledged that a decision-maker cannot achieve perfect rationality when operating under numerous constraints arising from both domestic and international environments. In such circumstances, the decision-maker is more likely to rely on bounded rationality, which directs them not toward the optimal outcome, but toward the most satisfactory and feasible option (Efegil 2018). In this regard, it is important to note that the various constraints encountered by Callaghan in the offices he held often compelled him to operate within the limits of bounded rationality.

Callaghan had been particularly worn down as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary, but tougher tests awaited him as Foreign Secretary. It would be appropriate to begin with the Cyprus issue. O'Malley and Craig noted that Callaghan described Türkiye's operation in Cyprus as the most frightening moment of his career and stated that the US prevented a potential war between the UK and Türkiye (O'Malley and Craig 2001, p. VII).

In his speech to Parliament on 31 July 1974, Callaghan emphasized that the UK's influence was greatly strengthened by its sovereign base areas and strong ties with the US during Türkiye's military operation in Cyprus. For him, this partnership enabled both countries to cooperate effectively. He also expressed gratitude for the support of the US administration (House of Commons 1974). Despite Callaghan's statement, there were ongoing problems between the UK and the US.

It is generally believed that personal relations from leaders to diplomats play a key role in UK-US relations. As Foreign Secretary, Callaghan worked to strengthen Britain's ties with the US because he believed the UK had become too focused on Europe (Carter 2022). However, the Cyprus crisis strained his personal relationships with Kissinger and damaged his efforts with the US.

As Foreign Secretary during Türkiye's 1974 operation in Cyprus, Callaghan actively participated in diplomatic negotiations between Greece and Türkiye. During this period, he had some vital disagreements with the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. One of the principal disagreements involved the potential closure of the UK's sovereign base areas in Cyprus, a policy that the US strongly opposed. Consequently, under pressure from the US, the UK decided to keep its intelligence facilities on the island operational (Hughes and Robb 2013, pp. 890–94).

As Robb notes, Türkiye's intervention in Cyprus revealed that US–UK tensions were rooted primarily in intelligence and nuclear cooperation, and that the scope of their special relationship was gradually diminishing. More importantly, the power imbalance in the bilateral relationship was evident, enabling the US to disregard the British demands whenever their interests diverged (Robb 2014, p. 141).

Additionally, the failure to prevent Türkiye's intervention in Cyprus raised questions about the UK's global role and power. Furthermore, the ineffectiveness of Callaghan's Prime Ministership during the crisis involving Ugandan leader Idi Amin highlighted the same question for the Commonwealth (Garnett et al. 2018, pp. 183–85). Callaghan expressed his perspective on this matter and on the broader difficulties with the US as follows:

“Britain felt a special obligation to Cyprus as a member of the Commonwealth, and to her people because of our past links, as well as our responsibility under the 1960 Treaty. The United States had neither a similar background of history nor a similar treaty relationship. Their principal concern was to avoid an extension of Soviet influence in

the Middle East, and to the extent that this meant preventing Turkey and Greece from getting at each other's throats, British and American policy coincided. But it also resulted in the United States being less willing to antagonise either the Greek Colonels in the early stages of the conflict or the Turks after their invasion. I felt fewer inhibitions". (Callaghan 1988, p. 339)

For Callaghan, Britain in 1945 remained one of the "Big Three" powers, alongside the US and the Soviet Union. However, he also acknowledged the complex decline of Britain's power following World War II, as well as the adverse impact of global transformations on the country's international standing. Despite this decline, Callaghan maintained that his country continued to possess considerable influence in world affairs (Callaghan 1975, pp. 3–4).

The Cyprus issue presented major challenges for Callaghan and subjected him to considerable criticism. This criticism did not solely originate from the media. For instance, in 1975, a committee was established to investigate the UK's foreign policy during the 1974 Cyprus crisis, to which Callaghan provided testimony. Notably, the committee's report strongly criticized the government's handling of the crisis (Barber 1976, p. 27). At this point, an important clarification is necessary. Callaghan occupied a key position in the decision-making process as the UK's Foreign Secretary during the Cyprus crisis. Although he sought to formulate a relatively pragmatic policy that took into account relations with the United States, the realities of the Cold War, and broader geopolitical concerns, it is understandable that he has been criticized for the perceived failure in Cyprus. However, attributing success or failure solely to the Foreign Secretary without considering Harold Wilson, who was Prime Minister at the time, or the government more broadly would be misleading. While the testimony referenced above was delivered by Callaghan, it should be recognized that the criticism ultimately targeted government policy rather than an individual actor. A similar analytical approach should also be applied when evaluating Callaghan's tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary.

Taken as a whole, constraints regarding the Cyprus issue were primarily due to objections from the US. During his tenure, Callaghan could not afford to provoke a conflict with the US, both economically and politically. As a result, he decided to adopt a diplomatic approach and avoided escalating tensions with Türkiye. Additionally, in response to American demands, Callaghan ensured that the intelligence facilities in Cyprus remained operational.

One of the most significant developments during Callaghan's term as Foreign Secretary was the decision over whether the UK would remain a member of the European Economic Community (EEC). A new crisis arose when Callaghan officially declared his intent to renegotiate the terms of the UK's EEC membership. The outcome of these negotiations was to be presented in a referendum. This referendum was viewed as a governmental strategy aimed either at terminating or legitimizing the UK's membership in the EEC. The negotiations covered several issues, including agriculture, the Community budget, economic union, and relations with Commonwealth countries. Throughout the process, Callaghan specifically questioned the true meaning of the term "political union" (Breitenstein 1975, pp. 53–54).

The concerns regarding the Commonwealth arising from the UK's continued membership of the EEC were similarly reflected in its relations with the US and other continents. Callaghan expressed these concerns in his speech to Parliament prior to the referendum, in which he defended continued EEC membership. In his own words: *"One of the fears which was expressed continually during the course of those long debates on the EEC was that membership would cause us to turn inwards and away from our historic links with the Commonwealth, the United States and other continents."* At this point, he made it clear that the UK could main-

tain its EEC membership while also having strong relationships with the US and other continents (House of Commons 1975a). Thus, he adopted a balanced discourse that would appease both Parliament and opposition within his own party.

The UK's membership in the EEC, together with the ongoing process of decolonization, carried the risk of producing economically constrained relationships with many former colonies. At this point, the Lomé I Convention, which was adopted in 1975 by the nine EEC member states and 46 African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries, enabled the UK to maintain its economic ties with its former colonies (Erkul 2021, pp. 257–61). With the efforts of Callaghan, who was serving as Foreign Secretary at the time, many of the potential economic difficulties in relations with former colonies were largely mitigated. Moreover, securing economic relations with former colonies contributed positively to the EEC referendum held in the UK shortly thereafter. In this way, the burden of the ongoing decolonization process on the UK was partially alleviated. However, as will be discussed below in the case of Rhodesia, decolonization continued to pose a significant challenge and constraint for Callaghan.

Prior to the 1975 Referendum, the Labour Party was deeply divided over the question of its membership in the EEC. Party members who opposed Britain's membership believed that the party could not pursue socialist policies because of the capitalist structure of the EEC. Therefore, the 1975 referendum was a political safeguard for the Labour Party (Clements 2019, p. 126) as the public's "arbitration" on this issue effectively ended internal disputes over EEC membership and enabled the party to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with the EEC. In Callaghan's own words:

"... Britain's membership of the European Community confirmed by the vote of our fellow citizens last June, also offers us challenges and opportunity. We intend genuinely to contribute to Community policy; despite our differences from time to time. We do so because we recognize that the progress of Europe is itself a British interest". (Callaghan 1975, p. 13)

In summary, through their diplomatic skills and with the support of German Chancellor Schmidt, Wilson and Callaghan achieved a significant political success in British history by securing public approval for the UK's membership in the EEC (Morgan 2004, p. 305). On the other hand, the UK's willingness to risk its EEC membership through a referendum demonstrates a lack of commitment to European ideals (Sanders 1990, p. 158). In short, Callaghan, as the UK's Foreign Secretary, found himself heavily constrained by Atlanticist priorities, Commonwealth relations, and criticism of his own party in shaping his policy towards the EEC. Although Callaghan experienced a degree of political relief following the 1975 referendum, he maintained a cautious and balanced approach by not supporting further integration within the EEC.

Callaghan's views on a common foreign policy should be evaluated within this context. In his speech to Parliament on 25 June 1975, shortly after the EEC referendum, he stated that establishing a common foreign policy within the EEC would have presented significant challenges and that acting on abstract principles would have been ineffective. At this juncture, Callaghan proposed a more pragmatic approach to developing a common position by anticipating potential foreign policy developments rather than relying on theoretical commitments. In short, Callaghan found it politically more rational to maintain his cautious approach to integration within the EEC following the EEC referendum and sought to maintain this position in foreign policy as well (House of Commons 1975b).

This section concludes with a discussion of Callaghan's perspective on the Soviet Union. During this period, relations with the Soviet Union were tense. On 24 September 1971, under the Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath's leadership, Operation Foot was carried out, resulting in the deportation of 105 Soviet diplomats who were declared per-

sona non grata. This action severely strained relations between the UK and the Soviet Union. Notably, tensions concerning diplomatic representation persisted even during Callaghan's tenure as Foreign Minister (Erkul 2024c). Despite these challenges, Callaghan aimed to restore relations with the Soviet Union. His efforts resulted in the signing of a trade agreement that would allow the UK to export to the Soviet Union (Lane 2004, p. 158). Additionally, the Agreement on the Development of Economic, Scientific, Technological and Industrial Co-operation, signed on 6 May 1974, not only addresses economic relations between the UK and the USSR, but also aimed to expand and systematize scientific, technological, and industrial cooperation between the two countries (United Kingdom & USSR 1974).

4. The Challenges of the Economy, Domestic Politics, and Foreign Policy in Relation to Prime Minister Callaghan's Constrained Position

According to Leonard, Callaghan's rise to Prime Minister was expected following Wilson's resignation. Callaghan held an advantageous position compared to other candidates in the 1976 Labour Party leadership and prime ministership race. First, Wilson sent a message to Callaghan through Harold Lever, stating that he intended to resign within three months and that Callaghan should prepare for the leadership. It is obvious that Wilson's resignation was not a surprise to Callaghan, which gave him an advantage over the other candidates. Second, Callaghan had made a few enemies during his long career in politics. This made him stand out as a conciliatory candidate (Leonard 2015, p. 741).

Callaghan became prime minister during a difficult political time period. Nevertheless, he had two key notable advantages: decades of experience in the House of Commons and the presence of a comparatively cautious opposition leader (Norton 2020). However, issues within his own party presented considerable challenges during his premiership.

When Callaghan became Prime Minister, the Labour Party was divided regarding the UK's EEC membership, and much of its grassroots base continued to view the European Union with skepticism (Geddes 2004, p. 76). In the meantime, inflation in the UK was around 25%. Despite cuts in public spending, the value of the pound sterling continued to decline. This economic hardship compelled Callaghan to seek a loan from the IMF, which led to the first major criticism of his premiership from his own party (Brivati 1998, p. 352).

In this challenging political and economic climate, Callaghan needed to prove his leadership. Therefore, he considered it necessary to reshuffle the Cabinet to consolidate his authority as the new Prime Minister, a move that included the removal of his personal rival, Barbara Castle, from the cabinet (Derbyshire and Derbyshire 1988, p. 60). Additionally, he demonstrated his keen interest in foreign affairs as Prime Minister.

Wilson wanted to give Foreign Secretary Callaghan substantial autonomy in conducting foreign policy. With Callaghan's accession to the Prime Minister, Anthony Crosland became the new Foreign Secretary. As noted earlier, Callaghan had been influential in shaping the UK's foreign policy during his time as Foreign Secretary, and he had no intention of handing this role over to Crosland (Robb 2014, pp. 130, 175). Consequently, the Prime Minister's Office on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office became evident with Callaghan's tenure as Prime Minister (Clarke 1988, p. 94). However, Gaskarth had a different perspective. He argued that Callaghan left routine foreign policy matters to the foreign minister. In other words, Callaghan allowed the foreign minister to formulate and implement foreign policy on relatively less important matters. On the other hand, as a rule, he would handle serious issues, including military operations, treaties, and summits (Gaskarth 2013, p. 14).

Derbyshire and Derbyshire also had a similar thought about Callaghan's leadership. For him, Callaghan delegated decision-making authority to secret subcommittees on controversial issues, such as the Chevaline programme, and preferred to avoid cabinet debate.

As Prime Minister, he aimed to focus on key political issues, especially foreign affairs and combating inflation, due to inheriting a less favorable legacy ([Derbyshire and Derbyshire 1988](#), p. 59).

Focusing on the significant foreign policy issues that Callaghan encountered during his tenure as Prime Minister, examining the UK's foreign policy should begin with its relations with the US during this period. Although Callaghan publicly criticized the US's African policy, he maintained a cautious stance in his relations with the US to prevent any negative impact on the alliance ([Bell 1978](#), p. 568). Notably, the proposals and diplomatic efforts advanced by Callaghan in the House of Commons shortly before he became Prime Minister in 1976 were appreciated by the US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger ([Documentation: Foreign Policy and National Security 1976](#)). Additionally, Henry Kissinger noted that, in the early 1970s, the UK aimed to assert its European identity by indicating a willingness to end its special relationship with the US. However, after 1976, Callaghan and his Foreign Secretary Crosland rebuilt the close relationship with the US. This shift in the UK's stance was valuable to the US ([Kissinger 1982](#), p. 577). All things considered, during the first part of Callaghan's premiership, there was a perception that Callaghan and Kissinger were working to enhance alliance relations and foster greater understanding between the two nations ([Cyr 1979a](#), p. 138).

According to Callaghan, the Vietnam War had a significant impact on the United States' global power. He argues that the US was still the most powerful actor by the end of the war, but the world should now be defined as multipolar ([Callaghan 1975](#), p. 5). As Verrier noted, relations with the US have been a key to British foreign policy since 1945. At this point, the US's defeat in Vietnam and the subsequent detente in the Cold War led to the US attempting to reduce its international commitments, which also had an influence on the UK's foreign policy ([Verrier 1983](#), p. 326).

In this regard, unlike Anthony Eden, who tested his country's global power during the Suez Crisis ([Erkul 2024a](#)), Callaghan had a different view. The recognition of the UK's declining global power and status during his premiership presented an opportunity to engage with the world through a new foreign policy. In this context, Callaghan had some successes in foreign policy, including revitalizing Anglo-American relations, providing confidence in the US and Europe simultaneously, improving relations with the Soviet Union, and following a foreign policy that emphasizes supranational and multinational organizations ([Lane 2004](#), pp. 154, 167–68). In short, Callaghan believed that a multifaceted foreign policy would benefit the UK while placing a priority on the US.

Callaghan's efforts to establish strong relations with the US were also instrumental in securing a favorable outcome to his country's loan negotiations with the IMF. However, he did not receive the level of support from the US that he had anticipated. While he did not directly blackmail the US on this point, he did warn the US that the UK, given its current economic situation, might be unable to sustain its responsibilities within the Western alliance ([Robb 2014](#), pp. 176–77).

Callaghan was determined to preserve the UK's military capacity since he believed that the nation's military strength would continue to play an important role in influencing the Western alliance and the US. In short, Callaghan intended to maintain the UK's military power, including its nuclear deterrent, to uphold its influence within the Western actors and its influence over the US ([Lane 2004](#), p. 156). In other words, for him, the decline in the UK's military usefulness to the US has negatively affected their relations based on shared interests ([Sanders 1990](#), p. 195). From this perspective, Callaghan continued the UK's contribution to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in both nuclear and conventional ways. It is also important to note that he supported the Alliance's 1977 decision to increase NATO members' defense spending by three percent annually

(Davis and Pfaltzgraff 1987, p. 121). The increase, which was set to take effect in the 1979–1980 budget period, had been supported by UK Defence Minister Frederick Mulley. In a 1978 statement to Parliament, Mulley affirmed that the UK was committed to raising defence budgets (House of Commons 1978).

In addition to these factors, the UK's nuclear capability played a significant role in shaping its relations with the US. While there has been general criticism in the Labour Party for an independent nuclear deterrence (the Labour Party and its leaders have sometimes had differing opinions on this issue), it is important to emphasize that Callaghan supported both NATO's nuclear protection and the UK's nuclear deterrence. He even started the modernization of the existing Polaris missiles without fully consulting the cabinet (Duncan and Inglee 1987, p. 93). In this context, Callaghan followed in the footsteps of Clement Attlee⁴ and Harold Wilson. Because Attlee, who made the decision in 1947 for the UK to acquire nuclear weapons, had not brought the issue to the Cabinet or Parliament before. Similarly, Wilson also kept the matter out of Cabinet discussions (Walker 2010, p. 456). During this period, many members of the Labour Party supported disarmament and held anti-American views. Therefore, Callaghan's decisions have a strong coercive influence on him (Clarke 1992, pp. 212–13).

Callaghan also sought a middle ground in his parliamentary statements, considering the views of the Labour Party and parliamentary members who held anti-American views. For example, in his address to Parliament on 15 March 1977, following a visit to the US, he expressed support for harmonious relations and cooperation with the US, yet made it clear: *"I have no desire to see this country become an industrial satellite of the United States. Especially in regard to our maritime protection, we should, as far as possible, although by all means in partnership with our allies, be able to look after ourselves."* In doing so, Callaghan aimed to reassure both pro and anti-American groups within his party and Parliament (House of Commons 1977a).

The Middle East politics also played an essential role in the relations between the US and the UK during this period. Callaghan's rise to Prime Minister ended the divergences between the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister regarding the Palestinian question. He was uncomfortable with the open support for Israel during the Wilson era and wanted to moderate it. To facilitate this policy shift, he delivered several pro-Palestinian speeches intended to signal a more balanced stance, thereby reducing the UK's overt support for Israel. Callaghan intended to show that support for Israel would not continue in the same manner (Lochery 2010, p. 504). It should also be noted that Menachem Begin made an official state visit to Britain shortly after becoming Prime Minister of Israel in 1977, where Egypt-Israel relations were a key issue on the agenda. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) initially opposed direct talks between Israel and Egypt, fearing that such discussions could lead to a separate peace agreement between the two nations rather than a comprehensive solution that included the entire region. Additionally, the UK was concerned that supporting these negotiations might risk its interests in the Arab world. Despite these concerns, Callaghan approved the bilateral talks. Notably, the US also supported these negotiations. President Carter believed that Callaghan's mediation efforts helped to generate momentum in the discussions between Israel and Egypt (Rynhold and Spyer 2007, p. 148).

After a comprehensive analysis of the UK's relations with the US, the conclusion of this section presents Sanders' insights on the state of these relations in May 1979, the month when Callaghan lost the election. Also, for him, in May 1979, relations between the UK and the US were at their lowest point in more than a generation (Sanders 1990, p. 178).

Continuing with Britain's relations with the EEC, a sphere to which Callaghan attached considerable importance within his multifaceted foreign policy. Callaghan's approach to the

EEC reflects a continuation of Wilson's second term as Prime Minister. During this period, the UK shifted away from closer cooperation within the EEC, and Callaghan maintained this trend when he became Prime Minister (Wallace 2005, p. 54).

However, during his time as Prime Minister, Callaghan maintained a cautious approach to ambitious proposals for European integration (Kavanagh et al. 2006, p. 159). In other words, he took a pragmatic approach to European issues and was not eager for further integration, even though he supported continuing the EEC membership. Furthermore, the country was in a deep economic crisis and was forced to accept an IMF bailout shortly after Callaghan became prime minister. Under such circumstances, it is understandable that Callaghan wanted to shift his focus away from the EEC. Conversely, the failure of the EEC to create an economic miracle to solve the country's economic problems, along with criticism of the UK's perceived excessive contributions to the EEC budget, created a challenging situation for Callaghan (Young 2004, p. 147).

At this point, it is also essential to address the UK's relations with France. In this context, French President Giscard d'Estaing's 1976 visit to the UK was important as it marked the first state visit after many years. This visit aimed to both strengthen bilateral relations and promote closer ties between the UK, France, and Germany. Furthermore, while reaching an agreement on establishing a broader representative body for the European Parliament, Giscard d'Estaing also sought to show his awareness of the UK's concerns on problematic issues such as devolution. In short, this visit highlighted shared challenges and interests and initiated efforts to establish a more stable bilateral relationship (Waite 1976). Additionally, the developing relations with France and Germany had a positive impact on the UK's relations with the EEC.

Equally important is the need to address the enduring problems inherited from the legacy of the British Empire. Callaghan believed that the Conservative Heath government was neglecting the Commonwealth due to its focus on the EEC. In contrast, he prioritized the Commonwealth, even during his tenure as Foreign Secretary. He believed that resolving the Rhodesian conflict would have a positive impact on the Commonwealth. However, efforts to reach a settlement proved challenging and ultimately led to a diplomatic stalemate involving the US. Over time, the Rhodesian conflict failed to yield the desired results, and the Labour Government's power within the country weakened, forcing Callaghan and Foreign Secretary Owen to wait for the general election to address the issue. However, his defeat in the 1979 general election prevented his recognition as the prime minister who resolved the Rhodesian problem (Lane 2004, pp. 164–66).

Callaghan's constrained position on the Rhodesia issue was clear in his 17 January 1979 speech to parliament. A review of his speech clearly shows that the Prime Minister was aware that any solution not approved by the US was unacceptable and unsustainable. He also stated his desire for parliamentary debate on the matter but indicated that doing so would be futile given the negative reports on a solution in Rhodesia (House of Commons 1979b). In other words, he postponed the solution because he did not want to risk his government's position in domestic politics over such a controversial issue. At the time, Callaghan was leading a minority government, which made his position even weaker. He also wanted to avoid damaging relations with the US over foreign policy. As can be seen, the institutional constraints and external pressures faced by Callaghan undermined the effectiveness of the decision-making process and ultimately rendered it nearly impossible for him to formulate and implement policies addressing the challenges confronting the UK.

As noted earlier, although a settlement of the Rhodesian question was postponed until after the election, it was the Thatcher government that ultimately assumed responsibility. With the Lancaster House Agreement signed at the end of 1979, the Thatcher government paved the way for independence for Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and resolved this issue. In the

meantime, Callaghan was criticized for the ineffectiveness of the sanctions imposed on both South Africa and Rhodesia during his tenure as Prime Minister (Erkul 2021, pp. 264–69). Regarding South Africa, in its 1979 Labour Party Manifesto, the Labour Party clearly stated its strong opposition to apartheid and pledged to continue supporting anti-apartheid movements if it remained in power. The manifesto also stated that it would take steps to reduce the UK's economic dependence on South Africa and to prevent new investment by British companies (Labour Party n.d.). However, it should be noted that Callaghan also faced criticism for delaying serious action on South Africa.

The final issue to be addressed in relation to the British Empire is the Falklands dispute. The Falklands dispute became particularly pronounced during Callaghan's premiership. Callaghan was primarily concerned that Argentina could move to claim sovereignty over the Falkland Islands. This threat from Argentina had prompted a "leaseback" option, in which the islanders would remain under British jurisdiction, but their sovereignty would be granted to Argentina. However, the "leaseback" option was ineffective because the Falklands population did not accept it. In the absence of a diplomatic solution, Callaghan's government shifted its attention to a potential Argentine attack and to deter Argentina from undertaking such an action (Parr 2014, p. 68).

An examination of the debates in the House of Lords on 25 January 1983 shows significant developments concerning the Falklands during Callaghan's tenure as Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister. According to these debates, the "leaseback" option was first introduced to the government's agenda in 1975, and the government had attempted to maintain its sovereignty over the Falklands by making certain concessions. In 1976, the situation in the Falklands escalated to a threatening level, leading to a deterioration in relations between the UK and Argentina. Another point worth noting was Argentina's military presence on British soil in December 1976, and the fact that the government concealed this crisis from Parliament until May 1978 (House of Lords 1983).

As this indicates, Callaghan's lack of a clear majority in Parliament, economic difficulties, and domestic political pressures significantly constrained his ability to make major foreign policy decisions. In addition, Anglo-American relations were the most significant factor constraining Callaghan's decision-making on important foreign policy issues. He had to be particularly cautious in his relations with the US, especially regarding the EEC, financial assistance from the IMF, policy towards Africa, the modernization of the UK's nuclear weapons, the defense budget, and relations with NATO. Finally, the uncertainty about his position on the Falklands dispute could be attributed to his lack of a clear parliamentary majority. This political instability has led to a more passive foreign policy.

Continuing with the Northern Ireland issue during Callaghan's tenure, it is important to highlight the extent of the political constraints he faced. In 1977 and 1978, there was a decrease in the number of deaths resulting from Irish Republican Army (IRA) attacks. However, this trend changed in 1979 when the IRA intensified its attacks, particularly targeting security forces, as part of their strategy to force the British Army to withdraw from Northern Ireland (Garrett 1979, pp. 87–88).

Callaghan's response to the increasing attacks was political. The last major initiative of his regarding Northern Ireland was an attempt to expand its representation in the House of Commons in 1979. However, the gradual weakening of the Callaghan Government prevented this effort from being noticed (Boyce 1996, p. 123). As Verrier points out, the Northern Ireland issue needs to be examined from a different perspective. Callaghan's failure to solve this issue created a challenging situation for the UK's global prestige. Additionally, in terms of domestic politics, Callaghan's reliance on the support of Ulster Unionist MPs to maintain his government raised concerns about the government's inde-

pendence and eliminated any possibility of reaching a compromise in Northern Ireland (Verrier 1983, p. 323).

Callaghan's lack of a clear parliamentary majority constrained his decision-making regarding the Northern Ireland issue. This constraint adversely affected both the military and political/diplomatic resolution of the problem, undermining his potential for leadership. Another critical issue reflecting Callaghan's political constraints was the proposed devolution of power to Scotland and Wales.

The rise of nationalism in Scotland and Wales put pressure on Callaghan to implement regional reforms. In this context, he focused on proposals for regional governments and limited devolution (Cyr 1979b, p. 154). As a result of Callaghan's regional reform initiatives, a referendum was held in 1979 in Scotland and Wales on a bill to devolve legislative powers to both countries. He used the referendum to manage opposition, requiring that at least 40% of voters in both countries approve the proposal for it to pass. Ultimately, as this threshold was not met, the process did not proceed (Forman and Baldwin 1999, p. 28). This highlights Callaghan's aim for a balanced policy that considered both supporters and opponents of devolution. One of the best examples of this was the requirement for a 40% approval rate in the referendum. This not only relieved the pressure on Callaghan from those demanding the referendum but also reassured opponents by ensuring that a 40% approval threshold was not met.

In short, Labour's ongoing rule without a clear parliamentary majority created political challenges for Callaghan. The threat of a no-confidence motion compelled him to be very cautious in addressing the demands made by the opposition parties (Shore 1993, p. 116).

In the debates following the referendum, the Prime Minister told Parliament that all parties needed to be consulted before decisions on devolution were made. He argued that it was not right for Parliament to make such an important constitutional decision during an election period. He also expressed discomfort, implying that the opposition was using a constitutional matter to gain political advantage before the election (House of Commons 1979c). As Mitchell and Williamson noted, given the results of the devolution referendums held in Scotland and Wales, Callaghan should have brought repeal orders to Parliament to overturn the devolution legislation. However, Callaghan tried to postpone this because he was looking for a way out of the referendum results. At this point, the Prime Minister's options were extremely limited by both parliamentary arithmetic and public opinion (Mitchell and Williamson 2022).

In short, the Prime Minister saw submitting the issue to a public vote as a way out, considering those who supported devolution. However, for those who opposed devolution, as mentioned above, he made it mandatory for certain additional conditions to be met for the referendum result to be valid. His policy choice was influenced by his constrained political position and his reluctance to take responsibility for such an important issue so close to the election.

Analyzing the economic situation of the UK during the Callaghan era reveals the political constraints that the prime minister faced. It is obvious that the first problem Callaghan had to address was the economic hardship that the UK was facing. The quadrupling of oil prices in the UK had a negative impact on public life. To "hide" this negative impact, Wilson relied heavily on foreign borrowing until 1976. When external credit was no longer available, the UK's only remaining option was to seek assistance from the IMF. But the IMF funding was conditional, and it was incompatible with the government's policies and ideals (Shore 1993, pp. 114–15).

At this point, Callaghan was constrained by the alliance he formed with the Liberals⁵ in Parliament in 1977. This alliance allowed the Callaghan government to remain in power, but it also compelled the Labour Party to abandon its "socialist" policies. The Liberals had

made this condition a prerequisite for the alliance, considering the fight against inflation to be a top priority (Baker 1990, p. 59). To align with this priority, Callaghan believed he had to abandon Keynesian economics. In his own words:

“We used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting government spending. I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists...”. (Labour Party 1976, p. 188 cited in Evans and Williams 2009, p. 17)

As Berend highlights, it became evident that Keynesianism in the European economy during the 1970s failed to solve stagnation, inflation, and unemployment effectively (Berend 2007, pp. 365–66). But on the other hand, Cawood emphasizes a dilemma: the Labour Party abandoned Keynesianism but still relied on union support to prevent strikes, which obstructed the implementation of the new economic policy (Cawood 2004, p. 261).

To manage the economic downturn, in 1976, the Callaghan government implemented a series of measures, including limiting wage growth, cutting public spending, and accepting a certain level of unemployment. These measures raised concerns among unions and required their cooperation. However, despite these efforts, the government’s economic expectations were not achieved (Pearce and Steward 1996, p. 501).

Blank stated that even if the Callaghan government successfully implemented its economic policies and regained the confidence of both the working class and industry, it still would not be economically sufficient. Because for him, Britain was highly vulnerable to international economic developments (Blank 1977, p. 720). Similarly, Pearce and Steward note that economic problems led to a decline in the UK’s global power, labelling it the “sick man” of Europe. This decline was reflected in reduced defense spending, resulting in the closure of naval facilities at the Cape of Good Hope and an air base in the Indian Ocean in 1976. Despite the costs, the Callaghan government prioritized its nuclear deterrent and chose to hide the Chevaline-Polaris modernization program and its expenses from Parliament (Pearce and Steward 1996, p. 610).

The challenges during Wilson’s and Callaghan’s premierships divided and polarized the Labour Party. The left wing supported increased economic nationalization and unilateral nuclear disarmament, and opposed the UK’s membership in the European Community. Contrarily, the right wing supported NATO, nuclear weapons, and European Community membership, while opposing further nationalization (Crewe and King 1995 as cited in Leach et al. 2006, p. 102).

5. The Winter of Discontent: Evaluating Callaghan’s Prime Ministership Based on Success and Failure

Theakston mentioned that in his later years, Callaghan stated that he would not be surprised if people considered him the worst prime minister of the UK in over 200 years (Theakston 2010, p. 190). However, not everyone shared this pessimistic view. Bernard Donoughue, who was the Director of the Number 10 Policy Unit in Callaghan’s government, evaluated the success of the Callaghan government in his diary. In his own words:

“Despite all the mistakes and failures, we did not do a bad job. Much was beyond our power and influence, for good or ill. Governments and Prime Ministers can achieve much less than their electors believe. Expectations are doomed to disappointment”. (Donoughue 2008, p. 504)

Some disagreed with Donoughue’s optimistic interpretation of Callaghan’s premiership. Skidelsky may have delivered one of the harshest critiques regarding the governments of Wilson and Callaghan. He expressed his views in the following words:

“They were among the low points of British Government in the twentieth century, perhaps the lowest point. At no time since before the First World War was there such a feeling that Britain had become ungovernable, and that a change of regime—a change in the way of governing, and not just a change of government—was required”. (Skidelsky 2004, p. 316)

The most significant issue that made Callaghan’s term as Prime Minister problematic was undoubtedly the economic difficulties experienced by the UK. When examined in a general context, 1977–1978 was a relatively successful period for the Labour government economically. In this context, some members of the government believed that the fall of 1978 would be an opportune time to hold an election, given the improvements in various aspects of the UK economy. However, Callaghan’s primary concern during this time was the high unemployment rate, which had to be reduced before an election could be called. In this environment of uncertainty, the autumn of 1978 was no longer an option, and the emergence of the “winter of discontent” (Donoughue 1987, pp. 142–47) marked the beginning of the end for Callaghan.

The “Winter of Discontent” refers to a period that began with strikes⁶ across the UK in the winter of 1978 and 1979. During this period, workers went on strike against the Labour government’s attempts to curtail wage increases. The success of this movement was a notable factor in the Labour Party’s election defeat under Callaghan’s leadership in 1979 (Martin 2009, p. 49).

Callaghan’s refusal to call a general election in 1978 brought significant criticism. In the fall of 1978, it was estimated that Callaghan’s chances of winning a general election were close to those of Thatcher’s. However, it would be a mistake to evaluate Callaghan’s decision not to call an election at that time as a poor political choice in hindsight. Most Cabinet members⁷ offered balanced arguments both for and against calling an election, ultimately leaving the decision to the Prime Minister. Also, Callaghan was optimistic regarding the economy’s recovery by fall 1978, believing that public support for the government had improved once again (Shore 1993, pp. 115–17). Callaghan aimed to call an election that would allow the Labour Party to secure a powerful parliamentary majority, but he delayed the decision. While he still held onto this hope, time was not on his side. Ultimately, on 28 March 1979, he lost a vote of confidence in the House of Commons (Garnett and Lynch 2012, p. 55).

As Kavanagh points out, prime ministers in the UK typically consult with the cabinet before deciding on an election date. Although the decision is negotiated with the cabinet, the prime minister stands to lose the most from an electoral failure (Kavanagh 1990, p. 203).

According to Drucker, Callaghan and Denis Healey, who was then Chancellor of the Exchequer, received clear warnings in the summer of 1978 that neither the Labour Party nor the unions would accept a 5% cap on wage increases. Drucker further argues that the weary leadership of Callaghan chose to ignore all these warnings (Drucker 1983, p. 68). By contrast, Shore argues that Callaghan should not be held directly responsible for the unions’ chaos, which was caused by widespread strikes. However, his overly conciliatory stance in seeking constructive dialogue with union leaders ultimately compromised the authority of the democratic government. The absence of a declared state of emergency and the lack of military involvement in providing essential public services support this view (Shore 1993, pp. 118–19).

It is crucial to note that when firefighters across the country went on strike in 1977, the Callaghan government used troops to fight the fires (Holmes 1983, p. 219). On 15 November 1977, Merlyn Rees, the Home Secretary in the Callaghan Government, stated in Parliamentary Debates, regarding the deployment of the Army to extinguish the fires, *“It was done with the aim of saving life.”* (House of Commons 1977b). However, whether it was

directly important for the continuation of people's lives or not, the Callaghan Government could not show the same leadership during the "Winter of Discontent".

Callaghan had been a union supporter from a young age, and his strong belief in unions is widely seen as a factor contributing to his eventual downfall (Morgan 1999, p. 133). In other words, Callaghan's situation was a true irony. A champion of the union wing of the labour movement, Callaghan lost the election due to widespread dissatisfaction among the British people with the actions of the unions (Thomson 1981, p. 254). One of the best comments on Callaghan's being labelled a failed prime minister came from Brivati:

"If Callaghan had called the election in October 1978 and lost he would have gone down as a competent premier who weathered a difficult time. In clinging to power through the winter of 1979, he lost much of his credibility and the Labour party much of its political coherence" (Brivati 1998, p. 356)

As Kirkland argues, the media played a central role in intensifying the crisis. Through the homogenization of unions and strikes, and the widespread deployment of sloganistic, quasi-wartime language, media narratives worked to the disadvantage of the government. Anti-union rhetoric in the media positioned diverse unions as a single target. In other words, the union movements were homogenized. Ultimately, through this homogenized "enemy," the media both highlighted the Labour Party's special relationship with the unions and portrayed it as powerless (Kirkland 2025, pp. 129–35).

During this period, several newspaper headlines in the British press further illustrate the point discussed above. For instance, the *Daily Mail* ran headlines such as "Britain Under Siege" and "Target for Today – Sick Children," while *The Sun* declared "Four Million Children Are Blockaded from School," and the *Daily Express*, quoting a heart surgery patient, asked, "What Right Have They to Play God with My Life?" (Clutterbuck 1984, pp. 47–48). Taken together, these headlines not only reflect the media's anti-union rhetoric but also demonstrate how such coverage portrayed the government as ineffective, particularly by highlighting the Labour Party's close relationship with trade unions in a way that proved politically damaging.

The turning point for Callaghan came with a newspaper article titled "Crisis! What Crisis?". When Callaghan returned from the Guadeloupe summit in January 1979, he stated regarding the strikes in the country, "I see no signs of mounting crisis.". However, this statement was incorrectly reported as "crisis, what crisis?" (Dampier and Walton 2008, p. 125). Although some claimed he said, "Crisis! What crisis?" in response to the Winter of Discontent, Callaghan never confirmed that he used those words (Warwicker 2015, p. 181). Only five days after the news was published, on 16 January 1979, Callaghan faced severe criticism in Parliament, especially from the opposition leader, Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher described the situation as a crisis and delivered a lengthy speech targeting Callaghan's administration for the ongoing strikes. In his reply, Callaghan defended the right to strike as a fundamental principle of a free society. At the same time, he emphasized his opposition to allowing these strikes to escalate into actions that could harm society's general interest (House of Commons 1979a). In other words, he sought a balance between his socialist beliefs and his responsibilities to the public. This balancing act constrained his strategy for handling the strikes. Although the article adopts a critical stance toward Callaghan when examining both the emergence of the Winter of Discontent and his management of the crisis, it is important to recognize that the underlying economic disputes were not confined to the UK but constituted a broader issue affecting Europe as a whole.

The 1970s can be regarded as a period in which the welfare state model in Europe was increasingly challenged and questioned. The fact that European states allocated significantly greater resources to welfare expenditures compared to other global actors began to undermine their position in international economic competition (Berend 2007,

pp. 389–90). In this context, when the Winter of Discontent is interpreted as an effort by trade unions to preserve the gains they had achieved through the welfare state, it can also be seen as part of a broader wave of strikes across Europe. Despite his trade union background and political beliefs, Callaghan recognized that the existing situation was unsustainable and sought to manage the crisis within the political and economic constraints he faced.

In 1979, a minority government led by Callaghan was the subject of a vote of no confidence. A minority government does not lose power simply because its own MPs leave the party. It loses power when other parties represented in parliament unite and demonstrate their will to overthrow the government (Smith and Palsby 1981, p. 118). Callaghan's refusal to accept wage increases above 5% and the unions' strike actions, along with the failure of the devolution referendums in Scotland and Wales, were detrimental to Callaghan (Laybourn 2002, pp. 58–59). At this point, it should be emphasized that, despite the numerous constraints affecting the decision-making process, Callaghan managed to maintain a relative balance until late 1978. However, the end of the Lib–Lab Pact forced him to lead a minority government, and the subsequent emergence of the Winter of Discontent ultimately deprived him of his governing capacity. Therefore, these developments indicate that the situation for Callaghan moved beyond institutional constraints within Parliament and reached a point where both decision-making and policy implementation became effectively impossible.

According to Randall and Sloam, the Wilson and Callaghan governments largely failed to implement their socialist rhetoric (Randall and Sloam 2009, p. 99). Similarly, as noted by Budge et al., the left wing of the Labour Party attributed Callaghan's 1979 election defeat to his failure to implement uncompromising socialist policies (Budge et al. 2001, p. 364). On the other hand, as Parker pointed out, Callaghan's defeat in the 1979 election paved the way for the privatization of many nationalized industries and the weakening of powerful unions. This electoral loss also set the stage for nearly two decades of Conservative governance, which continued until Tony Blair became Prime Minister of the UK in 1997 (Parker 2011, p. 114). Finally, Taylor's assessment offers a different perspective on Callaghan's electoral defeat. He argues that the Labour Party's 1979 electoral defeat was not as catastrophic as it appeared. Firstly, Thatcher's 43.9% of the vote was low. Secondly, voter turnout was relatively low, yet the Labour Party still increased its total votes compared to the 1974 election. Therefore, the 1979 election results did not reflect a nation overwhelmingly demanding change (H. Taylor 2020).

When assessing the successes and failures of the UK's foreign policy during this period, it should not be forgotten that the Wilson and Callaghan governments were exhausted by the permanent economic issues (R. Taylor 2004, p. 98). In such a situation, it became difficult to formulate and implement foreign policy strategies. In Callaghan's own words:

"But foreign policy is not merely subject to the constraints of the British economic predicament and of British public opinion. Nowadays it is also an 'integral part of the Government's entire strategy, economic, cultural and social. It has become a cliché to say that we live in an interdependent world, but it is nevertheless true. The world is interdependent in the sense that every one of our countries depends for its existence on a great many other countries." (Callaghan 1975, p. 2)

As reflected in Callaghan's statement, a multifaceted foreign policy⁸ was advantageous for the UK. Hill observed that Labour leaders have generally kept the UK's historical connections to both the US and the Commonwealth members. In this context, Callaghan's phrase in 1975, *"We are the bridge-builders,"* can be interpreted as a reference to the UK's ability to foster connections among different actors (Hill 1979, p. 253).

Callaghan's statement, "*We are bridge builders*," essentially rephrases Winston Churchill's claim that Britain stands at the intersection of three concentric circles: the Commonwealth and Empire, the English-speaking world, and a United Europe (Mangold 2002, p. 26). This may not be considered a wise foreign policy choice. As Erkul points out, Churchill's Three Circles Doctrine, presented in a 1948 speech, provided a fancy basis for foreign policy; however, the leaders who adopted this doctrine were unable to find a new way for the UK's foreign policy (Erkul 2024b).

The Winter of Discontent is widely regarded as the most significant failure of Callaghan's long political career. The administrative ineffectiveness of his government in addressing the strikes was influenced not only by his relatively conciliatory stance toward trade unions but also by the broader political fragilities within his administration. Therefore, assessing the leadership and policy decisions of a prime minister operating under conditions of limited political support risks producing analytically incomplete or potentially misleading conclusions regarding their overall success or failure.

6. Conclusions

An analysis of British political history reveals that a prime minister's success may not necessarily hinge on resolving long-standing issues or leading the country into an economic golden age. In contrast, evaluating failure is much more straightforward. This clarity arises because both academics and the public tend to hold leaders accountable for their failures, and these events remain vividly remembered. A well-known example is the humiliation/failure experienced during the Suez Crisis of 1956, which has contributed to a widespread perception in British academia and society that Anthony Eden was a failed prime minister.⁹ Callaghan did not achieve success that would be remembered for generations as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary, and Foreign Secretary. The article points out his failures on key issues during these roles. The article's focus on certain instances of failure through the lens of constraint should not be interpreted as suggesting that Callaghan was an unsuccessful politician. On the contrary, the analysis emphasizes that, in the three major offices he held prior to becoming Prime Minister, he consistently sought to make decisions that can be regarded as rational within the circumstances. In this respect, the article aims to demonstrate the extent to which various constraints shaped and limited the decision-making process in the positions Callaghan occupied. In other words, rather than portraying him as an ineffective political figure, the study foregrounds the challenges and limitations he encountered in the process of making and implementing decisions.

As Prime Minister for nearly three years, he is mainly remembered for the economic difficulties and crises of the Winter of Discontent, as well as for his ineffective management of these challenges. In summary, despite a notable political career, his legacy is overshadowed by failures rather than any significant achievements. At this point, examining politicians and political issues through an outcome-oriented lens, particularly in the case of Callaghan, risks rendering the analysis itself problematic. The outcome-based approach, commonly employed in such studies, evaluates decisions primarily in terms of success or failure, often neglecting the specific conditions of the period in which those decisions were made and the factors that shaped the decision-making process. While this may appear to offer a straightforward analytical framework, it ultimately leads to oversimplified and potentially misleading conclusions. Given Callaghan's significant place in British politics, assessing his political legacy solely through such an outcome-oriented perspective would be inadequate. Accordingly, this article treats it as essential to examine both the contextual realities of the periods in question and the various factors that influenced the decision-making process.

The article highlights that Callaghan's time as Prime Minister was constrained by domestic and foreign policy influences, as well as economic factors. These constraints had a detrimental impact on his leadership and decision-making abilities. It is important to note that the argument presented in the article does not aim to justify Callaghan's failures in his political positions. Instead, it seeks to evaluate his leadership under the circumstances of that period and show that Callaghan faced significant restrictions in his decision-making process.

Callaghan was a significant figure in British politics, being the only politician in the twentieth century to hold the positions of Home Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary, and a three-year tenure as Prime Minister, which ended in 1979, was one of the most turbulent periods in British politics. In fact, in the years following 1979, political commentators continued to describe Callaghan's premiership as a disaster (Brivati 1998, pp. 350–51). Although the Labour Party weakened during his time as Prime Minister, as Laybourn notes, "*perhaps, also, his premiership was not the disaster it was presented as being in the 1980s*" (Laybourn 2002, p. 54).

Like other UK Prime Ministers, he experienced both successes and failures. However, it is crucial to recognize that his leadership was constrained by domestic/foreign policy, economic issues, and his government's parliamentary majority. Ultimately, and unfortunately, politics is highly result-oriented, and Callaghan will be remembered primarily with the Winter of Discontent and his defeat to Margaret Thatcher in the 1979 election.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

MP	Member of Parliament
UK	the United Kingdom
US	the United States
IMF	International Monetary Fund
EEC	European Economic Community
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
FCO	The Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Notes

- ¹ For Callaghan, losing his father at a young age highlighted his psychological need for constant security; his public and union work can also be understood in this context. The pension his mother received after the Labour Party came to power in 1924 established his connection to socialist ideology, leading him to continue his political life within the Labour Party (Morgan 1997, pp. 10–11).
- ² The fact that he had never attended university was a constant source of disturbance for Callaghan (Morgan 1997, p. 753). Callaghan is not unique in this regard. Former British Prime Ministers David Lloyd George, Ramsay MacDonald, Winston Churchill, and John Major also did not have university degrees. Therefore, a university degree is not a necessary qualification

for becoming the Prime Minister of the UK (Madgwick 1984, p. 50). But he was the first British prime minister born in the 20th century without a university degree (Batteson 1997, p. 367).

For Callaghan, the sea symbolized a commitment to the greatness of the British Empire, a legacy inherited from his father, a sailor (Morgan 1997, p. 6).

In this context, there are some similarities between Labour Prime Ministers Clement Attlee and Callaghan. Both leaders faced challenges in managing a fragile economy. Attlee also supported the UK's pursuit of nuclear power, despite his country's need for financial assistance from the United States (Erkul 2024d).

The Liberal–Labour Pact (Lib–Lab Pact) was crucial in supporting James Callaghan's government, helping it remain in power after 1977 (Jones 2009, p. 66).

In addition to public sector strikes, rising oil prices and energy costs, as well as high inflation, were also difficulties faced by the Callaghan government during the “Winter of Discontent” (Shepherd 2015, p. 11).

Cabinet members gather insights and information from departmental officials, and UK prime ministers traditionally receive political advice from these members (Pryce 1997, p. 156).

It is essential to incorporate cultural diplomacy into the multifaceted realm of foreign policy. Callaghan emphasized the importance of the UK's cultural diplomacy and played a key role in its academic revival (Barber 1978, p. 268).

Many people in Britain still think of him as a “failed prime minister.” This negative opinion is mainly due to the Suez Crisis and the actions he took during that time (Erkul 2024a).

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