

Britain and Greece: 40 years ago

May 30 2010

During the UK general election campaign, especially in the first week of May 2010, the fortunes of Greece figured prominently in British new bulletins. The huge street demonstrations against austerity measures in Athens seemed to figure as possible portents of things to come post-election when British austerity measures would need to kick in, and may have helped trigger a late swing back of 2-3 per cent of voters back to supporting Labour on election day itself. Here [Alexandros Nafpliotis](#) considers some parallels with the 1970 general election in Britain and Greece's then predicament of being governed by a military junta.



'If a member of a club breaks the rules for a limited period, the other members may tolerate it but if he is in persistent violation of the rules, the time must come when the club can no longer accept the situation. My government, with great reluctance, has come to the conclusion that this is the situation we are faced with now'. (George Thompson, Britain's chief delegate to the Council of Europe, 11 December 1969). The occasion for Thompson's censure is a timetable presented by a Greek minister, which has failed to persuade European allies of the intentions of the Greek government.

Western European governments are toughening their stance vis-à-vis Greece, which is now forced to look for support in other areas of the globe. The Greek prime minister, who has also taken over the post of minister of foreign affairs, is struggling to take the country out of the 'vulnerable international position' it is in, and which does not leave it much room for manoeuvre. In his effort to achieve this the PM encounters strong reactions from members of his government, who disagree with his initiatives in trying to mitigate foreign critics through pursuing a conciliatory line.

Meanwhile, Britain just went through a crucial election, which has reinstated the Conservatives to the leadership of the country after a long period of Labour dominance. It is considered certain that the Tories' return to power will impact considerably on London's relations with Brussels and other major European capitals. The Tory leader has assumed the responsibility of dramatically changing the UK's profile, competing with the charismatic Labour leader from five years ago.

All of the above refer to the situation in Athens and London not in 2010 but exactly 40 years ago. The third anniversary of the 21 April coup d'état that brought the Greek Colonels to power was overshadowed by the feeling of isolation that the regime was increasingly experiencing. This was mainly a consequence of Greece's walkout from the Council of Europe, when it realised that expulsion was imminent the previous December. George Papadopoulos (prime minister, minister of defence, and also minister of foreign affairs) launched the regime's 'opening into the East', in order to enhance the international standing of Greece, which had taken some serious blows. The hardliners of the junta reacted to Papadopoulos' concentration of powers, and to his handling of the situation in Cyprus. Meanwhile in Britain in the summer of 1970, Edward Heath unexpectedly became UK premier, as he led the Conservatives to one of the biggest electoral surprises in British history, and set Britain's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) as his primary goal.

The Tories' return to power created great expectations on the part of the Greek junta, mainly because of the lack of a left wing within the Conservative party and the great interest that the Tories traditionally show for matters of defence and security. The newspaper *Nea Politia* (the mouthpiece of the regime), immediately pointed out the importance of the electoral outcome, claiming that the British election results 'show that the swing towards the left in Europe is being halted' and that these developments 'vindicate the 1967 Revolution and show that the Greek officers who launched it were the first to understand the message of [the] times'.

This was followed by positive statements by British officials that contributed to an amelioration of relations. London, under tremendous pressure formed by its financial difficulties and US insistence, decided that it was necessary to have a 'good working relationship' with the Greek military regime that would allow Britain to actively promote trade (including arms sales) between the two countries.

The tension that was created in the Mediterranean in September 1970, strengthened Greece's position, as it underlined the country's significance for the Atlantic Alliance. Events then seemed to justify the British argument in favour of working closely with Athens and avoiding at all costs discussing the 'Greek issue' in NATO forums. A meeting took place at Geoffrey Rippon's office at the end of the month that is quite

indicative of the Heath government's intentions and epitomised British policy towards the Colonels under the Conservatives. It provided a perfect illustration of the priorities of Whitehall, its position on a series of sensitive issues, and, finally, marked a watershed with regard to Anglo-Greek relations in some respects.

British policy-maker decided that 'co-operation with Greece in the military field was particularly important if we were to maintain a good working relationship with the Greek Government' and it was stated that 'HMG's recent agreement to the supply of frigates should prove helpful in this connexion'. The new spirit in relations was further proven by Palamas' (Greek alternate minister of foreign affairs) visit to the British capital and Sir Denis Greenhill's (permanent under-secretary of state for foreign affairs) statement that his country wished to do 'as much business as possible with Greece', as well as by the Palamas –Douglas-Home meeting in New York in October. Despite some fluctuation in relations between the two countries (chiefly to do with difficulties bequeathed by Wilson), the Heath government made clear its will to establish warmer relations, by drawing a distinction between its policy and that of its predecessor, and by using cooperation in the military field as the catalyst.

That events in Britain in 1970 were a milestone in Anglo-Greek relations also reflected a strong cynicism and *realpolitik* with which London and the Foreign Office regarded the political situation in Greece. The following year, the British ambassador in Athen, Sir Robin Hooper sent a report back to the FCO commenting:

'I do not see Greece returning to a democratic system of government as understood in Western European countries for many years and evolution even to a form of guided democracy such as the colonels have in the past seemed to envisage is evidently going to be slow and uncertain'.