

The United Kingdom and its applications for accession to the Common Market

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During the 1960s, the United Kingdom's policy towards Europe changed. The wait-and-see approach of the 1940s and 1950s, which, at most, allowed for European cooperation at intergovernmental level, was gradually replaced by a determination to participate more actively in the European unification process.

A fear of being sidelined in international affairs and the resounding success of the European Economic Community (EEC) were the main factors behind the change in direction of the British Governments in the early 1960s. Public opinion and the major political parties, with their commitment to national sovereignty, appeared to be divided. For example, the Conservative Party was more pro-European than the Labour Party. The latter, together with the trade unions, was keen to protect the Welfare State and State control of the economy against what it popularly perceived to be a capitalist Europe too wedded to the idea of free trade.

The United Kingdom's interest in Europe met with a mixed reaction elsewhere. The strongest opposition came from France, which, although it had welcomed the idea of the UK's accession in the 1940s and 1950s, when Britain's approach was lukewarm, changed its stance to rejection when General de Gaulle came to power. This was a symptom of the two countries' jostling for position as leaders of Europe. Accordingly, France took a sceptical view of the United Kingdom's relationship with the United States. The UK Government also found itself called to task for old grudges dating back to the war.