

'The dilemma facing Harold Wilson' from Le Figaro (18 June 1971)


Caption: On 18 June 1971, the French conservative newspaper Le Figaro publishes comments made by the British Labour MP, Maurice Edelman, highlighting the role of both politicians and public opinion in the debate concerning the United Kingdom's accession to the Common Market.

Source: Le Figaro. 18.06.1971, n° 8 322; 145e année. Paris: Le Figaro. "Le dilemme d'Harold Wilson", auteur:Edelman, Maurice , p. 38.

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British public opinion and the Common Market

The dilemma facing Harold Wilson

Harold Macmillan once said that you shouldn't try to catch a train using last year's *Bradshaw* (timetable). The EEC negotiators should bear that remark in mind as they enter the final phase of their talks on enlargement.

When Britain was applying to join the Common Market, there was practically no popular view in the country on what seemed an esoteric and indeed very academic issue, but the Heath–Pompidou meeting has suddenly brought it home to the British people that the moment of historic choices has arrived. The debate is now on in earnest everywhere, on street corners, in shops, pubs, homes and factories, and it is a debate of interest to a majority of people who had not, until now, felt themselves directly affected.

Over the past decade, discussion in Britain about European unity and joining the Common Market has been restricted to a handful of journalists, to select circles, pro-European activists and a group of politicians including Edward Heath and Roy Jenkins. However, it was Harold Wilson, espousing the European cause in 1967 with all the enthusiasm of a spinster finding passion late in life, who managed to obtain a majority in favour of going into the Common Market, the likes of which had never before been seen in the history of our Parliament.

When he applied for membership on behalf of the Labour Government of the time, Wilson said he would not take 'no' for an answer. Well, the 'no' is now a 'yes' and Wilson finds himself in a delicate situation politically. To start with, opposition to Britain's application within the Labour Party is no longer confined to a small parliamentary group led by a couple of rather melancholy and inward-looking former Ministers, Peter Shore and Douglas Jay, a group that attracted few followers. The leaders of the two main trade unions, Jack Jones of the Transport and General Workers Union and Hugh Scanlon of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers, have very recently come out against British membership.

These two unions, with their huge block votes, dominate the Labour Party Congress and it therefore seems likely that, if Wilson continues to support the British application for membership, he and the Executive Committee could be defeated at the next Congress, whether it be the annual Congress this autumn or a specially convened session after the conditions for Common Market enlargement are published in the summer.

Wilson's political difficulties are complicated by the fact that, for some time now, the former Prime Minister has felt his leadership of the Party seriously threatened by Roy Jenkins, a former Chancellor of the Exchequer and a committed pro-European, and by Jim Callaghan, also a former Chancellor of the Exchequer. Callaghan, who is extremely popular in Britain, is the Labour Party Treasurer and that gives him considerable influence within the organisation. In a recent speech that shook the Labour Party, he set out his position perhaps not entirely unambiguously but in sufficiently clear terms for the Party to have got the message. He is not in favour of British membership, and his attitude gives a boost to all those who are opposed to it.

So Harold Wilson faces a dilemma. Considerable resistance to Britain's membership has arisen in the country. It can be ascribed in varying degrees to reactionary right-wing groups with racist tendencies, to Enoch Powell's brand of intellectual conservatism, to the dry, scholarly, little-islanders, Shore and Jay, to a few respected economists offering reasoned arguments, to the man in the street instinctively shrinking from the unknown and to the far left which simply toes the Moscow line.

When we first tried to join the EEC, the lack of public interest was undoubtedly a gut reaction to some very emotional slogans. 'The price of butter will go up,' reflects the fear and near terror of the housewife who is scared that the cost of living, already on the increase, will reach unbearable levels. This genuine worry has been heightened demagogically by such dramatic warnings as 'Join the Common Market and you'll have to speak French' or 'Join the Common Market and you'll lose your sovereignty and your Queen.' For a nation,

the fear of losing sovereignty can be just as much a matter of concern as the fear of losing one's identity is for an individual. Common Market opponents have clearly won one victory in whipping up nationwide hysteria on this issue and it will now be very difficult for Heath to reassure people.

This is the context in which Wilson must make a tough decision. He has made his support conditional on securing 'fair conditions' and, to quote one of his favourite expressions, he has 'kept his options open.' Without too much political gymnastics, but at the cost of some moral acrobatics, he could now come out against membership on the grounds that the conditions obtained after the Heath-Pompidou meeting are not good enough. That would allow him to kill two birds with one stone. He would remove Callaghan and Jenkins from the paths leading to control of the Labour Party and he would become the leader of all the disparate groups which, for good reasons or bad, do not want an institutionalised Europe. He could even try to ride the wave of public opinion as reflected in the opinion polls and force a general election to remove Heath from power on the European issue alone.

But he could choose a different path and recognise that we stand at a moment in history that calls not for politicians but for statesmen. He could recognise the fact that Western Europe's real interests, including those of Britain, demand that a historic decision, one that has matured over a long period, should be supported by a united political leadership. He will be considerably helped in this over the coming weeks if public opinion is not, once again, bruised in the final negotiating stages by an excessively rigid attitude on the part of the Six. Enlargement should be, and the signs are that it will be, an act of generosity and not the result of horse-trading.

Maurice Edelman, MP