

'If Britain withdrew' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (16 March 1974)

Caption: On 16 March 1974, German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, concerned about the consequences of a possible British withdrawal from the common market, considers the reasons why the United Kingdom should want to renegotiate the conditions of its accession to the European Communities.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Benckiser, Nikolas; Deschamps, Bruno; Eick, Jürgen; Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Fest, Joachim; Welter, Erich. 16.03.1974, Nr. 64. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Wenn England austräte", auteur:Götz, Hans Herbert , p. 1.

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If Britain withdrew

By Hans Herbert Götz

Will Great Britain withdraw from the European Economic Community if the now requested ‘fundamental renegotiations’ concerning her membership conditions do not lead to something that can be presented to the British voters as a success? The ‘renegotiation’ issue has formal, economic and political consequences. Article 6 of the Act of Accession lays down that accession provisions ‘may be suspended, amended or repealed’. This elaborate procedure, taking at least two years, applies to all the EEC institutions and would, ultimately, have to be ratified by the national parliaments.

Wilson will have doubts as to whether the use of this procedure will bring him any closer to his main political objective of regaining a solid Commons majority. It is also uncertain whether Britain’s partners would agree to such a procedure. Besides, constant ‘renegotiations’ are part of everyday life in Brussels. Regional funds, mountain farming programme, preferences for developing countries, Mediterranean policy, association negotiations or research policy — all these come under the heading of renegotiation. Their long-term objective is not, however, the destruction of everything that had appeared to have been irrevocably achieved in a European community of interests, but still, although at present repeated daily with more desperate defiance than self-confidence, a ‘European Union’, whatever that may mean. While eight EEC States still pretend to be working at enlarging the Community, the British Prime Minister and, above all, his anti-Europeans obviously interpret renegotiation as breakdown.

What could Wilson, surrounded by ‘pro-Europeans’ as well as fanatical ‘antis’, request? As an experienced tactician, familiar with economic facts, the new Prime Minister has obviously known for a long time that the EEC’s strongly disputed agricultural policy is offering more advantages than disadvantages to Great Britain in her current predicament. Contrary to the situation at the time of the accession negotiations, the EEC has become an island of relatively low agricultural prices. If consumers in Britain have to grumble even more about price rises than over here, it is not the fault of the common agricultural policy but of the weakness of the pound and the fantastic price increases in some global agricultural markets. The common agricultural market, surprisingly still functioning — although nobody can quite understand how — is still providing more advantages than disadvantages to almost all parties concerned, including Great Britain. It is, therefore, in the British interest to remain in this confederation. Besides, given the terrible economic situation, Wilson needs his European partners more urgently than ever.

If no laurels are likely to be won in these negotiations, there seems to be more chance of success in a new negotiation on the EEC Financial Regulation. It is to enter into force on 1 January 1975, although further negotiations on the date thereof will still be necessary — with or without Wilson — because some fiscal policy preconditions, established five years ago, will still not have been met by the end of the year. The Labour Party’s election manifesto does not, however, attack the technical aspect of the 1970 Financial Regulation as much as its political substance. And this is where matters could become serious. The definite transition from the system of Community financing through Member State contributions to the system of ‘own resources’ (customs duties, levies on agricultural imports and resources deriving from value-added tax) is supposed to give the EEC an additional and, at the same time, the as yet most important element of federal sovereignty. The ensuing loss of national sovereignty is to be offset to a certain extent by an extension of the European Parliament’s budgetary powers. This issue, above all, is targeted by the British opponents. And the resistance of the great British public against the association with ‘Europe’ becomes apparent at the same time.

The outcome of such ‘real’ renegotiations cannot be foreseen. It has become doubtful whether, contrary to 1969 and 1970, the necessary political force will be there to defend the planned Financial Regulation. If the current paralysis in European politics keeps spreading and the old Continent continues its political slumber, the bureaucrats’ imagination will soon come up with temporary measures for transitions and postponements, temporary measures that would then become permanent solutions. The renunciation of the entry into force of the Financial Regulation would indeed be a ‘success’ for the British opponents of Europe. Great Britain would then no longer have to withdraw from the EEC. The EEC, however, would no longer be what it

surprisingly still represents outside Europe: a glimmer of hope, of economic power and of independent partners in a world of superpowers.