

'Britain and Europe' from the Corriere della Sera (19 July 1971)

Caption: On 19 July 1971, the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera examines the economic and political consequences for the United Kingdom of its accession to the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: Corriere della Sera. dir. de publ. Spadolini, Giovanni. 19.07.1971, n° 28; anno 10. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Inghilterra ed Europa", auteur:Guerriero, Augusto , p. 1.

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Britain and Europe

‘Her Majesty’s Government is convinced that, for us, the wise decision is to take the risk, seize the opportunity and join the European Communities.’ That was how Heath tabled the White Paper in the House of Commons and opened the debate on Britain’s accession to the EEC. The decision will be taken in October.

A political choice usually involves advantages and disadvantages for the chooser. But it also involves an element of risk, since the predicted advantages and disadvantages may be partially or wholly confirmed by the facts, or wholly contradicted by them.

For Britain, the advantages and disadvantages of accession to the EEC will be of two kinds: political and economic. Let us first consider the political aspect. The White Paper points out that from 1961 to the present time every British government — Conservative, then Labour, then Conservative again — has tried in turn to bring Britain into the EEC. The basic reason for Britain’s continuing wish to join the EEC despite changes of administration has been the successive governments’ bitter experience of the limits of British power in the modern world. One after the other, they have been forced to recognise that Britain is no longer able to stand on its own feet; alone, it would be condemned to slow but inevitable decline.

Britain’s main problem since the war has to be to adjust to a radically different position in a world that is in the throes of unprecedented change. At first the British people failed to realise the immensity of the change in their country’s people. They were unable to grasp that Britain, after holding out alone against Hitler and winning the most terrible war in history, had become a second-class power. Then came the end of the empire. Exercising great political judgement, Britain succeeded in transforming its former colonies into a free association of independent nations. It believed the Commonwealth could be the answer to its political and economic problems; and in pursuit of that illusion, it let slip the opportunity to join the European Community in the 1950s.

When, in the 1960s, it subsequently decided to join, President de Gaulle closed the door. Britain was cured of one illusion, and France began to labour under another. George Thomson, who was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in the Labour government ‘with special responsibility for negotiations with the Common Market’, wrote in *The World Today*: ‘The splendour that was France cannot be recaptured by France alone, nor can Britain alone preserve its former greatness. But the splendour that was Western Europe can be restored if its nations combine their resources and powers in new institutions.’

Consider what the world will look like at the end of the century. The two present superpowers will have been joined by another three: Western Europe, China and Japan. If Britain were to remain alone, it would be a small power of no account in a world of superpowers.

The main political objection to Britain’s accession is that national sovereignty would be reduced. Accession to the Treaty of Rome undoubtedly involves a loss of sovereignty. But it will be a small and clearly circumscribed loss. If, however, one foresees, as does *The Economist*, that Western Europe will move towards a federal government, then it has to be admitted that a greater reduction in sovereignty is possible.

Harold Wilson, who is about to place himself at the head of the opposition to accession (the ‘anti-marketeers’, as the British call them), said in a speech on 3 August 1961, and repeated in another speech on 25 February 1970: ‘The whole history of political progress is that of the gradual abandonment of national sovereignty ... The question is not whether sovereignty will remain or not remain absolute, but in what way we are disposed to sacrifice sovereignty, to whom and for what purpose ... whether the proposed renunciation of sovereignty will help us move towards the kind of world we want to see.’

Let us now consider the economic aspect. What economic advantages will Britain gain from membership of the EEC, and what disadvantages will it incur? The whole issue is highly debatable, as can be seen from the wide spread of predictions about price increases. The Labour government’s forecast was that the price of food products would rise by 18 to 26 % over the six-year transition period; the Conservative government,

however, predicts a price increase for these products of around 2.5 % per annum for the six years, resulting in an annual 0.5 % increase in the cost-of-living index. *The Economist* points out that food prices would rise at more or less the same rate even if Britain remained outside the EEC.

Wilson has 'four doubts', which he invokes as the reasons why he is about to put himself at the head of the anti-marketeers. The first apparently concerns the effect of joining the EEC on Britain's balance of payments. On this point, as its correspondent reported from London, *The Economist* retorted: 'The effect will be beneficial for Britain in any event since either Britain will remain the stagnant country it is today, in which case it will be helped by the Community's balance of payments, or it will recover, in which case it will have to contribute to the Community's budget.'

Wilson's second and third doubts concern the terms for Commonwealth sugar and New Zealand butter. But these doubts are entirely unfounded. First of all, Geoffrey Rippon, who negotiated on behalf of the Conservative government, has secured better terms than those the Labour government hoped to obtain. Secondly, the countries concerned have declared themselves satisfied with those terms. There is more justification for Wilson's fourth doubt.

The Treaty of Rome provides for free movement of capital within the Common Market. This rule, if applied to Britain fully and immediately, i.e. directly upon accession, could upset its balance of payments. Rippon had proposed a 'timetable for derogation from the rule'. And the Six have accepted it in substance. This disposes of Wilson's fourth doubt. But we may be sure he will find other pretexts.

The truth is that he was in favour of Britain joining the EEC when he was the one who would have taken the country in; now he is against British accession except on terms better than those that Heath is prepared to accept. The doubts and quibbles, and the twisting of figures to support his case, are not enough to gloss over the basic contradiction: if it was right for Britain to join the EEC two years ago, or last year, it is still right today; if it is not right today, it was not right then either.

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