

Press conference held by General de Gaulle at the Elysée (27 November 1967)

Caption: On 27 November 1967, General de Gaulle holds a press conference at the Élysée Palace during which he restates and explains his opposition to the United Kingdom's accession to the European Common Market.

Source: Western European Union Assembly-General Affairs Committee: A retrospective view of the political year in Europe 1967. March 1968. Paris: Western European Union Assembly-General Affairs Committee. "Press conference by President de Gaulle (27th November 1967)", p. 152-154.

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[...]

Question: I wanted to ask you if, after the recent devaluation of the pound sterling, you think that Britain is now more in a position to enter into the Common Market than six months ago, when you held your last press conference?

Answer: Ever since there have been men and ever since there have been States, any great international project has been imbued with seductive myths. That is quite natural, because at the origin of the action there is always inspiration, and that was true for the unity of Europe. Ah, how fine and how good it would be should Europe be able to become a fraternal and organised entity in which each people would find its prosperity and its security. This also holds true for the world. How marvellous it would be to see disappear all the differences of race, language, ideology and wealth, all the rivalries, all the frontiers that have always divided the world.

But, however sweet dreams may be, the realities are there and, on the basis of whether or not one takes them into account, policy can be a rather fruitful art or a vain utopia.

It is thus that the idea of joining the British Isles to the economic Community formed by the six continental States arouses wishes everywhere that are quite justified ideally, but it is a matter of knowing if that could be done today without rending, without breaking what exists. Now, it happens that Great Britain, with truly extraordinary insistence and haste — certain reasons for which the recent monetary events perhaps cast some light on — had proposed the opening, without delay, of negotiations in view of her entry into the Common Market. At the same time, Britain stated that she accepted without restriction all the provisions that rule the Community of the Six, which seemed somewhat to contradict the request for negotiations, for why would one negotiate on clauses that one would have entirely accepted in advance? Actually, we are viewing here the fifth act of a play during which Britain's very diverse behaviours with regard to the Common Market have succeeded one another without seeming to be alike.

The first act had been London's refusal to participate in drafting the Rome Treaty, which it was thought, across the Channel, would never come to anything. The second act brought out Britain's deep-seated hostility toward European construction, once that construction started to take shape. And I still hear the summons which in Paris, as early as June 1958, my friend Macmillan — then Prime Minister — addressed to me, who compared the Common Market to the continental blockade and who threatened to declare it at least a tariff war. The third act was the negotiations conducted in Brussels by Mr. Maudling for a year and a half, negotiations designed to make the Community bow to Britain's conditions and halted when France made her partners note that the issue was not that, but precisely the opposite. The fourth act, at the start of Mr. Wilson's Government, was marked by London's lack of interest in the Common Market, the maintenance around Great Britain of the six other European States forming the free-trade area, and a great effort exerted to strengthen the Commonwealth's internal ties. And now the fifth act is being played, for which Great Britain, this time, has declared her candidacy, and, in order for it to be adopted, has set out on the path of all the promises and all the pressures imaginable.

To tell the truth, this attitude is rather easy to explain. The British people doubtless discern more and more clearly that in the great movement that is sweeping the world, in the face of the enormous power of the United States, the growing power of the Soviet Union, the reborn power of the continental States, the new power of China, and taking into account the increasingly centrifugal orientations that are dawning in the Commonwealth, the structure and customs of its activity, and even its national personality, are henceforth at stake. And, moreover, the great economic, financial, monetary and social difficulties with which Britain is at grips make her aware of it day after day. Hence, to her very depths, a tendency to seek a framework, be it European, that would help her to save, to safeguard her own substance, that would permit her still to play a leading rôle and that would lighten a part of her burden.

And this could, in principle, only be beneficial to her, and could over the short term only be satisfactory to

Europe. But, on condition that the British people, like those with whom it wishes to join, wishes and knows how to compel itself to make the fundamental changes that would be necessary in order for it to be established in its own equilibrium; for it is a modification, a radical transformation of Great Britain that is necessary in order for her to be able to join the continental States.

This is obvious from the political viewpoint. But today, to speak only of the economic domain, the report that was addressed on 29th September by the Commission in Brussels to the six governments shows with the greatest clarity that the present Common Market is incompatible with the economy, as it now stands, of Britain, whose chronic balance-of-payments deficit is proof of permanent disequilibrium, and which involves — as to production, to food supply sources, to credit practices, to working conditions — factors which that country could not change without modifying its own nature. A Common Market also incompatible with the way in which the British obtain their food, as much by the products of their agriculture, subsidised to the highest level, as by the goods purchased cheaply everywhere in the world, particularly in the Commonwealth, which makes it impossible for London ever really to accept the levies laid down by the financial regulation, which would be crushing to it. A Common Market also incompatible with the restrictions Britain imposes on the exporting of capital, which, to the contrary, circulates freely among the Six. A Common Market incompatible, lastly, with the state of the pound sterling as it has once again been brought to light by the devaluation, as well as by the loans that preceded and accompany it; the state of the pound sterling, also, that, combined with the character of an international currency which is that of the pound, and the enormous external liabilities weighing on it, would not permit Britain to belong, at this time, to the solid and solidary [sic] and guaranteed society in which are joined the franc, the mark, the lira, the Belgian franc and the florin. In these conditions, what could be the outcome of what is called Britain's entry into the Common Market? And if one wanted, despite everything, to impose it, it would obviously be the breaking up of a Community that has been built and that functions according to rules that do not tolerate such a monumental exception. Nor would it tolerate the introduction among its main members of a State who, precisely owing to its currency, its economy and its policy, does not at present belong to Europe as we have started to build it.

To have Britain enter and, consequently, to be committed now to negotiations to that end, that would be for the Six — everybody knows what this turns on — that would be for the Six to give their consent in advance to all the expedients, delays and façades that would be aimed at masking the destruction of an edifice that has been built at the cost of so much hardship and in the midst of so much hope.

It is true that, while recognising the impossibility of having Britain enter today into the Common Market as it exists, one can wish all the same to sacrifice the latter to an agreement with the former. For theoretically, the economic system currently practised by the Six is not necessarily the only one that Europe could practise. One can imagine, for example, a free-trade area extending all over the West of our continent. One can also imagine a type of multilateral treaty like that which will emerge from the Kennedy round and regulating, among 10, 12 or 15 European States, their reciprocal tariffs and their respective quotas. But in one case as in the other, it would first be necessary to abolish the Community and to disperse its institutions. And I say that France will certainly not ask that. However, if one or another of her partners, as is after all their right, were to propose this, she would examine it with the other signatories of the Rome Treaty. But what France cannot do is to enter now, with the British and their associates, into negotiations that would lead to destroying the European construction to which she belongs. And then, that would in no way be the path that could lead to allowing Europe to construct itself by itself and for itself, in such a way as not to be under the dependence of an economic, monetary and political system that is foreign to it.

For Europe to be able to counterbalance the immense power of the United States, it is necessary not at all to weaken, but to the contrary to strengthen the Community's ties and rules.

Certainly, those who, like me, have proved by their acts the exceptional esteem, attachment and respect that they hold for Britain, firmly desire to see her one day decide on and accomplish the immense effort that would transform her. Indeed, in order to facilitate things for her, France is quite ready to enter into some arrangement that, under the name of association, or under another name, would foster, starting right away, trade between the continental States on the one hand and the British, Scandinavians and Irish on the other.

Indeed, it is not in Paris that one fails to recognise the psychological evolution that seems to be taking shape among our friends across the Channel, or that one does not fully appreciate the merit of certain steps that they had already taken, and others that they plan to take, toward re-establishing their balance within and their independence without. But for the British Isles really to be able to moor fast to the continent, a very vast and very far-reaching mutation is still involved. Everything depends, therefore, not at all on negotiations — which would be for the Six a march toward abandon sounding the knell of their Community — but rather on the determination and action of the great British people, which would make it one of the pillars of the European Europe.

Source: French Embassy, New York.