

Letter from Harold Macmillan to Charles de Gaulle (London, 7 November 1958)

Caption: On 7 November 1958, the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, asks the French President, Charles de Gaulle, to reconsider once again France's position regarding the creation of a single industrial free-trade area in Europe.

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Secret.

I am deeply disturbed at the position we have reached in our negotiations for a Free Trade Area. We have always well understood that France had specially difficult economic problems. We have also understood and admired the efforts of France, through the Treaty of Rome, to achieve a measure of economic unity which would lay a sound basis for political harmony in Europe.

But the Treaty of Rome, taken by itself, can easily lead to a division in the European ranks rather than a bond of union. If the industry of the other Western European countries is progressively excluded from the markets of the Six, how can we prevent political antagonism as well as economic rivalries from springing up?

We thought the idea of a Free Trade Area provided the solution. We saw it as something which in no way interfered with the aims of the Common Market. We recognised that special attention would have to be paid to damage which might be caused to individual industries in individual countries. But, within these limitations, we did see it as providing for substantial freedom of trade between the seventeen countries of Western Europe without forming a purely protectionist bloc against the outside world. It is on this conception that we have been negotiating for almost two years. And this is, I am confident, the aim which has inspired the other participants in the negotiations.

It has been all the greater shock to have it brought home to me in the last few months, and most clearly of all during the visit of your Foreign Minister, that France is not after all aiming at the same objective. Monsieur Couve de Murville insisted not only that France is not prepared to stand a regime of free trade in Europe (in spite of the safeguards we are all prepared to consider), but that such a regime must inevitably destroy the objectives of the Common Market. If this is really so we have been negotiating at cross purposes. In less than two months' time, an economic cleavage will occur which the present negotiations will be powerless to prevent. This is because, to put it bluntly, France is operating on a conception quite different from that of her partners. It is no secret that even among the Six the conception of a large free-trading area in Europe is generally welcomed for its political sake alone.

Nobody has striven harder than I to put Europe in its rightful place in the world. Nobody has made greater efforts to find the means whereby Britain can be brought closer to Europe. The best solution to these two problems I can find — and it is one which has been almost universally accepted in the world — has been the Free Trade Area with the meaning which that phrase denotes.

I beg you not to regard this as a technical issue. I hope you will give your close attention to it in its broadest political aspects. I am convinced that we are already in a crisis which has the seeds of disaster for Europe in the long term. In the short term, the political consequences will start to become acute on January 1. If before then we cannot do something to prevent the erection of barriers between two halves of Europe, I am fearful of the consequences.

I am sure you will not mind my taking advantage of our old friendship to speak quite frankly to you.

May I add how glad I am to hear from our Ambassador's report of his talk with you yesterday that there is a good hope of your coming to visit us early next year.