

Letter from Arnaud Wapler to Maurice Couve de Murville (London, 12 September 1962)

Caption: On 12 September 1962, Arnaud Wapler, French chargé d'affaires in London, sends to Maurice Couve de Murville, French Foreign Minister, an account of the conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, dedicated, in particular, to the United Kingdom's plans for accession to the EEC.

Source: Ministère des Affaires étrangères ; Commission de Publication des DDF (sous la dir.). Documents diplomatiques français. Volume II: 1962, 1er juillet-31 décembre. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1999. p. 195-197.

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T. Nos 3439 to 3452.

London, 12 September 1962.
(Received: 9 p.m.)

The second day of the Conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers ⁽¹⁾ was marked by a number of virulent attacks by the foremost members of this group against British accession, at least on the existing terms.

Mr Diefenbaker ⁽²⁾ adopted the toughest line and Mr Holyoake ⁽³⁾ the most moderate, with Mr Menzies ⁽⁴⁾ seeking the middle ground. For their part, Mr Nehru ⁽⁵⁾ and Mr Ayub Khan ⁽⁶⁾ expressed criticisms and very strong reservations.

The Canadian Prime Minister emphasised the political dimension of the problem. He felt that Britain's accession to the Common Market would weaken the Commonwealth, reduce the support that the United States gives to Europe for its defence and push Canada into the US orbit from which it had always sought to distance itself. On the economy, he recalled past promises made by the British Government to maintain the system of Commonwealth preferences and expressed his fears about the fate of Canadian raw materials exports, particularly aluminium, in the event of accession, and about the actual substance of the European Economic Community's price and production policies. Mr Diefenbaker did not, however, put forward any alternative solution, he merely limited himself to stating that, if everyone agreed to consider alternatives to accession, he had ideas to put forward. He concluded by saying that it was possible to obtain better terms from the Six and that the close, bilateral consultations between the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth should be pursued during the next phase of negotiations. Finally, and most importantly, he said that it would be appropriate to convene a further Prime Ministerial Conference, once the negotiations were complete.

The New Zealand Prime Minister, on the other hand, recognised the urgent reasons, both political and economic, which might prompt Great Britain to seek accession. However, at the same time, he had to admit that the negotiations in Brussels had not yet provided sufficient safeguards for the vital interests of the Commonwealth and that the results secured to date were too vague and too general. Yet this question concerned New Zealand's very existence and, were Great Britain to accede without any proper safeguards for his country, it would face an economic disaster in the short term, whatever the promises of long-term advantages. Mr Holyoake concluded by saying that, for the time being, he had to reserve his position on the economic aspect, but that, if at the end of the negotiations his country's vital interests were safeguarded, he would support Britain's application for accession to the Common Market.

The Australian Prime Minister also recognised that Great Britain might draw political advantages from accession; however, he added that the economic arguments were not so clear and that, in any event, the Commonwealth would have to pay part of the initial cost of the operation if not part of the final cost. Mr Menzies asked for greater clarification as to the cost and once again called for Australian exports to enjoy freer access to the European market. While more critical of Mr Macmillan's arguments than Mr Holyoake had been, Mr Menzies did not ask for more than his New Zealand counterpart, that is, better terms in the form of market access guarantees.

Mr Nehru disputed Mr Macmillan's arguments about the political advantages of accession for the Commonwealth. On the contrary, he considered that it would increase international tension, adversely affect the development of the poor countries and, above all, would mean the end of the Commonwealth as such, 'at least if the accession terms as they now stand are not radically altered.' Mr Nehru also rejected, from an economic point of view, the terms of the agreement reached in Brussels as it affected his country. The Six were not offering India any real possibility to increase its exports, and Great Britain's accession would lead to a drop in British investment in India. In fact, the Common Market was largely inspired by out-of-date colonial concepts. Why, for example, he said, offer a zero rate for raw jute but not for jute products?

Mr Nehru asked for a zero rate on Indian textiles at the very least.

Mr Ayub Khan mainly defended his country's economic interests, but he stressed that the agreements finally reached between Great Britain and the Six were very harmful to Pakistan's economy and would undermine its confidence in the value of the economic ties with the United Kingdom and the sterling area. He therefore asked for the temporary agreement reached in Brussels to be improved in several respects: immediate talks on the agreements planned for a common external tariff before they were finalised; correction of the imbalance in trade between Pakistan and the enlarged Community; abolition of quotas on Pakistani exports; reduction or abolition of the common external tariff on these products.

Mr Goka, Ghana's Minister of Finance, representing Mr Nkrumah ⁽⁷⁾, categorically rejected any prospect of association with the Common Market, adding that Ghana was not opposed to Great Britain's entry, although it would have serious consequences for his country.

Ceylon's representative was relatively satisfied with the provisional agreement reached to date in Brussels and appealed in particular for guarantees for coconut oil exports. The Prime Minister of Sierra Leone ⁽⁸⁾ stated that he was ready, in principle, to consider association status for his country.

This morning's British newspapers are making no secret of the impact of most of these statements and are giving particular prominence to the hostile, political positions taken by Mr Diefenbaker and Mr Nehru. They demonstrate the entire range and violence of the criticisms but show surprise only at Mr Nehru's position and, to a lesser degree, that of Mr Ayub Khan.

However, the press sees no weakening in the Cabinet in the face of attacks from previous members of the Commonwealth which will doubtless be echoed today in the attitude of some new members. Most newspapers quote the cynical remarks of Jamaica's Prime Minister ⁽⁹⁾. 'This is just rhetoric, speeches that serve no purpose. Great Britain is determined to join and will join, no matter what we say!' Several commentators point out that Mr Macmillan appears to be more determined than ever not to give in, and the Beaverbrook press ⁽¹⁰⁾ itself notes the fact with dismay.

(List of telegrams)

(1) The eleventh Conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers began on 10 September to examine the impact of possible British accession to the Common Market on the Commonwealth. (*Political Yearbook 1962*, p. 537-539)

(2) Diefenbaker (John): Prime Minister of Canada.

(3) Holyoake (K. J.): Prime Minister of New Zealand.

(4) Menzies (Robert): Prime Minister of Australia.

(5) Nehru (Jawaharlal): Prime Minister of India.

(6) Ayub Khan (Mohammed): President of the Republic of Pakistan.

(7) Nkrumah (Kwame): President of the Republic of Ghana.

(8) Margai (Sir Milton).

(9) Bustamente (Sir Alexander).

(10) The newspaper group, the most important being the *Daily Express* owned by Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook, a fervent supporter of the British Empire and free trade and very hostile to the Common Market.