

Parliamentary debates in the House of Commons (24 May 1971)

Caption: On 24 May 1971, British MPs debate the outcome of the meeting, held three days earlier in Paris, between the British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, and the French President, Georges Pompidou. They also consider the future of negotiations concerning the United Kingdom's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC).

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The Prime Minister (Mr. Edward Heath): With your permission, Mr. Speaker, and that of the House, I should like to make a statement about the visit which I made to Paris last week.

I should like first to tell the House of the warmth of the welcome which I received from the President of the French Republic and from the Prime Minister and his colleagues. I was impressed by their unmistakable desire for a renewal of friendship and co-operation between Britain and France, as an essential element in the growing unity of Europe.

My talks with President Pompidou extended altogether over a period of something like eleven hours. Except for a short time at the end of the talks when we were joined by the Prime Minister of France, we were accompanied during this time only by interpreters. This enabled us to deal with the wide range of subjects covered in the communiqué issued at the end of the talks, which I will with permission circulate in the OFFICIAL REPORT.

Our main area of discussion was the whole field of European policy. It was heartening to discover how close are the views of the French and British Governments on the development of Europe and its rôle in the world.

Our talks showed that both Governments wish to bring about the development of a united Europe through an enlarged European Community. We do not intend this as a defensive alliance against external threat. We see it as certainly the best means and probably the only means, in the world of today, of guaranteeing peace within Europe, providing prosperity for her peoples, and restoring to Europe that political, economic and cultural influence in the world that her traditions and her potential justify.

We also found an identity of view on the rôle which a united Europe can play in relation to the problems which face us in other parts of the world, and particularly in relation to the developing countries, where there is so much that an enlarged community which included Britain and France could contribute.

We discussed the development of the European Community and the working of its institutions. We agreed in particular that the identity of national states should be maintained in the framework of the developing Community. This means, of course, that, though the European Commission has made and will continue to make a valuable contribution, the Council of Ministers should continue to be the forum in which important decisions are taken, and that the processes of harmonisation should not override essential national interests. We were in agreement that the maintenance and strengthening of the fabric of co-operation in such a Community requires that decisions should in practice be taken by unanimous agreement when vital national interests of any one or more members are at stake.

This is indeed entirely in accordance with the views which I have long held. It provides a clear assurance, just as the history of the Community provides clear evidence, that joining the Community does not entail a loss of national identity or an erosion of essential national sovereignty.

As to the means by which greater unity and co-operation could be achieved, our primary concern was with the development of common economic policies, in the context of the British application for entry into the European Communities. But we both saw this as the basis for closer political collaboration, if the negotiations for enlargement of the Communities could be brought to a successful conclusion. We had only a brief discussion of defence questions, recognising that these were matters for the future, after enlargement.

We reviewed the progress made in the Community towards economic and monetary union, following the meeting of the six Heads of Government in The Hague in December 1969. I told President Pompidou that Britain looked forward wholeheartedly to joining in the economic and monetary development of the Community, if negotiations for British accession could be satisfactorily concluded. We both arrived at a clearer understanding of each other's anxieties and objectives in this field; and I was able to dispel any reservations which the French Government might have felt about the British Government's willingness, which my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

have often expressed, to accept the consequences of this development for its own policies.

We agreed upon the need to negotiate suitable arrangements for those members of E.F.T.A. who are not applying for membership of the enlarged Community, and thus to avoid the re-erection of trade barriers between them and the Community.

We discussed the problems which would arise as a result of enlargement of the Communities, when the time came to renew the Yaoundé Convention. The House will have noted that our agreement on the need to safeguard the existing rights of present associations under the Convention was matched by our agreement on the need to safeguard the interests of future associates under a new Convention and particularly of those who would depend largely on exports to the enlarged Community of sugar or other primary products.

Finally, the President and I reviewed the progress of the enlargement negotiations. We did not attempt to reach definite conclusions on issues which fall to be considered within the negotiating conference in Brussels and Luxembourg. But the President emphasised the importance he attached to the system of Community preference and his welcome for Britain's acceptance of this principle immediately upon entry into the Community which had been agreed upon at the last Brussels meeting. I went over the main issues involved in a settlement of Britain's contribution to the Community budget in the years leading up to the full implementation of the Community's system of financing its expenditure. And I emphasised to President Pompidou the importance of reaching satisfactory arrangements for New Zealand. I also explained the difficulties presented for us by the existing fisheries regulation. On all these points, though we did not seek to arrive at final conclusions, President Pompidou's attitude was positive and constructive.

The results of our exchanges on these matters are best demonstrated in our joint conclusion that it is desirable and possible to reach early agreement in the negotiations between Britain and the Community. The President and I both felt able to say after our talks that we were confident that the main issues could be settled before the end of June.

There are still important questions to resolve, and there is still much hard work to be done before Her Majesty's Government will be in a position to come to Parliament with an account of the arrangements on which our entry into the European Communities can be negotiated. But this I can say today as a result of my talks with the President of the French Republic. I am confident that the divisions and suspicions which have so hampered relations between Britain and France in recent years have now been removed. We have established that the views of the two Governments are very close over the whole range of European policies. The French President has shown his clear desire to proceed with the building of a united Europe on the basis of an enlarged Community, with Britain as a member. We can therefore approach both the final phase of our negotiations for entry into the Communities and, if they go well, the development of Europe thereafter, in a spirit of confidence and partnership. I believe that this opens the prospect of a degree of unity, and thus of peace and prosperity, in Western Europe which our continent has never seen before, and which would be of profound significance for Britain, for Europe and for the whole world.

Mr. Harold Wilson:

[...]

Thirdly, with regard to the budgetary contribution which the right hon. Gentleman has just mentioned, having regard to the inevitably disproportionate burden on Britain which would result from food levies — as I think the whole House has recognised from the outset — would the right hon. Gentleman now say whether he feels, following these talks, that the likely budgetary contribution to be negotiated will be one which will not place an undue burden on this country and, in particular, force this country into a continuing period of devaluation to maintain our balance of payments over the first difficult years?

[...]

The Prime Minister: I discussed with the President the new proposals on Community financing put

forward at the last Brussels meeting. I said that I thought these would help to remove any suggestion that we were not accepting the full system of Community financing which had, after all, been accepted by both administrations. I said that the arrangements for it should not be such as would appear at the end of the period to be too great a burden for us to assume so that there might be a desire to try to change the whole system. It was agreed that the actual arrangements, to be satisfactory, must not place an unbearable burden on the balance of payments or across the exchanges, and that was accepted.

[...]

Mr. Shore: Has the Prime Minister simply accepted the French view of the future of Europe and, in particular, the French President's conception of a European Republic which was spelt out on British television three days before the talks began? Will he tell us whether he has also accepted the French ideas as to what are the correct terms of entry? If he has not, will he indicate any important area of negotiation where the French position has become closer to ours rather than the reverse?

The Prime Minister: In reply to the first part of the question, we reached agreement about the sort of Europe we want to see. This has not been exclusively a French view over the past 20 years, but a view which has been put forward by members of consecutive administrations, by many right hon. and hon. Gentlemen in this House and broadly held in this country. It is a Europe which, by its unity, will be of a size and nature and in an equal position with the United States, Japan or the Soviet Union, to enter into international trading arrangements and international financial arrangements and to use its influence in the world. On this the French and British Governments find themselves in agreement.

On the question of institutions, those who have followed European policy closely will know that I for one have always believed that countries in the Community would not be able to overrule another member's vital interests. It is not a question of creating the United States of America from a country which has been newly settled. It is a question of a community of six ancient European States, well-established in themselves. Therefore, the way in which we have to develop in Europe is by harmonising policies while at the same time acknowledging the vital interests of individual countries.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me for details about the negotiations. These will be carried on in Luxembourg on 7th June and on 21st and 22nd June. Their objective now is based on the fact that the French President wants to see Britain in the European Economic Community. That is the fundamental change, surely, over the last 15 years, and it is basic to the whole negotiating position. Therefore, we shall be able, I believe, in the coming month of June to reach agreements between ourselves and the Five as to what those arrangements should be.

Mr. Dodds-Parker: I congratulate the Prime Minister on the success of the discussions, which I hope will lead to a successful conclusion of the negotiations in Brussels next month. I urge him to emphasise that the European Economic Community is not just an end in itself but is there to support in broad terms the political and defence purposes of an ever more closely united Europe.

The Prime Minister: The European Economic Community is there to ensure the prosperity of its peoples, which it has been successful in doing since its foundation, to lead to a closer unity in international finance, in monetary fields and in the co-ordination of economic policies, and then to be able to exert political influence and, if it so desires, to consider, as the European members of N.A.T.O., with the exception of France, are doing, how Europe can best contribute to its own defence. There is the well-known difference of view in this House on whether or not Britain should become a member of the Community, but I hope that everyone here will agree that it is good for this country and good for Europe that the cloud of mutual suspicion between Britain and France which has hung over us for the last 20 years is being dispelled and we can now build a better relationship.

Mr. Thorpe: I welcome the outcome of these talks, which appear to have removed the possibility of a European veto. I recognise that there are still matters to be negotiated in Brussels, but, leaving aside the genuine opposition to Europe, which I respect, and the opposition for political tactical reasons, which I do

not respect, does the Prime Minister agree that the main task now is to convince the people of this country of the undoubted economic and political advantages of uniting Europe for the first time in its history?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome. I believe that the people of this country who have been worried about the possibility of the French Government maintaining their veto will now see that this is no longer the case and that they can consider the arrangements which it is possible to make for British entry into the Community. As the President of France said in his speech to the Press conference on Friday evening, for so long there have been those who believed that Britain's only purpose was to try to get into the Community in order to wreck it, for so long there have been those who have believed that France's only purpose was to veto Britain's joining the Community to which she had a right to belong, and before that gathering there were two men with heavy responsibilities who have now acknowledged openly that neither of those things was true.

Mr. Turton: Did my right hon. Friend explain to M. Pompidou that at present 59 per cent. of the British people are opposed to entry of the Common Market and only 23 per cent. are in favour? Did he inform the French President of the steps he proposes to take to ascertain whether the British people support any terms which are negotiated?

The Prime Minister: I have always made it plain that it is Parliament's responsibility to decide —

Hon. Members: No.

The Prime Minister: — this issue, as it is to decide every other issue of international relations [Interruption]. If hon. Members do not wish to accept their responsibilities, that is a matter for them. I have always taken the view, as a Member of Parliament, that it is my responsibility fully to report on these matters to my constituents and to consult them, but I have always taken the view of Burke, who represented the constituency of the right hon. Member for Bristol, South-East (Mr. Benn), that one owes them one's judgment as well as one's energy.

Mr. MacLennan: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept, whatever is to be the outcome of the negotiations to join the E.E.C., that the apparent accord and reasonableness of approach of the French Government on this occasion will be widely welcomed on all sides? Does he expect that all the difficult outstanding issues will have been fully thrashed out in Brussels and Luxembourg, so that the House will be in possession of the facts on which to make up its mind before the Summer Recess?

The Prime Minister: We both believe that it is desirable and possible, in the work between now and the next meeting in Luxembourg on 7th June and then the meeting in Luxembourg on 21st and 22nd June, to prepare the ground sufficiently for the Ministers to take the decisions on the major items outstanding by that time. It would then be the wish of the Government to present a White Paper to Parliament setting out the whole position.

Sir H. Legge-Bourke: Would my right hon. Friend accept that it was obvious that this meeting had to take place and that, having taken place, its success has been considerable? With regard to the arrangements through the usual channels for debating the White Paper, will he recognise clearly that it is not just a question for the House of Commons: that this really is a matter in which all of us in this House must be given adequate time to propound to our constituents what is contained in the White Paper?

Therefore, may I express the hope that when the White Paper is published, we shall have a "take-note" debate on that and then an opportunity to discuss it with our constituents?

The Prime Minister: I have said that the debate is a matter which we are considering. We would want to give the House the fullest possible White Paper at the earliest opportunity and then to have discussions about how the debate should take place, when it will take place, its length and its form. On my hon. Friend's first remarks, I am not one of those people who believe in the inevitability of causality. There was nothing inevitable about this meeting. It was the result of a great deal of long and hard work and very careful

preparation. I believe that that is the key to its success. I thank my hon. Friend for his congratulations.

[...]