

Question and answer session at the Council of Europe (23 January 1967)

Caption: On 23 January 1967 the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, during a visit to the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, replies to questions posed to him regarding the United Kingdom's integration within the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: Council of Europe-Consultative Assembly. Reports of the debates. Eighteenth ordinary session (Third Part). 23 to 27 January 1967. Tome III. Sittings 17 to 24. 1967. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Copyright: (c) Council of Europe

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/question_and_answer_session_at_the_council_of_europe_23_january_1967-en-a5a0e58c-0320-408d-9bd2-7edb02b103f6.html

Publication date: 22/10/2012

Question and answer session of the Council of Europe (23 January 1967)

[...]

Mr. MONTINI(*Italy*) (Translation). — Mr. President, as a senior member and first Vice-President of our Assembly, I would like to thank the British Prime Minister, Mr. Wilson, for having come to our Assembly to give us his Government's point of view on a problem which is of the greatest interest to the Council of Europe, namely, the place and role of Great Britain in the context of European integration.

I would like to take this opportunity, Mr. President, of wishing Mr. Wilson every success in his undertaking and on his tour of Europe. Although Mr. Wilson dealt with this question in his speech, I would nevertheless like to ask him whether Great Britain is in favour of development at political, indeed at institutional and political level, which might lead to a new and more substantial integration, reaching beyond the present predominantly economic and executive functions of existing bodies, including those of the States of the Economic Community.

Thank you, Mr. President.

Mr. WILSON.— I should like to thank the Vice-President, Senator Montini, for what he has said and for his good wishes.

In answer to his question, as I have made clear in what I have said, we envisage the future development of Britain's relations with and within Europe as being not only economic, not only confined within the existing Community, but political as well.

As to the development of institutions and the relationships between Members of the enlarged Community, this is a matter which I am having the privilege of discussing with the Governments on the tour which I have described. These matters were discussed, as the Senator will be aware, very profitably and helpfully in Rome last week.

It will be our intention to work in the letter and in the spirit in institutions which may be developed by agreement among the Members of the Community, including ourselves. Until we do become Members, it would perhaps be wrong for me or my colleagues in Britain to express any opinions about arguments which are or have been currently going on between Members of the Six themselves. If we are in, we shall play our full part in these problems.

THE PRESIDENT. — I now call Sir Alec Douglas-Home. After that I shall call Mr. Radius.

Sir Alec DOUGLAS-HOME (*United Kingdom*). — I often question the Prime Minister, but seldom when I am overseas ! I wonder whether he will permit me today to make it clear that the Conservative members of the United Kingdom delegation to this Assembly fully support the initiative which he is taking, and that, therefore, the movement for British entry into the European Community may now be seen against the background of broad national unity in Britain. In particular, I wish him success in the important discussions which he is about to undertake in Paris.

Mr. WILSON.— I should like to thank Sir Alec Douglas-Home for what he has said, and to confirm completely what he said on the question of the initiative announced in the House of Commons by Her Majesty's Government, which did at that time receive, and has subsequently received, the full support of the main political parties in our House of Commons. I also thank him for the good wishes he has expressed for our continuing tour.

THE PRESIDENT.— I call Mr. Radius. After him, I shall call Mr. Struye.

Mr. RADIUS (*France*) (Translation). — Mr. President, the Prime Minister mentioned just now the problem Britain's accession would cause because she is a large importer of foodstuffs. And he referred twice to the

statement he made ten weeks ago, on 10th November last year, in which he stressed the vital interests of Britain and the Commonwealth.

On 4th May he was a little more precise. In a reply to the Leader of the Liberal Party he said that the agricultural policy of the Community would mean a levy of 65-70 % on imports of cereals from the Commonwealth. The Government quite definitely could not accept that, but if the agricultural policy were altered to make the terms more acceptable, the position would be different.

In view of that statement, I would like to ask the Prime Minister the following question : does he still feel the same today, and does he regard some alteration in the common agricultural policy, to decrease the levy on imported cereals, as vital to the interests of Britain and the Commonwealth ?

Mr. WILSON.— This is a matter of great importance and of considerable complexity, which I might feel, as we all might, could perhaps more profitably be discussed tomorrow than today.

It is indeed a problem which has already led to quite fruitful discussions in Rome, as I am sure it will in Paris, Brussels, The Hague, Bonn and Luxembourg.

I have on a number of occasions, when questioned about this problem of the levies, stated that if we look ahead to 1969, 1970 and beyond, it is difficult to make any precise calculation either as to the effect on Britain's balance of payments or the cost of the levy, or, indeed, as to the size of the levy, because I have not met an agriculturist who is certain whether world prices may not rise during that period; nor, I suggest, is there finality about what the Community prices may be in those years. These are matters, I understand, which are left for further discussion.

This is a very important problem for us and a very important problem for the Community, and particularly for more than one country which is a major food importer rather than one concerned with food exports.

In my speech a few minutes ago, I stressed particularly the problems of the financial regulations with regard to this disposal of the money taken in by Government under those levies. The adherence of a majority food importer would, of course, throw out of balance all the figures which have been worked out during the past two years — not, I gather, without considerable difficulty and discussion and very late sitting and, of course, would increase beyond the present target figure the total amount of money required for the Special Fund.

Therefore, these matters would be necessarily, as is envisaged by the terms of the Treaty itself, a matter for adjustment on the entry of a new Member. I hope that, in these adjustments, we would be able to solve these problems to our mutual advantage.

I would say to our friend — who is more than a friend, because in a very special political sense he is our host as parliamentary representative of the city in which we are meeting — that a very deep and close study such as I am sure he has made of the whole problem of cereals movements might suggest that some change in prices might be very beneficial to his own country and perhaps his own constituency and might lead to closer and warmer trade between Britain and France. These problems are not necessarily capable of solution or interpretation only in one direction.

THE PRESIDENT. — After I call Mr. Struye, I shall call Mr. Finn Moe.

Mr. STRUYE (Belgium) (Translation). — Mr. President, I must ask the Prime Minister to excuse me if my questions are lacking in discretion, but he knows Members of Parliament are always inquisitive and sometimes indiscreet. This is my first question: does the Prime Minister consider that the difficulties he may meet with in his approaches — which we all hope will succeed — are more likely to be economic or political ?

My second question follows on from the one put by Mr. Radius and concerns agricultural policy. After many difficulties, the Six succeeded in laying down the broad lines of a common agricultural policy. The

Prime Minister has told us about Britain's difficulties and we all know what they are. Does he think these difficulties could be overcome simply by very broad transitional measures and progressive adaptation, which would not involve any modification of the principles already adopted by the Six ?

Here is my third question : the Six met with great difficulties on the subject of the qualified majority in Luxembourg, almost exactly a year ago, and overcame them. Without altering the Rome Treaty, they succeeded in reaching a sort of gentlemen's agreement on a pragmatic basis whereby in practice the qualified majority would be hedged about with arrangements and guarantees which would render it more acceptable to the various countries. Could the Prime Minister tell us whether this might help Britain to accept what has already been agreed on the subject of the qualified majority ?

Fourth question : a great deal has been said about the former Fouchet-Cattani Plan. Does the Prime Minister think that during the months ahead this Plan might be the basis of a fresh effort to launch the beginnings of a political union in Europe, and would Britain be prepared to be associated with such endeavour ?

Finally, my very last question : I think we all believe — we have said so a thousand times in this Assembly — that the Europe of tomorrow is inconceivable without Britain as a full Member, for she is an integral part of Europe. But if, by some mischance, that does not come about during the months to come, would the Prime Minister consider as a substitute, in accordance with the other article at the end of the Treaty, a Treaty of Association which might be the first step towards future membership ?

Mr. WILSON.— I will deal with those five questions briefly. The first was to ask me whether I thought that the difficulties about Britain's entry were, principally, economic or political. If Mr. Struye is referring to the difficulties on our side, I said that there are certain problems on the economic side. I see no political problems about entry. If, of course, he is asking me to forecast what difficulties might arise on the side of the Six, this matter should perhaps be left for a few weeks, while these explorations continue — or perhaps it is a question on which he and his country might be able to give a more accurate forecast than I would feel right in trying to do now.

The second question related to agriculture. He asked me whether I feel that the agricultural problems will require merely a period of time — transitional arrangements — or whether more fundamental changes would have to be made in the rules. We are discussing this already, as we continue our tour. So far, we have discussed it only in one capital, Rome. The Foreign Secretary and I were more than a little encouraged in our talks there to feel that some of the difficulties which have been foreseen in agriculture might not be so great as we thought, although, of course, there are problems arising out of the financial regulations, as I said, which, in any case, would require consequential amendment on the entry of any new Member. The existing ones would have to be changed in so far as they are on a percentage basis, if the number of participants increases.

I do not believe that those problems are insoluble. I believe that they are difficult and that, given the right good will, we can solve them.

The third question was about the qualified majority and the discussions at Luxembourg. We have followed with the greatest interest the discussions in the Six over these problems during the past year or two. We felt that it would have been wrong for the British Government or the British Parliament to intervene while the discussions were going on, because we were not directly concerned. I can imagine that we would have been invited to mind our own business if we had expressed opinions on one side or the other in these discussions.

If we become a Member, we shall, of course play our part in any future discussions. If we become a Member, at the point that we do we will carry out the agreements reached by those who founded the Community and have been working it since that time.

Perhaps, if I might express a further opinion here, I said during my earlier speech that we have been concerned in our studies not only to look at the wording of the Treaty, but also at the way in which the Treaty has been working in practical terms. I said that we have been encouraged by that. I would not exclude

from the area which has given encouragement the discussions, and the outcome of those discussions, which took place at Luxembourg.

The fourth question concerned the political future of Europe. For example, the questioner mentioned the Fouchet Plan, which, of course, we have studied. Again, I think it would be wrong, since these are matters of controversy within the Six, for me to express this afternoon, off the cuff or in any other way, a view in favour of one or other formulation ; for the political unity of Europe, on which very many European statesmen have spent a great deal of time and thought, has so far been subject to different conclusions by them.

If I am asked — as I was — whether, in a few months, I would hope that we could reach agreement, whether on the Fouchet Plan or on any other, again I must turn the questioner to those who have been discussing those problems for the last ten years. In ten years, so far, no agreement has been reached, which is unfortunate. It is not for me, I think, from the outside, to say that in ten months we could reach an agreement which has not been reached in ten years.

But we will do our level best with you to see that we obtain a solution, because all of us are concerned about the future political unity of Europe. Indeed, I should like to express the view, which, I think, may not be acceptable to everyone here, that if we — as I hope — are to embark on discussions about British entry into the Community, then I hope that we can be associated with the discussions on political unity at the earliest possible moment so that we can make our contribution as from now instead of waiting until the economic and other discussions are complete.

The fifth question concerned association. I am aware that the idea has been mooted in some sections of the Press because of the great difficulties which undoubtedly exist — and we would be wrong to minimise them in our own minds or in our approach — about entry under Article 237, perhaps the Treaty of Association under Article 238 would be appropriate. It is not for me to attempt to lay down what form of involvement with the Community is appropriate for our colleagues in EFTA. Each of them will judge for himself what is the right association. It is not for me even to speculate about what their final decisions will be.

Some, I know, will want full membership ; some, I believe, may well want associate membership. It is not for me to speculate about that. But I think that if we were to conclude now, because of the difficulties, that there was any future in the idea of Britain joining as an associate Member — being loosely associated with something in which, if the conditions are right, we shall be fully integrated — then I believe that would be a very half-hearted and defeatist solution.

Nor are we normally of a mind to join anything with which we have a loose association and do not have any say in the way in which it is run. No ; that is perhaps a semi-escapist way of dealing with the difficulties we face. I would rather we all faced up to the difficulties and went straight for a solution of the problems that we face.

THE PRESIDENT. — My colleagues will have noticed that I allowed Mr. Struye to put more than one question. Mr. Struye is the Chairman of our Political Committee. Of course, I would not only allow him but encourage him to do that in that capacity. However, I hope that my colleagues will agree that from now on they should put only one question.

Mr. FINN MOE (Norway). — First. I should like to join those of my colleagues who have congratulated Mr. Wilson on his brilliant speech. The question I wish to put is not of an economic nature, but it has, nevertheless, an important bearing on the negotiations which we all hope will lead to greater economic unity in Europe.

I have seen Press reports to the effect that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom accepts the idea of what has been called a twin pillar system of Atlantic defence. Is that so ?

Mr. WILSON.— I am always grateful for any advice, comments, or questions from my old friend, Mr. Finn

Moe, and I thank him for what he has said. He has referred to a phrase or concept which is very familiar, I think, in discussions of these problems — the concept of the twin pillars on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, I think that it is usually used not in the context of Atlantic defence, but in connection with the broader question of the Atlantic partnership. The idea of course is that if that partnership is to be a real one it must be based on independence as well as interdependence, on a basis that each side of the Atlantic is capable of talking on equal terms to the other, which means strengthening our own base.

In so far as that concept refers to building up Europe's economic strength, technical ability and industry, then, as I said in my speech, that is very much our idea. Our concept of Atlantic partnership does not mean subservience or dependence on outside technology. The phrase "twin pillars" has often been used. Most of our speakers in the House of Commons during our debates have used it, as I have myself. We must be careful, in using any of those analogies, that we are not carried away by them. That is now an established *cliché* in these discussions. As the greatest master of *cliché* in the British House of Commons, I would be the last to deny anyone his *cliché*, particularly since I have used it myself; but we must be very careful about it.

If equality of strength by building up our own technological strength is meant, I believe that that is a useful *cliché* for all of us to use.

THE PRESIDENT. — I call Mr. Vos.

Mr. VOS (Netherlands). — As you, Mr. President, have made a rule that only the Chairman of the Political Committee can pose more than one question, but not the Chairman of the Economic Committee, then I agree with your rule.

I wish all success to Mr. Brown on his journey to all the European capitals. He will visit The Hague only after our elections have taken place.

In the European Parliament we are always faced with the question of the right to control the financial considerations involved in the agricultural policy. I should like to ask the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom whether the question of the rights and powers of Parliament with regard to the functioning of the Community, when large sums of money are involved, will be the subject of his negotiations with the other Prime Ministers and Heads of State he will be visiting during the next month. Will the question of the rights and powers of the European Parliament *vis-à-vis* the Commission and *vis-à-vis* the Government of the Community be on his agenda?

Mr. WILSON. — I have discussed those problems often with Mr. Vos in committees in past years. It is a pleasure to hear him again on that subject.

If I understood the question aright, he was referring, I think, not to the control of national Parliaments, but to European parliamentary control over the working both of the agricultural programme and policy, and particularly over the financial aspects of that policy, because of the traditions in each of our own countries of parliamentary control over finance.

Mr. Vos asked me whether this is playing a part in our discussions with Heads of Government of the six EEC countries. The answer is, of course, that any question which any Head of Government wants to put to Mr. George Brown and myself, we shall do our best to answer. We for our part will stress the difficulties that need to be stressed, and we shall also stress those favourable factors we see. We shall also, as we have done in Rome, seek to learn from the principal countries the practical working of the Community as a means of overcoming the difficulties.

The future development of parliamentary control must be a matter for the Six themselves. It is not at present a reality, and, therefore, is not currently an issue. We should, as Members of the European Community, if our negotiations lead to that membership, play our full part with the others in discussing all these problems. I think that it would be wrong for us now, not as Members, to go faster and further than those who are. It would equally be wrong to suggest if we become Members that we might lag behind them in anything on

which they agree.

THE PRESIDENT. — I should like to make it clear to Mr. Vos that in the opinion of the Bureau all Committees are equal and all Committee Chairmen are equal. But it was a fact that as Mr. Struye was putting a question in the opening of the Political Debate I allowed him five questions.

I call Mr. Badini Confalonieri.

Mr. BADINI CONFALONIERI (*Italy*) (Translation). — I shall put just one question to the Prime Minister.

He referred just now, in one of his replies, to his visit to Rome last week. The visit to Rome was the first stage of his European tour. There is a saying that " well begun is half done ".

Would the Prime Minister give us his impressions of that visit ?

Mr. WILSON.— As I said when I left Rome to the Press who were there, I felt that it had been a very good start to our tour. We had, as we had expected and even more so — been very warmly received by the Italian Government and had from them their assurance of full support for what we had set before ourselves. They were extremely helpful in giving us, out of their own rich experience of the work of the Community, some impression of how particular problems that they had have to face had been solved, for example, in the field of regional development and policies, which is a special problem for Italy and which is also a problem, so far as parts of the United Kingdom are concerned, for Britain.

We had an extremely good start. I might say that at one point, after an exchange of views on both sides, Mr. Fanfani put no fewer than fifteen questions off the reel to me and I tried to give him, with similar speed and crispness, fifteen answers. Whether he was satisfied with them, I am sure you will hear in Rome.

THE PRESIDENT. — I call Mr. Dunne.

Mr. DUNNE (*Ireland*). — During his very eloquent and inspiring speech the Prime Minister referred to Celts, of whom I am one.

I should like to ask the Prime Minister this question. Would he comment upon the prospects of Irish unity in an extended European Economic Community ?

Mr. WILSON.— It is not a new question for me ! I am happy to tell Mr. Dunne, if it is any comfort to him, that I represent twice as many Irishmen in the British House of Commons than he represents in the Dail ! He was good enough not to make this question more difficult for me by asking it in Irish, so I shall not reciprocate by replying in " Liverpool scouse", of which I am sure he has knowledge !

The question is not one which is principally concerned with the Treaty of Rome, or, indeed, any discussion under the Treaty of Rome. It is of much older origin and in its way it raises problems no less intransigent than those which Members of the Economic Community have to face.

For myself, I think that many of us in the British Parliament have been reasonably encouraged during the last year or two by the improved relations within Ireland as a result of the meetings between Mr. Lemass, when he was *Taoiseach* — I hope that I have pronounced that right — and the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Mr. O'Neill. I believe that they have both shown great statesmanship in coming together at a time when such action was likely to lead to criticism by constituents on each side of the border.

I am happy to say that both Mr. Lynch, the new *Taoiseach*, and Mr. Terence O'Neill, have been discussing this with me in Downing Street during the past four or five weeks. I believe that the signature of the Free Trade Treaty between Britain and the Republic of Ireland last year will of itself help to bring a closer economic unity between the two parts of Ireland, because this will mean that there will be over a period of

time complete free trade between the whole of the British Isles, and the Border, which has been the scene of such interesting historical development that I do not want to dwell on it today, will now become open for trade between Northern and Southern Ireland.

The main question, I think, Mr. President, is not one for determination within the Treaty of Rome. If the Council of Europe cannot solve the problem, I doubt whether the European Economic Community unaided would be able to do so. In fact, I do not know that any of us can solve it, except those who live in Ireland. It is a problem for the people of Ireland. I know, just as my predecessors, that no one would be happier than Great Britain if this problem is solved by agreement within the Emerald Isle. I am sure that I am speaking for everyone in expressing the hope that over the next few years we shall see an intensification of the process of coming together which has begun during the last three or four years.

THE PRESIDENT. — I hope that Mr. Dunne will be encouraged by the fact that the Prime Minister referred not only to the Emerald Isle but, in anticipation of your question, Mr. Dunne, is wearing a tie of Irish national colour.

I call Mr. Pounder.

Mr. POUNDER (*United Kingdom*). — While regretting that Mr. Dunne should have seen fit to use this occasion to engage in Irish nationalist propaganda, may I ask the Prime Minister whether he would confirm that it remains the policy of her Majesty's Government to abide by the 1949 Ireland Act, whereby people of Northern Ireland will determine their own constitutional destiny and maintain links with the United Kingdom as long as they so wish ?

Mr. WILSON.— I am not sure whether the questions which are normally put to me in the House of Commons, and which are answered with unfailing regularity, are a matter which should take up the time of this gathering. But I confirm that the answer I have given to some of Mr. Pounder's distinguished colleagues from Northern Ireland in the House of Commons remains the answer. That does not in any way detract from what I believe to be the real duty of all those in Northern and Southern Ireland, without propaganda and with a genuine desire to solve the problems, to get together and solve the Irish problem so that we can all express our warm blessing to them for solving it and so be free from having to answer all these questions in the future.

THE PRESIDENT. — I feel that I must close this question-and-answer period at this point. There are two members of our Assembly who have written up to me since I have been sitting here, stating that they have questions, but I regret that it is not possible, within the time, to put them. However, I shall see that they get priority when speaking in the debate.

Mr. Wilson, on behalf of the Assembly, I wish to thank you very much indeed not only for coming here and for your speech, but for answering the questions we have put to you. Thank you very much indeed.