

Speech by Edward Heath (Blackpool, 15 October 1966)

Caption: On 15 October 1966, Edward Heath, leader of the British Conservative Party, delivers a speech to Conservative Party members at a meeting held in Blackpool. He emphasises the importance of membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) for the United Kingdom.

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Mr. President, the time has come when this Government must declare itself clearly and firmly on Europe. We have done so. We fought the last election on it. Sir Alec, in his speech yesterday so highly praised by everyone here and in the Press today, dealt clearly and forcibly and persuasively with the position of the European policy. Europe today is restless; Europe wants to know where the British Government stands. Our friends in the Community are restless and want to know. Our trading partners and allies, some of them, in the European Free Trade Association feel the strain of being in their present position with Great Britain. They have the strain of the surcharges, they have the strain of the vacillation of the British Government. The Government must make its position clear. The Community is moving apace to its final state. It will be in that final state by the time that any British Government will be able to negotiate with it.

Certain fundamental facts follow from this which the British Government today must recognise and they are these, that they or any other member who wishes to join will have to accept the European Economic Community as it is for itself. The time has long passed, to my regret, when any member could expect to influence the Community from its outside in its basic beliefs and its basic organisation. So the British Government must recognise that there are some things on which there can be negotiations and others which have got to be accepted; and that includes the Treaty of Rome, the common tariff, the agricultural policy, and the institutions. We negotiated arrangements for the Commonwealth. Of course we hope that all of those special arrangements will remain. We believe that they should. There will have to be transitional arrangements negotiated for the change over of a great country like ourselves to a member of the Community. But it is no use any longer Mr. Brown and his friends asking for special privileges in the European Economic Community. It is true that the six members gave them to themselves but they were the founder members and, rightly or wrongly, their view now is that that period is over and the privileges are no longer to be extended.

Then it is no use either members of the Government travelling Europe and travelling the world saying that the will to go into the European Community exists. It is no use them saying that unless they are prepared to take the decisions I have outlined. Only when they show that they will accept that as a basis of European membership for Britain can they say that they have the will to carry this policy through.

The Labour Government must weigh up the balance on this issue. They cannot defer it any longer. In fairness to our friends in Europe wherever they may be, in the Community or in EFTA itself, and in fairness to the Commonwealth they must make up their minds and tell the world. While the period of waiting for negotiation goes on there is an immense amount to be done to change our own internal policies, in order to be able to adapt ourselves more easily and to give us longer time and to work out the problems of the sterling area and to deal with the indebtedness of this country to the International Monetary Fund, and to discuss with those who wish in Europe the question of defence and political developments.

All of these are immense and difficult problems which would face any government, and I say so quite frankly to all of you here today and to the country as a whole. But Europe will not wait for ever, and unless a decision is taken in principle for this country, unless a solemn declaration of intent is made, then finally, when the Community reaches its full stage of development, it may be too late for any British Government to take that step. So I believe that this is the solemn time for the British Government on Europe.

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