

'Common Market and Commonwealth' from the Corriere della Sera (13 September 1962)

Caption: On 13 September 1962, the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera draws attention to divisions in British public opinion on the United Kingdom's accession to the European Common Market and outlines the implications thereof.

Source: Corriere della Sera. 13.09.1962, n° 205; anno 1. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Mercato comune e Commonwealth", auteur:Guerriero, Augusto , p. 1.

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Common Market and Commonwealth

Is the final obstacle to our future in Europe — asks the *Economist* in a headline — the Commonwealth or the two old gentlemen of Europe who met over the last few days?

Neither. The Commonwealth is certainly opposed. Nor, moreover, are the two old gentlemen very enthusiastic.

The main obstacle is not the Commonwealth, de Gaulle or Adenauer. The main obstacle is Britain itself. If Britain does not join, it will be a tragedy for everyone: Britain will nevertheless have to lay the blame at its own door. *Imputet sibi*. At the outset, Britain did not believe in the Common Market and wanted to stay outside. It then tried to sabotage it. In the end, Britain came round and now wants to join. But how much does it want to do so? Half of Britain wants to and half does not. Public opinion polls have shown that opposition increased strongly between March and September: from 28 % to 52 %.

Gaitskell, like the other Labour leaders, has said that he considers the terms obtained in Brussels to be unsatisfactory and has recommended calling a second Commonwealth Conference before a final decision is taken. British public opinion is therefore divided and Britain, when public opinion is divided, is paralysed. To perform great deeds and to make great decisions, Britain, being the real democracy that it is, has to be united.

Let our enemies come from west and east, wrote Shakespeare, from the four corners of the world; ‘we shall shock them; nought shall make us rue, if England to itself do rest but true.’ The problem is that Britain stands together only in the glorious hours of its history. It is then that it finds its courage and resolve, its greatness.

Faced with the problem of ‘to join or not to join Europe’, a strange alliance has been forged in Britain between those Tories nostalgic for imperialism and many Labour supporters, especially those on the left wing. Chauvinist, and even xenophobic attitudes, such as have not been seen in British political debate in recent decades, have reared their heads. Some are putting forward the argument that Britain has a major ‘role’ to play in the underdeveloped countries. Others are keen to stress the danger that Britain will be invaded by a flood of foreign workers. Better Indian or Pakistani immigrants than Italians. Non-European immigrants, given the colour of their skin and their lack of vocational training, have to resign themselves to the humblest jobs. Europeans, however, could be in competition with British workers. The argument is ridiculous, because Britain desperately needs skilled workers and should consider itself lucky if it could import them from the Continent. There is no reasoning, however, with the Colonel Blimps, whether Conservative or Labour.

The Commonwealth Conference is now being held in London. Much stress is likely to be placed on the historic and sentimental links between Britain and the other members in the discussions. Politicians born and bred in Britain are not inclined to rhetoric. In such a case, however, it is almost impossible to do without it. In simple terms, however, if Britain were to join the European Community — called the Common Market — what would this mean for the Commonwealth countries? It would mean the end of the system of preferential tariffs introduced by the Ottawa Conference in 1932. Under this system, no duty or a reduced duty is paid for many products from the Commonwealth countries currently entering Britain. If Britain were to join the Common Market, the duty established by the Common Market’s ‘external’ tariff would have to be paid for these products. The problem is very serious — and has so far proved insoluble — for the ‘products of the temperate zone’ of the Commonwealth countries: i.e. agricultural products identical to those produced in the Community countries.

This question can be put as follows. If wheat and other agricultural produce from Canada, Australia and New Zealand were to be imported into the Common Market countries as they have up to now been imported into Britain, i.e. free of duty, the agriculture of the Common Market countries would be destroyed. In this case, the interests of the Commonwealth, and particularly those of the White Dominions, would be completely safe and Britain would have the twofold advantage of taking part in the Common Market and

continuing to have cheap produce. The costs of the operation would be borne in their entirety by the six countries that currently make up the Common Market. The vast majority of the peoples of these six countries, whatever General de Gaulle may think, would like Britain to join, are praying for Britain to join, but are unwilling to pay for Britain's entry by sacrificing almost all of their agriculture.

Let us look at the other side of the coin: Britain joins, and the Community's 'external' tariff is applied to those products. What will happen then? Those products will simply not be imported. In this case, the interests of the six countries would be completely safe. The costs of the operation would be borne by the Commonwealth countries, which would lose what has up to now been the natural outlet for their agricultural produce: the British market. Britain would have the drawback of paying slightly more for agricultural produce than it pays at present, but would have the advantage of belonging to the Common Market.

In Brussels, attempts are being made with the greatest goodwill both by the British delegate, the Lord Privy Seal, Edward Heath, and the delegates of the Six to find a solution halfway between or different from these two positions, that would temper the sacrifices of the various parties, by minimising them and making them bearable. Up to now, however, such efforts have not been successful. It has proved impossible to find a solution that the Commonwealth could be expected to digest. The Conference, currently under way in London, bears out this situation: almost all the Commonwealth governments — from Canada to Ghana, from Australia to India — have stated that they are opposed to Britain's entry into the Common Market. The hope of persuading the Commonwealth, if not to applaud, at least to resign itself, is proving unrealistic. Either Britain joins despite the opposition of the Commonwealth, or it does not join. At this point, however, we have to go back to what we said at the outset. A British government, if it were to take such a serious decision, i.e. deciding that Britain should join the Common Market despite the opposition of the Commonwealth, would need to be backed by a public opinion that was in agreement and warmly supportive. Unfortunately, British public opinion is cool, undecided and divided.

Augusto Guerriero