

Address given by Harold Macmillan (London, 20 September 1962)

Caption: On 20 September 1962, following the Conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers held in London, Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister, delivers an address on the nature and the future of relations between the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth and the European Communities.

Source: Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam. Hein Vos 1935-1972. Documentatie. Stukken betreffende het toetreden van Engeland tot de EEG, betreffend Afrika en andere stukken 1961-1963, 1965, 34.

Copyright: Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis / International Institute of Social History

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address_given_by_harold_macmillan_london_20_septembe_r_1962-en-22549d81-8281-4ab8-a070-289c424f2f79.html



Last updated: 01/03/2017

Text of Prime Minister's speech on the Common Market, Broadcast on September 20, 1962

We have just finished - the Commonwealth Prime Ministers and I - perhaps the most important Conference that has ever been held in the Commonwealth, and I want to speak to you tonight, as Prime Minister of Britain, about this Conference, and about the discussions which we have had on the immense question of Europe, Britain and the Commonwealth.

I want to make one thing quite clear at the beginning. We here in Britain - certainly my colleagues and I - reject altogether the view that Britain today is faced with the choice between the Commonwealth and Europe. That's not so, and for a very simple reason.

The Commonwealth and the European Common Market are quite different kinds of organisations. Both are developing in a very dramatic way but both are quite different and the membership of one can help and not hinder the membership of the other.

We in Britain have changed the Commonwealth altogether from what it used to be. Even at the end of the last war fifteen or sixteen years ago the Commonwealth consisted of Britain and four independent countries, all British colonies originally, mainly of British stock, all of them subjects of the Queen. Although we differed about some things we were a small united group. We had broadly the same foreign policy. We were virtually a military alliance, tested to the full in two great wars. And the British people and successive British Governments accepted that pattern. But now it's all changed and what used to be the British Empire has changed into a new thing - the Commonwealth.

Now there are fifteen countries, in Asia, in Africa, in the West Indies, as well as the old countries of which I've spoken. Some are large, some are small, some have hundreds of millions of inhabitants, some have only a few hundred thousand. There's a great variation of opinion, of policy and of tradition.

It's been an extraordinary story but it's altogether changed the pattern of the Commonwealth.

Now some of the Prime Ministers expressed their fears and anxieties at our Conference very frankly. Politically there was the fear that somehow or other if Britain were to join Europe the Commonwealth would never be quite the same thing again. But then, as I've told you, it never has been the same. It's always been changing and it's still changing.

Well then, you will say - what's the Commonwealth worth? I'll tell you what it's worth. It's the extreme diversity that really gives it its value. It's the fact that it covers all parts of the world, every Continent and yet has got this link. That's what gives it its value. It is this extraordinary diversity and the fact that we just have to see each other's points of view. And so we do talk over questions together. We have a kind of historic link: we are, I hope, outward looking and not inward looking: not, I hope, selfish and narrow, but try to take the broad view. That's the link and that's what makes the Commonwealth an instrument of real and increasing value in the world today.

But if you contrast that with the Common Market of Europe, of course that's quite a different thing. At present it's a group of six countries in Western Europe, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg. They've made a Customs Union or Common Market, as it is called, and that means that after a transitional period of a few years, after the time for adjustment, by 1970, these countries propose to make themselves into a single economic unit without any tariffs or any customs barriers between them. Just, in fact, like England, Scotland and Wales are today. It's been a great success up to now. They form a great economic group. There is no direct political commitment in the Common Market but, of course, it is one of the objects of the member countries to grow closer together politically, and naturally as their economic growth comes together, so will their political.

And so you see Western Europe is quite different from the Commonwealth. They are both going concerns but different.

But what we have been discussing with the Commonwealth is really this: how to reconcile the strong historical structure of the Commonwealth and the new developing structure on the Continent of Europe. This isn't really essentially a new problem for us, because all through our history, combined with all the immense outward growth of the British people all over the world, we've still been very much involved in Europe's affairs. We can't escape it. Sometimes we've tried to but we can't.

It's no good pretending. Some people naturally feel that we can go back to the old world before the war. A lot of people do look backwards but the real test you must bring to this question is "Are we going to look forward?"

A year ago the British Government decided - and it was a great decision - to start to talk and negotiate with the European Community, to see whether we could deal with the situation by joining the Common Market ourselves on terms which would be both honourable and acceptable. And we took this great decision for two reasons, one political, the other economic.

Politically because we were very glad to see the end of Europe's quarrels - quarrels in which we've been tragically involved throughout history, twice in my lifetime. Because we wanted to strengthen the new unity in Europe. And also because we knew that if we were not in Europe our influence would begin to decline, and with the decline of our influence in Europe we should lose our influence in the world outside. Now with Britain and some other countries - Norway perhaps and Denmark and other countries now members of the European Free Trade Area, the group to which we belong - if these all get together the European Community will become a community of between 220,000,000 and 230,000,000 people just as strong economically and in every other way as the Soviet Union or the United States.

But supposing we are not in it. It's there; we must accept that fact. Supposing we stand outside. Of course we shall go on, but we shall be relatively weak, and we shall not find the true strength that we have and ought to have. We shall not be able to exercise it in a world of giants.

So that was the first reason, political reason, a great historic reason, why we made this decision: to preserve the power and strength of Britain in the world.

And then there's the economic argument.

Economically these are the facts. In the newly-developed countries, in Asia and Africa and all the rest of the Commonwealth, if they are to have a really good chance, a fair chance, they must sell some at least of their manufactured goods to the advanced countries, and if we in Britain are to take these goods in sufficient quantities we must be strong enough economically to make the necessary changes and adaptations in our own industrial life.

British industry will have to concentrate more and more on the complicated, sophisticated, specialised goods: not just the things which almost anybody can learn to make, but the difficult things which need great precision, and highly skilled workmen. And yet it's just these very industries, which also require immense investment of capital. Very high investment of capital is required for very highly developed and very specialised plant. All these modern products - power stations, nuclear stations, computers, supersonic aircraft, the electronic field, all the rest of them - are very expensive; they need a big plant; and so if you are to sell them at a competitive price you need a very large market. Now the Europeans are going to have a home market, of nearly 200 million people: even now, perhaps more. How are we going to sell this kind of produce? Either to the Europeans in the Common Market area, or outside to the other markets in the world in competition with the Europeans. How are we going to sell them if the base, the home market, is only a quarter of theirs?

Now I know there are some people who talk as if there was an alternative system to the Common Market. The Commonwealth, they say, might form itself into a close economic unit vast in population and natural resources and able, on its own, to equal the great economies of America, of Soviet Russia, or of modern

Europe. I don't think that this idea has been a practical proposition for the Commonwealth in recent years, and I'm quite certain that the Commonwealth countries realise this. None of the conditions exist which would allow a Common Commonwealth Market, for these are countries with totally different backgrounds, different races, different stages of development, scattered all over the world. They simply do not make a compact grouping.

Well, how have we got on so far? There do we stand at Brussels in our negotiations? In the so-called temperate foodstuffs - that's to say corn and meat and dairy produce - we all of us, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the European countries, and Britain, hope by world agreements to get a managed market on a fair basis, with price policies followed fair and reasonable to producers and consumers, and to provide access to markets for traditional suppliers. That's agreed.

For New Zealand everybody accepts that some special arrangements will have to be made to suit her very special circumstances.

Now for the Asian countries we have got on the whole very good terms - very good.

For African and Caribbean countries we have got wonderful terms - just wonderful terms - if they choose to take them.

We have talked over all these things, frankly, for the last ten days, and I think we have been able, by this frank personal talk, to make the Commonwealth leaders understand our reasons why we need to join the Common Market, and why it will be, in the long run, better both for us, and for them.

As I say, we have got a long way in Brussels, but there is a lot to be done, before we can see exactly what arrangements we and the Six can make together, to give fair entry for the Commonwealth and the right conditions for our own British Agriculture. When we know the final position, then it will be for us here in Britain to decide what to do. All the Commonwealth have accepted that fact, because after all, we are independent too, if it comes to that.

So we want to preserve and strengthen the Commonwealth. We want also to play our part in Europe. Many of us, especially those who are young in heart or in years, are impatient of the old disputes, intolerant of the obsolete conceptions; anxious that our country should take its part, and if possible a leading part, in all these new and hopeful movements. All over Western Europe people are looking to Britain to join them in this work of peace and progress. And given the right terms of entry I am sure this is the right way ahead for us.