

General de Gaulle's second veto

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On 29 September 1967, the Commission of the European Communities delivered an opinion on the applications for accession of the United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark and Norway in which it proposed the immediate opening of accession negotiations with the applicant countries. Despite this opinion, France's partners in the Community, who were in favour of the first enlargement of the Communities, continued to meet with opposition from General de Gaulle. The French President pointed to the economic difficulties experienced by the United Kingdom and demanded that a solution to the major problems be found before its accession to the Communities. Unlike the Five, Paris was convinced that the United Kingdom's accession to the Common Market, even on the condition that it accepted the terms laid down in the treaties, would fundamentally change the nature of the Community and cause it to move in the direction of a single free trade area.

Aside from the economic arguments put forward to block the United Kingdom's accession, the French President had other concerns. Despite the commitments made by his government in economic matters, the British Prime Minister did not agree with the French views on foreign and defence policy. Harold Wilson continued to advocate the need for United States involvement in European defence and rejected the establishment of a European nuclear force. The French President feared that in an enlarged Community, France would not only be at risk of encountering greater difficulties in defending its economic interests, but that it would also be in danger of losing its leadership role to a more Atlanticist policy with the arrival of the new Member States.

On 18 November, the British Government was forced to devalue the pound sterling. The French President did not hesitate to voice his reaction. He believed that this was proof that the British economy was not ready to meet the conditions of the Common Market. On 27 November 1967, even before the accession negotiations with the applicant countries could begin, General de Gaulle held a press conference in which he declared his opposition, for the second time, to the United Kingdom's accession to the European Communities. In his statement, the French President particularly emphasised the incompatibility of the British economy with Community rules and stressed that the United Kingdom's accession to the European Communities firstly required that the country undergo a major political and economic transformation. He reiterated his proposal for an association between the European Economic Community and the applicant countries to promote trade, but London immediately rejected the idea of an association, which would exclude it from the Community decision-making process.

However, France's partners in the Community were not willing to accept this unilateral decision. They therefore tried to find alternative solutions to break the deadlock and maintain the prospect of accession for the applicant countries. But all the proposals came up against the opposition of General de Gaulle; he became increasingly isolated from the other Member States and even went as far as threatening to leave the Community if Britain were to accede. The difference of opinion between France and its partners on the issue of British accession affected the Communities' activities. It became essential to find a solution to the British question in order to break the deadlock and pursue the development of the Communities. The Five's mistrust of France's European policy was increased when, in February 1969, the French President proposed to the British Ambassador to Paris, Christopher Soames, that the United Kingdom accede to a single European free trade area which would replace the Community structures. The British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, not only rejected France's proposal but revealed its substance to the Five, thus contributing to France's isolation. Only when Charles de Gaulle's tenure as President of the French Republic came to an end three months later were negotiations able to be relaunched.