

The United Kingdom's second application for accession to the Common Market

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The October 1964 elections in the United Kingdom were won by the Labour Party. The Labour Party leader, Harold Wilson, took over from the Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, who had come up against the opposition of French President Charles de Gaulle in the bid to accede to the European Communities. The new Prime Minister, who had previously been opposed to the United Kingdom's accession to the European Communities, gradually began to pursue a more Europe-oriented policy. This new direction in foreign policy was largely a result of the difficulties encountered by the British economy in the mid-1960s. Relations with the Commonwealth continued to weaken and trade relations within the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) were developing at a slower pace than expected. Participation in the European Communities therefore seemed the best solution to revive the British economy, all the more so because exports to the Communities' Member States were constantly on the rise. The Communities also seemed to provide the necessary framework in which to overcome the balance of payments deficit and to devalue the pound sterling, a measure which had become essential. Finally, accession offered the United Kingdom the prospect of playing an active role in the development of the Communities, which were experiencing continued growth, and of reducing its dependence on the United States by choosing the path leading towards an emerging Europe.

However, during Harold Wilson's first term of office, conditions were not yet favourable for an open policy change towards accession to the Communities. Opposition to accession within the Labour Party itself was too great and the memory of the failure met by the first application for accession in 1963 was still too vivid in the minds of the general public. It was only following efforts made to persuade his party and after the elections held in March 1966 that Harold Wilson had a large enough majority to take the decision to make a second application for accession to the European Communities. At the same time, the empty chair crisis served to highlight General de Gaulle's opposition to the majority vote and to the Communities' evolution towards a federal structure. This reassured the British leaders, because even if Harold Wilson was ready to accept the economic terms associated with accession to the Communities, the Prime Minister was not keen on accepting the slightest limitation of British sovereignty in terms of foreign and defence policy. On 10 November 1966, the Prime Minister announced to the House of Commons that he had decided to visit the European capital cities to see whether conditions were favourable for a British application for accession.

In early 1967, Harold Wilson and his Foreign Secretary, George Brown, carried out a series of visits to the leaders of the Six. The reactions in the capital cities were mostly positive, owing to the fact that London had stated its willingness to accept the terms of the treaties and to fulfil the same obligations as its future partners. The most muted welcome came once again from France, in particular because of the economic difficulties experienced by the United Kingdom and the country's special relationship with the United States in foreign policy matters which, in the eyes of the French President, threatened to hinder Franco-German plans for political cooperation. However, the British Prime Minister was convinced that lessons had been learnt from the failure of the first application and that this time he would be able to convince General de Gaulle that British accession was essential.

On 2 May, after ascertaining the reactions of the members of the Commonwealth and EFTA, Harold Wilson announced to the House of Commons that the government had decided to apply for accession to the European Communities. The Prime Minister's announcement was approved by a large majority. On 11 May, with the backing of the majority in the main parties and a general public that had come to support the idea of accession, the British Government submitted to Brussels its second application for accession to the European Communities. As with its first application in 1961, the United Kingdom's application for accession was accompanied by those of Ireland, Denmark and Norway.