

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

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The United Kingdom was not part of the European unification process in the 1950s. It first applied for accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1961. It was somewhat envious of the very rapid economic growth of the EEC countries. The United Kingdom wished to avoid being economically and politically excluded from the new Europe and sought rather to preserve its traditional role of intermediary between Europe and the United States. Harold Macmillan, the British Prime Minister, prepared the British application after securing the backing of his Government and of the Conservative Party. The House of Commons approved the United Kingdom's application, and the general reactions of the Six seemed positive.

The announcement of the first application

The British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, prepared his country's application with great care. Backed by a solid majority in the Commons, he could afford to ignore resistance to the Common Market within the Conservative Party and was able to appoint dedicated pro-Europeans to the key posts within his Government.

At international level, he promoted the advantages of the United Kingdom's membership of the EEC to the Commonwealth countries. He also toured the capital cities of the Six in order to sound out the Member States of the European Economic Community (EEC) about possible accession by the United Kingdom.

In the circles close to the British Labour Party, there was some opposition to Britain's possible application for accession to the European Communities. The opponents were afraid, in particular, of losing the benefits of the Welfare State in a liberal Europe. They were against any loss of sovereignty and frequently raised the spectre of a capitalist Europe.

However, the vote taken in the House of Commons on 4 August 1961 was unambiguous. The House of Commons adopted the Government's proposal by 313 votes to 4, with the Labour Opposition and some 50 Conservatives abstaining. On 9 August 1961, the United Kingdom submitted its first application for accession to the EEC. It did not apply for accession to the ECSC and Euratom until 28 February 1962. Negotiations with the Six began on 10 October 1961. At the same time, the British press was buzzing with arguments for and against the Common Market. Overall, the reaction was quite positive. The Community's Member States appeared to be ready to welcome the United Kingdom. Following the British lead, Ireland applied for accession to the EEC on 13 July 1961, Denmark on 10 August 1961 and Norway on 30 April 1962.

Difficult negotiations

As Lord Privy Seal, Edward Heath was responsible for European issues and was therefore put in charge of negotiating with the Six in Brussels. The negotiations were tough, because London, resting on its imperial laurels, demanded exemption from a number of Community regulations. For example, it had difficulty in accepting the Common Customs Tariff for fear that it would lose its privileged relationship with the Commonwealth countries.

Considerable progress was achieved over the summer of 1962, particularly in terms of Britain's gradual shift away from the concept of imperial preference. But the British kept coming back with more and more requests for derogations and exemptions. Harold Macmillan even launched a public awareness campaign in order to win over British public opinion. But, at a Conference of the Commonwealth Countries in September 1962, Canada and New Zealand voiced their opposition to the United Kingdom's acceding to the EEC.

General de Gaulle's first veto

Germany, the Benelux countries and Italy were prepared to make substantial concessions. However, the negotiations on enlargement were adjourned following General de Gaulle's categorical veto. On 14 January 1963, he held a press conference at which he declared his opposition to the United Kingdom's application for accession. He referred to incompatibilities between continental European and British economic interests. De Gaulle demanded that the United Kingdom accept all the conditions laid down by the Six and revoke its commitments to countries within its own free trade area. On 28 January, the French Government forced its five European partners, who were already shocked by the unilateral veto, to adjourn the accession negotiations.

General de Gaulle was afraid that the new member might jeopardise the common agricultural policy (CAP) and transform the European Economic Community (EEC) into a huge free trade area. Above all, he regarded the United Kingdom as a Trojan horse concealing US interests: he believed that British accession would lead to the Americanisation of Europe. He declared his support for a deepening and an acceleration of Common Market integration rather than enlargement, and shed doubts on the UK's commitment to Europe.

De Gaulle's attitude also stemmed from reasons not connected solely with EEC interests. In addition to the anti-British resentment that he had continued to harbour ever since he was exiled to London during the war, he was afraid of British-American nuclear cooperation. When, in October 1962, American Polaris rockets were delivered to the British, this was a grave blow to Franco-British relations, while de Gaulle continued to develop close relations with Germany.