

Great Britain Remains Skeptical of Europe (January 2, 1973)

Abstract

After France lifted its veto, Great Britain joined the European Community together with Denmark and Ireland on January 1, 1973. As the article makes clear, both the Labour Party and a broad cross section of the British population continued to view the country's membership negatively.

Source

More Funeral March than Europe Fanfare Britain on the day it joined the European Community

If Britain's joining the European Community should turn out to be the historical turning point that Macmillan predicted twelve years ago, then it certainly will not be because the British people wanted it that way. Even on the eve of accession, which, at any rate, is an irrevocable fact sealed by the parliament a few months ago, almost one in four British voters had either no opinion or no idea. Thirty-nine percent were still opposed and only 38 percent in favor. In view of attitudes that are indifferent, predominantly grumpy, and partly hostile at best, it is not surprising that animosity has increased against the festival staged as a "fanfare for Europe," the announcement of which was attacked as a mistake both inside and outside of parliament.

When, in an enquiry posed in the House of Commons, Labour MP [Willie] Hamilton asked the Prime Minister what he regarded as his government's greatest error, [Edward] Heath said cuttingly: "To have underestimated the extent to which the Labour party, including its leaders, would betray its European obligations." Labour leader [Harold] Wilson, normally so quick to respond, took quite some time to strike back with the counteraccusation that Heath "cynically and deliberately broke his election promise not to enter the Common Market without the full approval of the British people."

Because Heath has long been familiar with this argument, which is based on a falsified quotation, it was easy for him to maintain the upper hand in this parliamentary exchange of blows. "If you had had a majority of 112 votes in favor of joining the EEC, you would have been the first to boast about it, as in fact you did when you made your own failed attempt." It was the final parliamentary clash before the accession date of January 1, 1973, and it accorded exactly with the icy political climate, in which relations between the prime minister and the opposition leader have played themselves out since Wilson's departure from his own European course.

Whereas Wilson's pro-Europe turnaround cannot be dated precisely, since it marked the end of a process that had progressed relatively slowly, Wilson's relapse into his old hostility toward joining the EEC, which had already manifested itself at the 1962 party congress, can be traced back to a specific date: the Labour defeat in the House of Commons elections of June 18, 1970, despite the fact that this debacle had nothing at all to do with the European course.

If accession day put the British public, though not official England, in a mood more appropriate for a funeral march than a "fanfare for Europe," then it is hardly surprising: that is, not after the accession opponents' systematic campaign, which led to their taking over all the leadership bodies in the Labour party and the trade unions. This campaign, which was echoed in the Conservative party with not entirely

innocuous vote revolts in the House of Commons, pulled out all the stops. The battle slogans appealed to the material and to the always effective patriotic instincts of the British—the latter due to their general and easily ignitable foreign animosity. The fear of a flood of price increases and the theory of sovereignty loss, as asserted by Michael Foot and Ennoch Power, were and still are the most effective weapons.

[...]

Ill humor and discord on accession day would not be cause for particular worry if one of the old traditions of British politics took effect from now on, namely, if the defeated opposition accepted the majority decision of the parliament, but that seems out of the question. The shadow cabinet, the Labour party caucus, the entire executive committee of the Labour party, and the General Council of the General Federation of Trade Unions made a binding decision that the next Labour government would initiate new negotiations on whether Great Britain should remain in the European Economic Community, with the ultimate decision being made by the British electorate in a referendum.

Within the scope of British parliamentarianism, there is hardly a conceivable solution that would come closer to open sabotage of a parliamentary majority decision. In order to justify such a destructive course, for which there is no counterexample, Wilson must legally question not the formal, but the intrinsic legitimacy of the ratification act.

No one, not even Wilson, denied that Britain's joining the EEC is a personal triumph for Heath. In his accession address, the prime minister characterized the accession as "a powerful, historical moment, in every sense of the word," but that is the only flight of fancy in an otherwise characteristically sober appeal, whose common denominator was the assurance that in practice, the cooperation of the Community of Nine would turn out to be the best thing for everyone.

In Brussels and the other capitals of the Community of Nine, the idea that a future Labour cabinet could raise the question of Britain's joining the EEC anew might seem unrealistic to the point of absurdity. In the everyday struggles of party politics in Britain, however, it is an unsettling reality with potentially serious consequences. It may very well be that the Labour party has set a course that guarantees a new defeat for itself from the outset – if [for example] accession should be convincingly established as a good thing in the consciousness of the voting majority by the time of the next elections to the House of Commons. Wilson must not consider the risk all that great, since otherwise he would not have done so astonishingly little to resist the requirement of a referendum, which he had always and repeatedly rejected publicly. The British dailies, however, presented a united front against him in the question of joining the EEC, once the *Daily Express* also abandoned its years-long campaign against accession. The communist party organ is the only exception.

Source: Heinz Höpfl, "Mehr Trauermarsch als Europa-Fahne. Großbritannien am Tag des Beitritts zur Europäischen Gemeinschaft," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 2, 1973. Republished with permission.

Translation: Allison Brown

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