

'Great Britain commits itself to Europe' from Le Monde (19 October 1967)

Caption: On 19 October 1967, the daily newspaper Le Monde focuses on the shift in British public opinion towards acceptance of European integration.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 19.10.1967, n° 7 081. Paris: Le Monde. "La Grande-Bretagne s'engage vers l'Europe", auteur:Sampson, Anthony , p. 1; 5.

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Great Britain commits itself to Europe

At a time when the Six are preparing to meet in Luxembourg in order to take a decision on the opening of negotiations with Great Britain, we felt that it would be useful to offer our readers a British take on a decision with so many potential effects. The articles that we are starting to publish today are actually not so much an expression of an opinion as an account of the profound changes that have persuaded Great Britain, after lengthy hesitation and despite a rebuff, to come closer to Europe.

*To retrace the main stages of this journey, there is nobody better qualified than a close observer of British society already familiar to the French public through his remarkable work *Anatomy of Britain* (published by Robert Laffont in 1963). In a series of three articles, Anthony Sampson describes how the leaders of Britain and the public have been ‘converted to Europe’ as a direct effect of challenging the traditional links with the Commonwealth and the United States.*

The three circles

by Anthony Sampson

Have the British really decided to become Europeans? If so, how did this change come about? In the course of my travels in Europe, I have been asked these questions hundreds of times. Admittedly, Europeans have good reasons for doubt. Great Britain’s conversion to the Common Market has been mysterious, full of ambiguities and not easy to explain. As was the case with other major changes in British history, such as the movement for Parliamentary reform after 1830 or the dismemberment of the Empire after 1950, the change has, on the whole, been introduced discreetly, without any public debate.

I believe, however, that the change has indeed taken place and is irreversible and profound. The question could actually be put in a different way. Why has the change in Great Britain’s policy come so late? Most of the continentals who have observed the attitude of the British towards Europe over the past twenty years have been somewhat exasperated by their political hesitations and the slowness of their conversion. Had Great Britain really wished to enter the Common Market, how easy it would have been ten years ago! Why has this change taken so long?

The explanation for the ambiguity of Britain’s position in the past is the Churchillian vision of its role in the post-war world. It was a vision that was to last almost twenty years. Churchill — as he never grew tired of repeating — saw Great Britain as being at the centre of three intersecting circles: America, the Commonwealth and Europe; and he thought that the influence of Great Britain in the world depended on its maintaining this delicate balance. The view was not without its attractions and was held by others as well as Churchill: it exerted its influence over Attlee, Eden and Macmillan. When the war was over, it meant that Great Britain could be seen as an independent power because of its new role as the pivot of the West.

Labourites were as seduced as the Conservatives by this image, with which men of my generation at university after the war were brought up. Of the three circles, Europe seemed to be the most fragile in many respects: at the time, parliamentary debates reflected a profound pessimism about Europe. The Commonwealth had a strong emotional content for the Left: after imperial domination, it seemed to be testing British idealism vis-à-vis the poor countries and might help to overcome insularity. For both the major parties, America was the most powerful circle, and it was on the Anglo-American alliance that the pride of post-war Britain rested. Politicians could convince themselves that it was the close wartime partnership that was being perpetuated, and their confidence was encouraged by the extraordinary prestige enjoyed in America by Churchill who, with his American mother and his American feeling for publicity, became almost as much a citizen of the United States as of Great Britain during his years in opposition. On the leading foreign policy problem, defence against Russia, the English and Americans were in agreement, and it was Churchill who, in his famous ‘Iron Curtain’ speech in Fulton in 1947, helped to lay the foundations of American policy.

From illusion to ignorance

The image of the three circles did a good deal to shelter Great Britain from post-war realities and to conceal the harsh fact that the two superpowers had, in fact, won the war on their own; the rapid building of the A-bomb and H-bomb added to the illusion of being the third world power. The country's political stability and the continuity of its institutions had emerged virtually intact from the war, which had generated no feeling of a break with the past or a desire to forget and start afresh. At the time, that was the main difference between thinking in Great Britain and in continental Europe. Britain had many enthusiastic advocates of a united Europe, but, in most of them, this enthusiasm did not go as far as full commitment. Their attitude could be summed up by the explanation given by Churchill of his position towards the proposed EDC in 1953: 'We are with them but not of them.'

The three circles were not a simple politician's construct: they stood for genuine conflict among different interests and different intellectual backgrounds in the British post-war elites. Although the Empire was on its way out, the imperial experience had made its mark on thousands of families of administrators, and 'public school' ideals were inculcated in response to the need to recruit athletic, self-confident young people for the outposts of the Empire.

Financial experts in the City had — not without reason — turned away from Europe since the 1920s and were investing in South Africa, Australia or America. Retired army generals and air force marshals, who played a major role in British administration after the war, were wary of Europe, as was to be expected, and ignorant of its peoples and languages.

It was unfortunate that the British victory led to an exaggerated respect for continuity and, therefore, for old men in the Conservative tradition; half the members of the British Cabinet in 1951 were veterans of the First World War. For young people trying to break away from this gerontocracy, the only obvious way out was not Europe but America, where the British were welcomed like heroes in the early post-war period. The atmosphere of stagnation and Puritanism of the time generated a sullen discontent, which was put into words by the 'angry young men' of the 1950s; nevertheless, these 'angry young men', such as John Osborne and Kingsley Amis, were not interested in Europe, and in Great Britain there was no equivalent of that generation of passionate idealists who, on the Continent, placed all their hopes in the unification of Europe or of those young French politicians whose careers had started in the resistance.

It was hard for young Britons to get to know the Continent, not just during the war but in the years that followed. The annual foreign currency allowance was just £35. The war had broken many links, and there were few exchange schemes. Even in 1963, a survey by the *Reader's Digest Selection* showed that only 6 % of the British had been to France and barely more than 3 % had visited West Germany (by the same token, only 1 % of the French had been to Great Britain).

Why Macmillan changed his mind

For most British people looking back over these post-war years, it is hard today to believe the pride and satisfaction of the time and the illusions harboured. But victory encourages self-satisfaction, and a complete victory linked with austerity gives rise to illusions. It should be added that British distrust of the Continent was to a great extent well-founded at the time: the qualities that the Continent admired in the British — political stability and continuity — were precisely those that Great Britain most feared losing in the *mêlée* of the Continent.

When Macmillan became Prime Minister in 1956, he brought with him a greater interest in Europe than his Conservative predecessors, Churchill and Eden. The Suez Crisis clearly showed up the limitations of the Anglo-American alliance. Nevertheless, as he explains in his *Memoirs*, Macmillan took over the Churchillian idea of the three circles: like Churchill, he had an American mother, and he considered it his life's work to maintain Anglo-American relations. His respect for American power went hand in hand with a certain intellectual disdain, but he combined these two attitudes in his own characteristic way. During the war, when he was in Algeria, he often used to say to his colleagues: 'We are the Greeks in their Roman empire', meaning that the United States had power and money on its side, but Great Britain could temper

American gaucheness with its own intelligence and culture.

He developed this idea after the war, sometimes — unguardedly — in conversations with politicians in continental Europe. This comparison with the Greeks precisely summed up the pessimistic view that Macmillan took of the world, especially in his relations with Eisenhower. For many members of the former generation of politicians, this image of the British, full of age and wisdom and counselling the brash young Americans, made up for the loss of power. To Europeans and the younger British generation, however, the comparison with the Greeks had no appeal; after all, look what happened to the Greeks in the end.

To tell the truth, during the seven years of Macmillan's premiership, the idea of the three circles rapidly became untenable. The Suez affair had revealed the limits of the 'special ties' with the United States, and the Cuban Crisis seven years later showed that America and the USSR could trigger off and resolve a world crisis without Great Britain. As for the Commonwealth, South Africa ceased to be a member in 1961, and Australia was already drawing closer to the United States. In the meanwhile, a series of economic crises showed that it was impossible for Great Britain to develop in isolation.

The limits of Macmillan's conversion

Several factors propelled Macmillan towards the Common Market in 1961. The failure of the summit meeting had dispelled his dreams of East-West détente. The European Free Trade Area (EFTA) had not succeeded in becoming a bridgehead to the flourishing Common Market. From late 1960, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and employers had reached the conclusion that the Common Market would provide the necessary stimulus for British industry, as well as a market for its products.

However, when Macmillan tried to enter the Common Market, he did so cautiously. He wanted to maintain relations with the other two circles intact. As he told me in 1961: 'Strengthening our ties with Europe does not mean weakening the others.' Although the Commonwealth was heading for disintegration, there was still a powerful pressure group in its favour within the Conservative Party, and Macmillan felt constrained to take a hard line in defending the interests of the Commonwealth. He thought that he could gradually bring his party to look towards Europe, and at no time did he dare to undertake a real crusade. He felt he could arrive at an agreement with America without compromising the prospects of entering Europe. When, in Nassau, he negotiated with Kennedy on the supply to the UK of Polaris missiles, his advisers warned him that this might cause his European projects to collapse, but they were not heeded. It is likely that, even without the Nassau agreements — taking later events into account — de Gaulle would not have agreed to Great Britain's entry. But these agreements showed that Great Britain was still strongly attached to the three circles, and they gave substance to de Gaulle's accusations that, once Britain was admitted to Europe, it would serve as a Trojan horse for the United States. After de Gaulle's veto in 1963, the chances of seeing Great Britain becoming more European appeared to be reduced to a minimum. The Conservative leaders refused to discuss the matter, the majority of the Labour Party rejoiced, and even the British Embassy in Paris started to sulk, going so far as to advise Princess Margaret not to visit France.

However, deep down, two major changes had occurred in the attitude of the British. First of all, the attempt to join Europe had shown the British people that, for the first time since the war, the island could no longer remain isolated. This evident truth, of which most European countries had been aware since the end of the war, at last had to be confronted by the British; and the negotiations, despite their failure, were a sort of shock treatment that bluntly confronted the British with the realities of the situation.

Secondly, the negotiations had served to mobilise and coordinate the energies of an enthusiastic group of British 'pro-Europeans' who, henceforth, were wholeheartedly committed to the Common Market. Among these were most of the young diplomats, a substantial portion of Treasury officials, the most forward-looking employers, and most of the English press, from the *Daily Mirror* to *The Economist*. These 'Europeans' were momentarily silenced by de Gaulle's veto, but they were certain that Great Britain ought to enter Europe and that, ultimately, it would succeed. One problem then arose: how could the Labour Party be converted?

Anthony Sampson