

The British call for renegotiation

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The British call for renegotiation

The victory of the Labour Party in the British general election of February 1974 caused some concern amongst the founder members of the European Economic Community (EEC). Labour's Harold Wilson had himself sought British accession to the EEC in 1967, when he was Prime Minister. A member of the Opposition since 1970, he severely criticised the compromises accepted by his successor, the Conservative, Edward Heath, when the Treaty of Accession was ratified in 1972.

In February 1974, Wilson returned to power. He immediately called into question the terms for Britain's accession to the EEC. His Foreign Secretary, James Callaghan, right from his initial address to the Council of Ministers on 1 April 1974, called for a fundamental renegotiation of the terms laid down in the treaties of accession negotiated by the Conservative delegates.

Although the new British Government did not challenge the principle of British accession itself, it nonetheless hoped to obtain improvements and amendments if the United Kingdom were to remain within the Community. In particular, it wanted to obtain an extension to the preferential terms agreed with regard to the transitional period, the purpose of which was to allow the entry of Caribbean sugar and New Zealand butter into the United Kingdom.

The British also demanded a reduction in the contribution to the Community budget and the renewal of direct subsidies, or deficiency payments, to small farmers in the poorest regions. Cornered by the left wing of his party, Harold Wilson finally had to accept a referendum on the principle of British accession to the EEC following a renegotiation of the terms of accession.

The United Kingdom's partners in Europe, in spite of French reservations, showed themselves ready to make certain concessions to the United Kingdom in order to avoid a victory for the opponents of European integration, an outcome which would have been damaging to the entire unification process. At the Paris Summit, held on 9 and 10 December 1974, Wilson obtained satisfaction with the creation of a European Regional Development Fund, which would be of great benefit to Britain, and with the prospect of obtaining a correction mechanism for Britain's budgetary contribution. The correction mechanism was approved at the Dublin European Council held on 10 and 11 March 1975.

On 27 March 1975, the Wilson Government, which recommended the electorate to approve the results of the renegotiation, published a new White Paper, calling for continued British membership of the Community. An intense campaign to influence public opinion then began. Movements such as Britain in Europe (BIE), which supported continued membership of the EEC, vied with the National Referendum Campaign (NRC), which fostered a nostalgic view of the Empire. When the national referendum was held on 5 June 1975, supporters of European unification succeeded in convincing a majority of the British to approve continued membership of the EEC, with 67.2 % of the electorate voting in favour.

In 1978, the Labour Government under James Callaghan protested once again at the amount of the British contribution, which it believed to be still too high. The Franco-German bloc became stronger in reaction to British aloofness towards European issues.