

'The Commonwealth – just a smokescreen?' from 30 jours d'Europe (June 1974)


Caption: In June 1974, in its coverage of the negotiations on the accession of the United Kingdom to the European Economic Community (EEC), the monthly publication 30 jours d'Europe examines the economic weight of the Commonwealth in relation to the United Kingdom.

Source: 30 jours d'Europe. dir. de publ. Fontaine, François ; Réd. Chef Chastenet, Antoine. Juin 1974, n° 191. Paris: Service de presse et d'information de la Commission des Communautés européennes. "Le Commonwealth est-il un paravent?", auteur:MacLeod, Alexander , p. 19; 22.

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URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_commonwealth_just_a_smokescreen_from_30_jours_d_europe_june_1974-en-e739581b-edb1-448d-9632-189bc89626b5.html

Last updated: 06/07/2016



The Commonwealth — just a smokescreen?

Notwithstanding Mr Callaghan's statement of the UK Government's case, Commonwealth issues seem unlikely to play much of a part in the 'renegotiation'.

In his first address to the Council of Ministers of the Community the Foreign Secretary, Mr Callaghan, did not stop at demanding 'major changes in the common agricultural policy so that low-cost producers outside Europe can continue to have access to the British food market'. He emphasised the Commonwealth, referring to New Zealand dairy products and Caribbean sugar, and went so far as to call for a more extensive scheme of Community preferences in the industrial and meat production sectors, a more liberal Community policy towards developing countries and greater flexibility in the approach to factors in the Community's trading relations with the rest of the world. All this was rather like a lengthy 'shopping list', and Mr Callaghan's references to the Commonwealth must have come as something of a surprise to the Europeans, who thought that the thorniest aspects of the 'Commonwealth problem' had been resolved during the talks which preceded the UK's accession to the Common Market.

In fact, the 'renegotiation' will cover issues which are harder to resolve than that of the Commonwealth: the British budgetary contribution and the changes to be made to the common agricultural policy. And it has to be said that, whilst the minority Labour Government is making much of the Commonwealth — whether from conviction or from political necessity — the Commonwealth itself does not seem particularly concerned by any revision of the United Kingdom's status within the Community, as Mr Callaghan would have us believe it is.

Weakening ties between the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth

It is no easier to define the place of the Commonwealth in British foreign policy today than it was in July 1961 when Harold Macmillan submitted Britain's first application for accession to the Common Market. As a political entity, the Commonwealth has no clear definition, and the ties which bind Britain and the 'old Commonwealth' are essentially ties of sentiment, language and culture. The members of this family share a common conception of institutions. Commonwealth leaders also continue to meet at more or less regular intervals and the 'Commonwealth Secretariat', which has its headquarters in London and operates on a basis of mutual trust, closely monitors economic and commercial issues likely to affect its thirty or so members.

The Commonwealth may be hard to define, but it would be wrong to say that it no longer has a place in British affections. Even so, trade with the Commonwealth accounts for a diminishing proportion of the UK's total trade, whilst her trade with Europe is steadily increasing.

Even in matters of sentiment and lifestyles, the impression is that the ties between the UK and the Commonwealth are weakening. As of the late 1960s, Commonwealth citizens wishing to settle in the UK or even to spend long periods of time there must satisfy numerous requirements which apply equally to whites and non-whites. In the last few months, Australia and New Zealand have decided to limit UK immigration by applying stricter selection criteria. These two countries now no longer give UK travellers automatic right of entry. Although the new Labour Government has given several thousand illegal Commonwealth immigrants leave to remain in the United Kingdom, the current patterns of emigration and immigration show that the United Kingdom and her Commonwealth partners are abandoning sentiment in favour of a policy of pure realism.

New Zealand butter

Self-interest is also discernible in the way in which some Commonwealth countries have responded to Mr Callaghan's calls for 'cheap food' for the British housewife.

New Zealand, for which the previous Conservative Government had secured special arrangements in 1971 in its trade with the Community, is not meeting the set quotas: it prefers to profit from increased world

demand for dairy products and send its butter and cheese to more lucrative markets. For its cheese, sold in Britain for NZ\$ 0.81 per kilo fat, New Zealand can get US\$2.38 in America. As a result, last year, New Zealand cut its deliveries of butter by 33 000 tonnes from the expected figure of 163 000 tonnes. Cheese sales on the London market were a third lower than the set quotas of 670 000 tonnes.

There is no sign that this trend will be reversed in the near future. Joe Walding, the New Zealand Minister for Overseas Trade, made it known during a tour of Common Market capitals early in the year that his country was afraid of the effects which Community levies would have on New Zealand lamb, saying that his Government hoped to see the Nine extending the special arrangements concluded with New Zealand beyond 1977. But he said, too, that, if his country was to provide cheap food for Europe, careful consideration would have to be given to what exactly was meant by 'cheap'.

The conclusion seems obvious: with her greater reserves, with increasing markets for her products and with greater confidence in her trading future, New Zealand does not appear to fit the image of the Commonwealth as portrayed by Mr Callaghan in Luxembourg.

Caribbean sugar

A similar situation seems to be evolving over Commonwealth sugar — especially that produced by the Caribbean states. When the United Kingdom acceded to the Community she was given assurances that the interests of Commonwealth sugar producers would be safeguarded.

For a while, the Commonwealth producers were disappointed by the way that things were going. But events then took a more encouraging turn: first, the previous Conservative Government offered the Caribbean suppliers a retroactive price rise of £22 a tonne. Then the European Commission agreed to a formula whereby the Nine would, in future, take 1.4 million tonnes of Commonwealth sugar a year. Finally, after a lively debate, the European Parliament has accepted the Commission's proposals. Assuming that this agreement on sugar is valid, in principle, only until the end of the year and that Europe's angry sugar beet producers (chiefly French) cool down, it is very likely that the Community will put forward a new proposal acceptable to the countries of the Commonwealth.

If the sugar quotas can be extended, and if New Zealand continues to sell her dairy products profitably outside Europe, two of the main chapter headings on the list of demands presented by Mr Callaghan in Luxembourg will have been dealt with. At a single stroke, the 'Commonwealth problem' will cease to be a major issue in the future negotiations.

Real British concerns for the Commonwealth

In other areas, however, the Labour Government is intent on promoting the 'Commonwealth interest'. Mr Callaghan believes that those Commonwealth countries which were not able to secure associated status have not secured the place for their trade with the Community for which they had hoped at the time of the 1971 talks. He also thinks that the Community programme of aid to those countries is too narrowly drawn and will be ineffective. India, Malaysia and other Asian members of the Commonwealth have not really benefited much from the Community's generalised system of preferences.

The Labour Government believes that Community aid must not be confined to the original signatories of the Yaoundé Convention or even those of its enlarged version. It has, therefore, decided to put pressure on the European Commission to have funds distributed more broadly and more fairly, particularly to countries in Asia and Latin America. However, the problem concerns not just the Commonwealth alone but the whole of the Third World.

It should not be forgotten that the desire of thirteen African, six Caribbean and three Pacific countries in the Commonwealth to collaborate with the Community has dwindled considerably as a result of the UK's accession to the Common Market. Niger made the first move towards this new policy, and the remaining 43 states are primarily concerned to strengthen their associated status. It is a fact that London has helped

their cause considerably by the line that it has taken in Brussels.

It appears that the Labour Government's efforts, with regard to the 'renegotiation', to highlight the case of the Commonwealth stem more from a desire to give the anti-Market faction in its own party pause for thought than from any real concern for Commonwealth rights. There will be much to do during the 'renegotiation', but it does not seem that the Commonwealth will provide useful support for the British case.

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