

'Britain at the crossroads' from the Luxemburger Wort (2 January 1973)

Caption: On 1 January 1973, the United Kingdom becomes a member of the European Communities. The following day, daily newspaper Luxemburger Wort analyses British reactions to accession and lambastes a certain British isolationist attitude.

Source: Luxemburger Wort. Für Wahrheit und Recht. 02.01.1973, n° 1; 126e année. Luxembourg: Imprimerie Saint-Paul. "England vor der grossen Wende", auteur:W. G. Krug , p. 12.

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Britain at the crossroads

— From W. G. Krug (London) —

The United Kingdom is at one of the most important crossroads in its chequered history. As the New Year is ushered in, Britain will renounce its splendid isolation for the first time in centuries — apart from temporary military alliances — and will become part of a larger European entity. For better or for worse, it is, therefore, turning back to the Continent from which it is separated by more than just the Channel.

Over 1 500 years ago, most of Britain was occupied by Roman legions and was ruled from Rome. Then, for centuries after it was conquered by the Norman duke, William the Conqueror, in 1066, its rulers included among their many titles that of King of France. This led them to fight the Hundred Years' War in an attempt to retain their French provinces. This time, however, they will become, of their own volition, an equal member of a European community. According to recent press speculation, British negotiators are even said to have approached the royal houses of Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands to see whether the Queen might be appointed 'Queen of the European Economic Community' and, thus, titular head of the new union.

The marriage contract between the United Kingdom and the Community, which was signed a year ago with great ceremony, comes into effect on 1 January. On instructions from the Government and with a grant of £350 000, the wedding will be celebrated in Britain in a ten-day festival called 'Fanfare for Europe', so that the honeymoon may develop into a harmonious marriage. Britain's two representatives will be going to the Commission in Brussels, and one High Court judge to the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg. For the time being, only half the number of MEPs will be taking their seats in the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 15 January, however (for the time being, the 17 members of the socialist Labour Party are holding themselves sulkily aloof for a year). While all this is going on, a stream of Eurocrats and their assistants will be at hand to fine-tune the European unification mechanism.

Mr Heath's Government did what it had to do in the time at its disposal, and it expects Britain's experience of empire, English pragmatism and a dash of inevitable chauvinism to make Britain very soon the leading power in the enlarged Community. It also expects that the same diplomacy that was exercised throughout the previous century to maintain the balance of power in Europe will now be equally skilfully used to ensure that its eight partners toe the line and serve Britain's interests. This applies not only to the day-to-day work of the Community and its further development but also to the many international issues that will probably arise, such as future relations with the USA, the Soviet Union and what is known as the 'Third World'. Or as the British would have it: to broaden the horizons and activities of the new EEC and make it generally more outward-looking.

In the countries of the old Community, any thoughts and ideals of a European attitude may well have long disappeared under the weight of economic controls and decisions imposed by the Eurocrats and given way to an increasingly widespread feeling of disappointment and disillusionment. Britain, on the other hand, can never be said to have suffered from even the slightest enthusiasm for Europe and is approaching the new venture only with feelings of unease. We may go even one step further and say that nearly every Briton is starting out on the new marriage with fear, doubts and reservations. Housewives see entry into the EEC as the green light for enormous increases in food prices. The nation as a whole believes that the EEC will interfere with sacred traditions and the British way of life, while Members of Parliament fear a loss of sovereignty in the Commons and the Lords. The business world, which has still not managed to put its own house in order, is worried about competition from duty-free Continental products flooding into the country. The trades unions are screaming blue murder over the complete freedom of movement of the Continental workforce and what they see as the inevitable influx of cheap foreign labour who will no longer obey a strike call and who will literally be taking the bread out of their fellow British workers' mouths. To hear the British talking amongst themselves at the moment, you might think that entry into the EEC will inevitably be followed by the Flood and that joining Europe marks the end of 2 000 years of British history and civilisation.

One thing at least is certain: the British are unwilling Europeans and will remain so for a long time to come.

Their ties are with the Antipodes, Australia and New Zealand, and, on the other side of the Atlantic, with North America and their former colonies in the United States and with Canada, which has the same Queen and belongs to the same Commonwealth. Despite apartheid and rebellion, they still have ties with South Africa and Rhodesia. Although Britain has not had an empire for a generation and only tiny fragments thereof remain, the British still cling to their community of English-speaking countries with its common language and culture. Every country and people on the continent of Europe is, however, completely excluded from this.

This is why the British do not really believe in the about-face to Europe which has now been imposed on them by the Government for reasons of economic necessity and political expediency. They do not have an in-depth understanding of Europeans, and the European way of thinking and acting is just as alien to the British as are their customs and daily life. The Government spent the whole year engaged in a desperate struggle to create the conditions for entry. This brought the Government only setbacks, unpopularity and open rebellion. The currency was changed to the Continental decimal system; weights and measures are going metric; temperature is no longer measured only in Fahrenheit but also in Centigrade; and, as on the Continent, train timetables use the 24-hour clock.

What had caused Harold Wilson's Labour Cabinet to fail was achieved by Mr Heath's Conservative Government with dogged persistence and only by the skin of its teeth: it managed to break the stranglehold of the trade unions and reform industrial relations. Despite the injection of thousands of millions of public money, trade and industry remained comparatively uncompetitive. The pound, moreover, became so vulnerable that it was allowed to float this summer, in other words find its right level — whereupon it continued its downward slide. The only record achieved by the end of the year has been 24 million working days lost through strikes, which is exactly twice the figure for the previous year.

The major turning-point which Britain will reach on New Year's Day has so far brought the country only painful changes. If this is the result of joining Europe, they say, then God protect us from our new friends. That is not exactly the right frame of mind in which to start out on a major new venture. In fact, as this year draws to a close, the British are not really in the right frame of mind to approach the Continent and to accept a subordinate role in a larger Community. They are approaching Europe full of pessimism and with their eyes wide open, and they will remain very uncomfortable bedfellows for a long time to come.