

'The island nation takes a step across the strait' from Die Welt

Caption: On 30 October 1971, German daily newspaper Die Welt comments on the favourable vote by the House of Commons which, two days earlier, approved, in principle, the accession of the United Kingdom to the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: Die Welt. Unabhängige Tageszeitung für Deutschland. ; Herausgeber KREMP, Herbert. 30.10.1971, n° 253. Hamburg: Die Welt. "Der Schritt von der Insel", auteur:Wirth, Fritz , p. 4.

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Last updated: 06/07/2016

The island nation steps across the strait

by Fritz Wirth
London

Is the EEC prepared for Britain?

Wilson commits political suicide

The 'Yes' to Europe from the 356 British Members of Parliament, regardless of whether they voted with enthusiasm or with regret, was not only an historic decision but also a logical one. Last night, Great Britain and Europe took a necessary and overdue step. A nation that, 30 years ago, did more to ensure the continued existence of Europe than any other Western European country has found a new political role and a new position.

This nation is smaller, poorer and less powerful than the one that once made history, but it is still a proud nation. It comes to Europe late after suffering several times the humiliation of a repeated sharp 'No', and yet it does not come in a hair shirt or as the 'sick man' of the Community, as certain thoughtless headlines may suggest.

For the British Parliament's 'Yes' to the EEC is not the last refuge for Britain from economic bankruptcy, it is first and foremost a political decision. It is significant because of its timing and its setting against the global political background. It has been pointed out that it coincides with the global political reorientation of the Great Powers and with the growing belief in an imminent military disengagement of the USA from Europe.

It is, therefore, not just Great Britain that has at last discovered the new role conjured up by Dean Acheson; at the same time, Europe — in one of the critical phases of its post-war history — has an opportunity for reorientation and self-renewal. Therefore, the 356 British MPs who said 'Yes' to Europe, some of them jeopardising their own political careers in so doing, deserve not only the respect but also the thanks of their new European partners.

The decision taken on 28 October will change not only Great Britain, it will fundamentally change the whole European Community. It would be a mistake just to talk about an 'enlargement' of the EEC or a 'second phase' of the Community. The result of the London decision is a new EEC. It means the end of that period in the development of the EEC that has been called 'Carolingian Europe'. This new Community, now enhanced by the accession of countries in the north of Europe, will not only have to change its old familiar structures, it will have to accommodate new balances of power and emphases. That will be an arduous and often painful process.

Nevertheless, there remains not just the question whether Britain is ready for the EEC but whether those in the political centres of the EEC are prepared for and tuned in to this development. For we have here a country joining Europe which has, hitherto, always taken a 'natural leading role' throughout its history, be it within the Empire or the Commonwealth, and which, even as an EEC latecomer, is hardly likely to submit to the European establishment's hegemonic 'claims to primogeniture'.

Edward Heath has been a European from the outset, but he will always remain a British European. In his political manifesto, his country's national sovereignty and the security of British national interests come high on the list. The man's concept of Europe is largely based on the Gaullist model of a Europe of nation states. Anyone who, on 28 October 1971, has dreams of a new wave of supranationalism in Europe, underestimates this man's sense of political realism.

Edward Heath leads a divided nation into Europe. If General de Gaulle once spoke of the danger of a 'Europe without a soul', it would be a mistake to believe that it would be Great Britain that would steer Europe away from such a danger by bringing with it spiritual qualities of that kind. For, in spite of all the

emotional pro-European words that have been heard in the House of Commons over the last six days, Europe should prepare itself for a sceptical, down-to-earth and pragmatic new partner.

This is not the entrance onto the political stage of some European patriots, enthusiasts or idealists. Even after the 'Yes' from 356 Members of Parliament, half the British nation still keeps both feet firmly on the island. This aversion to Europe has reasons and motives that are difficult for citizens of the continent to access or understand. It is easy and tempting to call it faint-hearted, yet anyone who condemns it can easily run the risk of being cast in the role of the Pharisee. Europe, too, as it was up to 28 October, had a painful birth. There is also the fact that no other European nation had so much historical tradition and psychological baggage to throw overboard as the British before stepping forth on this adventure.

Nor is this the time to pass judgement on the Labour Party, which is suffering a torment of contradictions and a severe crisis, or on the deplorable party-political manoeuvres of Harold Wilson. Over the last few months, the party and its leader have inflicted mortal wounds on themselves. However, the fact that 69 Labour Members of Parliament broke out of the political cul-de-sac that the party itself had created, gives a new meaning to Wilson's words that 28 October was not the end but just a beginning. Although, today, these 69 MPs may still be considered as rebels, tomorrow, if the truth be told, they will form the nucleus around which the process of regaining power for the party will be fulfilled. To achieve this, Labour has to recognise that 28 October was not the date when Great Britain was politically sold down the river to continental Europe and that the party must whisper 'Yes' to Europe, something they so stubbornly refused to do last night, when the party was summoned to stand up and make history.