

'Wilson's victory' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (7 June 1975)

Caption: Two days after the popular referendum on the United Kingdom's continued membership of the European Economic Community, German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung analyses the impact of the vote on UK politics.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Eick, Jürgen; Welter, Erich; Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Deschamps, Bruno; Fest, Joachim; Reißmüller, Johann Georg. 07.06.1975, Nr. 129. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Wilson's Sieg", auteur:Wiemann, Udo , p. 1.

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Wilson's triumph

by Udo Wiemann

Harold Wilson has won a battle. For him, it was probably the greatest victory of his political career. It was also a victory both for his country, which has now, after two decades of argument, come out conclusively in favour of Europe, and for his party, which has survived this conflict without being torn apart by it. Finally, it was a victory for the Prime Minister himself, for a 'No' to Europe might well at the same time have been a 'No' to Harold Wilson and a 'Yes' to his left-wing rival, Tony Benn. The Prime Minister might have had to start counting the days to the end of his term of office, but the verdict of the people has saved him from that.

Admittedly, this does not mean that all the votes cast for Europe were also cast in favour of Wilson. However, it was at the same time a vote for his Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, and against the Labour Left. It was also a vote for Wilson's predecessor, Edward Heath, who led the Conservative troops into battle, and for the band of Liberals under Jeremy Thorpe. Wilson succeeded in getting the troops of his political opponents to fight for him. He even forced them to accept the scenario for the battle, the referendum. This was a concept that he himself had once rejected as being an instrument alien to British constitutional practice. Virtually all the supporters of accession to the Community fought doggedly against the idea, but Wilson accepted it as a compromise, as a sticking plaster for the split in his own party that was so divided over Europe. The anti-Europeans seized on it as a weapon, but, for them, it turned out to be nothing more than a boomerang.

Wilson was also able to harness his European partners for his internal political game. By wringing from them the 'new negotiations', over and above the agreement reached two and a half years previously, he cast them in the role of accomplices in what was really an internal Labour Party power struggle. Their concessions formed the building blocks for his triumphal arch, but it was a dangerous, go-for-broke game to play: a few months ago, many people were still predicting a 'No' rather than a 'Yes' from this referendum.

If, as more than a few people believed, Wilson had devised and ratcheted up these 'new negotiations' essentially as a public relations exercise, while already fundamentally convinced that withdrawal would harm Great Britain, he would have been asking his country to take an incredible risk. Now, after all, it is not going to be just Heath — who signed the Treaty of Accession — but also Wilson who appears as the man who finally succeeded in joining the United Kingdom to the European Community, the man who knew how to convince his people of their place in the world. The fact that others helped him, not least his opponents, who in the end effectively wove for him his triumphal crown, will enhance rather than belittle his historical achievements. The great tactician can don the mantle of statesman.

His victory has left a certain amount of wreckage on the battlefield, some of which Britain will never be rid. In the aftermath of the referendum, Great Britain is not the same as it was, and the nature of the changes cannot yet be fully understood. The permanent transformation of party structures, for instance, will become evident only gradually over the next few months. The referendum called into question the power of Parliament to take decisions and, therefore, the very system of representative parliamentary democracy itself. Also totally undermined is the principle — so important for the credibility of politicians — that Ministers either have to accept a majority decision in the Cabinet or resign. Actually, Wilson suspended the principle of collective Cabinet responsibility only temporarily, but he cannot pull the reins tight again once they have gone slack. This will shortly turn out to be the case if the Prime Minister reshuffles his Cabinet. At least a few anti-Europeans will remain in his leadership circle, albeit occasionally in different posts. In Wilson's next government, therefore, there will be Ministers who are supposed to support a policy on a fundamental question that contradicts their most deeply held convictions. In other countries, that may not be unusual, but in Great Britain it has, hitherto, been unthinkable to prostitute oneself politically in such a way.

And yet, whatever might have gone wrong with such a risky venture as the referendum, Harold Wilson did in the end win a battle. The left wing of his party cannot be considered in any way to have been floored by this defeat. Further struggles are in store, mainly no doubt to do with the economy. The outcome of these struggles cannot be foreseen, but, for the moment, the result of the referendum cannot be denied. Great

Britain will remain a Member State of the Community. It is to be hoped that the Labour Government will play its full part in the Community of the Nine, will give it a fresh impetus and will fulfil, at least in part, the expectations that were pinned on the accession of this new Member State two and a half years ago.