

Parliamentary debates in the House of Commons (18 March 1975)

Caption: On 18 March 1975, British MPs hold a debate on the renegotiation of the initial conditions for the United Kingdom's membership of the European Communities, as reviewed earlier by the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson.

Source: Parliamentary Debates. House of Commons. Official Report. First session of the Forty-seventh Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Twenty-fourth year of the reign of her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Dir. of publ. Hansard. 1974-1975, No 888; fifth series. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office. "European Community (Renegotiation)", p. 1467-1480.

Copyright: Crown copyright is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office and the Queen's Printer for Scotland

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/parliamentary_debates_in_the_house_of_commons_18_mar_ch_1975-en-754cb57a-e728-4dbb-a7ed-b2b287a19ddo.html



Last updated: 22/12/2016

Parliamentary debates in the House of Commons (18 March 1975)

[...]

Mrs. Thatcher: Is the Prime Minister aware that we welcome his decision to recommend that we stay in the Common Market? We also welcome his statement that it has not been necessary to change a single clause in the basic treaties to carry out these negotiations, that they have all been completed within the existing terms and that, presumably, in due course of time there will be other improvements also within the existing terms, in the normal course of events. Is he aware that we also welcome his statement that practically all Commonwealth countries wish us to stay in the Common Market and his statement that the special relationship of this country with the United States will not be changed in any way but that it is his intention to strengthen it?

May I put to the right hon. Gentleman one main question? He was quite clear that this is the recommendation of Her Majesty's Government. Do the normal principles of collective responsibility apply to that decision? That would be the normal interpretation of a statement so clear and unequivocal, that Her Majesty's Government had decided to recommend the British people to vote for staying in the Community. I think that it will be a great pity if the one clear statement of the Prime Minister turns out to be unclear. If he does not intend to carry out the normal principles of collective responsibility, will he spell out the criteria which have decided him to depart from those principles on this occasion, so that we may know when it will occur again?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. She welcomed the fact, I think I heard her say, that we have not in these negotiations, these very fundamental changes in the terms, had to ask for any changes in the treaties. Surely that information was not new to her. It was in the White Paper that we published in April of last year, so she must have been aware of that. We said then that we hoped that it would not be necessary to ask for changes in the treaties. What in fact we have done is changed the 1971 terms without changes in the treaty, although, as I have said today – I also mentioned it last week, I think – we have given notice of the possible need to ask for treaty changes; for example, in respect of steel and even possibly in respect of New Zealand.

I welcome the fact that the right hon. Lady has acknowledged what she knows to be a fact, as the House does, about our relations with the United States. She will, of course, take full collective responsibility for the lower ebb of relations with the United States before we improved them last year. Presumably – [HON. MEMBERS: “Cheap.”] There is no doubt about that, and it has been made clear publicly by the United States Government in recent weeks.

As for the right hon. Lady's question about collective responsibility, I announced in January the policy that I intended to follow on this unique matter, on a matter on which not only this party has divisions but the Conservative Party has divisions and, indeed, all major parties –

Mr. Donald Stewart: No.

The Prime Minister: Expecting, as the Latin lesson says, the answer “No” I said that all “major” parties had divisions in them. This is true, and the same applies to many families and households in the country.

I announced that this would be the position. But the last person that I am going to listen to on collective responsibility is the right hon. Lady.

[...]

Mr. Prior: Why do you not answer?

The Prime Minister: I have answered. [Interruption.] I can understand their sensitivity on this, when no one had the guts to dissociate himself when the right hon. Gentleman was in charge of the Government but

only when his back was turned –

Mr. Prior: Answer the question.

The Prime Minister: – including the right hon. Gentleman. Remembering when the cock crowed for the right hon. Gentleman, I would say that at least he had the decency to abstain from his present Leader about a fortnight later.

With regard to the question that the right hon. Lady has put – [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] – have answered it. I answered this in January. I said that I was agreeable to this agreement to differ in the unique circumstances of this referendum. The referendum is unique, as the right hon. Lady herself has said. I believe that it is right in the circumstances, so that a fair and free debate can take place in the country on the most important decision that we have had to take in this generation.

Mr. Thorpe: May I first welcome this statement? May I congratulate the Prime Minister on the consistency that he has always shown on European matters? Is he aware that when, in the early part of 1967, he said that he would not take "No" for an answer, we knew that that was exactly what he meant – no more and no less? Would he, in fairness to himself, confirm that the words he used were "I have given the Cabinet's view."? May we take that at its face value or any other value? May we, as those who agree with the Prime Minister, wish him well in obtaining the full-hearted consent of the Labour movement? Finally, since the Prime Minister rightly attaches importance both to the sovereignty and to the representative nature of Parliament, if the recommendation which he is rightly and enthusiastically pressing upon the British people is resisted, will he not find it very difficult to remain in office?

The Prime Minister: First, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he said about consistency. In 1961, when Mr. Macmillan – [*Laughter.*] Yes, he is going to get it now. When Mr. Macmillan said that they were applying for entry because it was the only way that they could find out what the terms were, we all said that we would judge by the terms. In 1967 we were told after we had visited six countries that if we wanted to know the terms we should apply. We said that we were applying for that very reason. That is what we said in our manifesto in 1970. That is what the Conservative Party said in 1970. The Conservatives' mandate was to negotiate, no more, no less, and they were not going to do it without the full-hearted consent of the people.

We have been consistent here. I regret that the right hon. Gentleman is falling below his usual standards – or his brief writers are – when he refers to the statement about taking "No" for an answer. That was made specifically, I think, on 25th May 1967, but I should have to check that –

Mr. Thorpe: It was the 17th.

The Prime Minister: The 17th: I am obliged. That was said in the context that day or the day before of President de Gaulle's decision to veto any negotiations. It was on the question of the veto that I said that we would not take "No" for an answer. But no one at that time would have said that he would negotiate and get in whatever the terms. Even the Tory Party never said that. They very nearly succeeded in doing it, but they never said that they would accept whatever terms were offered – and no more did I. I now believe that the terms have been sufficiently improved.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about Cabinet judgment. Yes, Sir, this is a Government decision. Not all Government decisions are taken unanimously – as we now know from the right hon. Lady. She did not agree with anything that was done in those days. I have undertaken that when my right hon. Friends have had time to consider their position and when we have discussed the matter a little further, any one who wish publicly to dissociate themselves shall identify themselves – if they do not, I will – in order that the position can be clarified. I gave that assurance in January. I repeat it now.

Mr. Donald Stewart: Is the Prime Minister aware that in the coming battle on the referendum he will be leading a coalition of the Labour, Tory and Liberal Parties and that my party in Scotland will be fighting

against that coalition? [HON. MEMBERS: "Some of them."] Is he also aware that the temporary triviality announced today could have been arranged within the present Common Market set-up and that it is simply ground bait until the referendum has taken place and was quite unimportant within the context of the Treaty of Rome? Does he accept that in Scotland there will be great dissatisfaction that nothing has been done on fishing, steel and energy, but that primarily we shall fight this on the issue of sovereignty, because we are a people who know what it means to have lost our sovereignty?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman's assertion that I am leading a coalition of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Parties is as offensive to the Leaders of the Liberal and Conservative Parties as it is to me. In fact, of all the coalitions, judging by the various things that have been said at elections, the various ways that votes have been won and the variegated membership, there is no coalition so diversified in the history of this country as that led by the hon. Gentleman.

Regarding the hon. Gentleman's other point, this could not have been got easily. It required extremely difficult and tough negotiations.

Mr. Ashley: The issue at present is not the cynicism or, indeed, the jealousy of hon. Members of the Opposition about these negotiations. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that Ministers and, indeed, back benchers on the Government side of the House who have been demanding better terms and are now presented with much better terms must be the most consummate contortionists if they are now to present the case for pulling out of Europe?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he has said. For my part, I did not notice the appearance of jealousy on the faces of hon. Members opposite – a little cynicism perhaps, yes, behind their twittering; but I did not notice the jealousy in particular.

Mr. Powell: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that, whatever view may be taken of the details of the statement he has made, the people of this country will not, over time, submit to be taxed otherwise than by the authority of this House, nor to live under laws which are not made by this House?

The Prime Minister: I did begin by saying that while I was setting out the terms achieved in detail, which matter to a great many of us and to a great many outside the House, some right hon. and hon. Members would decide their attitude on broader considerations. Everyone knows where the right hon. Gentleman has stood on these matters.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Roy Jenkins): And on other matters.

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend has said – and on other matters. I do not think that those who take the view that virtually whatever the terms we ought to be in or whatever the terms we ought to be out will be very much affected by these terms. But many of us, including myself, take a very serious view of the question of the terms. That was why I spelled them out to the House.

On what I know is an anxiety of the right hon. Gentleman, I would say this to him. I am sure that his deep studies of this question will not lead him necessarily to take a different view. I believe that there is much more assertion of political power now than there was a few years ago. We saw it particularly in Dublin last week. Many criticisms have been made by many of us, including myself, about the irresponsible – in the best parliamentary sense of that word – powers of certain of the institutions, but these are now coming much more under a degree of control as a result of the initiatives taken at the Heads of Government conferences. The political element is now much more powerful than it was a year ago.

Mr. Ashton: Does my right hon. Friend remember that in 1972 we had literally dozens and dozens of divisions in the House over several weeks on the issues put before us by the then Conservative Government? Will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that every one of those divisions has been resolved and that we have no disputes now like those we had then?

The Prime Minister: On that occasion we voted primarily against the terms, which have been very much improved. But I said then, and so did many of my hon. Friends, including some who were quite strong pro-Marketeers on the principle as well as even on the terms, that – as we had made clear in the 1960s – had we done the negotiations and got terms we considered suitable, we would have legislated in a way that was very different from the way in which that was done in order to put the decisions on the statute book. They have been put on and now ratified by various orders, and many of these divisions are, therefore, in a sense, dealing with what was relevant in 1971. We shall continue at all points – indeed, we are now doing it – examining the legislation to see whether there is any need for change in the legislation, either on individual items or, where appropriate on powers.

Mr. Tugendhat: Will the Prime Minister tell the House, for the sake of clarity, how many members of the Cabinet, and who they are, have supported his position, and how many have opposed it, and who they are?

The Prime Minister: There is a Cabinet decision that I have announced. I have undertaken that after a few more discussions I shall see that the House is informed as to who they are. We never had very much information about the number of times the right hon. Lady dissociated herself.

Mr. Michael Stewart: Is my right hon. Friend aware that although the Opposition will make certain ritual noises of disparagement, they must be aware that the improvements that he and his colleagues have secured are substantial and of great benefit to the country? Further, taking up the question asked by the hon. Member for the City of London and Westminster, South (Mr. Tugendhat), will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that in view of the constitutional interest in the agreement to differ, which most of us believe to be a sensible arrangement, the House will be informed of the number and names of the dissidents before we all read them in the newspapers?

The Prime Minister: That is something that can never be undertaken by any Government or any party. But I am glad that my right hon. Friend supports what has been said, and I thank him for what he said about the negotiations. I hope that he will not be too critical of the Conservative Party, because a party that has not a single policy on which its members can agree, and the members of which have dissociated themselves from every policy that it had, can do no more than make ritual noises of disparagement.

Mr. John Davies: Does the Prime Minister realise that the last 12 months have seen serious damage to the reputation of this country in Europe as a result of all that he is now claiming to be so beneficial? Will he now make it his business to repair that damage and to set this country back in the councils of Europe to where it was when he took over the Government?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is quite wrong about the last year. Indeed, the Community is now a great deal more realistic in the way that it operates. I certainly do not intend to restore the position of Britain in the Community to what it was when the right hon. Gentleman was the Minister responsible, because we do not grovel before the other side; we fight for British interests.

Mr. Roy Hughes: Will the Prime Minister appreciate that there is no enthusiasm for this venture among the ordinary people of this country who form the heart of the British Labour movement? Would it not now be the decent thing to do, before any recommendation is made, first to present these renegotiations to the annual conference of the Labour Party, particularly bearing in mind all the fudging on this issue that has taken place in that body in recent years? Or are the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary now in the hope that they might do very well from Tory voters in the south-east of England?

The Prime Minister: I recognise, of course, the authority of my hon. Friend to speak for all the ordinary people in Britain. For myself I prefer to await the result of the referendum. It will give them a rather more articulate form of expressing their individual views. Of course, there will be a party conference on this question, but my hon. Friend will be aware, because perhaps he was involved in this, that there are a number of leading figures in this party, of whom I am one, who for very many years found the decisions of the party conference extremely irksome, and I am sure that he did, too, as did most people on the centre or left of the party at that time.

Mr. Costain: Does the Prime Minister appreciate that we on the Opposition side can see the sub-committees of the Cabinet sitting there on the Front Bench? Does he appreciate that we realise the difficulties he has in getting unanimity in his party? The charade which has gone on over renegotiation is an example of that. However, will he be honest to the country and agree that what he has announced only confirms what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Rippon) said during the original negotiations – that we would get better terms when we were in but that we would first have to join?

The Prime Minister: I do not agree with the hon. Member. We have got better terms because we asked for them, demanded them and pressed for them. I believe that these terms could have been got in 1971. I do not agree with him and I do not believe that any Heads of Government in Europe would agree with him either.

Mr. William Hamilton: Is my right hon. Friend aware that there are large numbers on this side of the House who always thought that he would do it? Can my right hon. Friend assure us, on a more serious note, that the powers that are being spelled out for the National Enterprise Board and the Scottish Development Agency will in no way be inhibited in the immediate or long-term future? Will he further assure the House that if the referendum result should go against the Government this will in no way soften and override the decision of the Government now reached?

The Prime Minister: As for my hon. Friend's opening remarks, praise from him is praise indeed, even if he went on to suggest that it was not on a serious note. As for my hon. Friend's assertion that this was always likely or, as he would think, certain, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I can confirm that even a month or two months ago when we were not getting our terms these matters were very much in doubt. My right hon. Friend and I agreed and so warned the EEC that we would have no alternative but to recommend the House, the party and the people to reject continuing membership. Even last week there were times in Dublin – [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish."] Conservative Members are so conditioned to accepting everything put in front of them that they do not appreciate these matters. My hon. Friend is quite wrong in suggesting that until very recently there was no question of the outcome.

As for the National Enterprise Board and the Scottish Development Agency, and so on, we see no threat in the powers or the attitudes of the Community to what is proposed. On all matters affecting industry, trade, regional development, steel and the rest we are conditioned by the requirement, which is reasonable and which we have always tried to observe, that we do not use any of these methods, machineries or policies for giving us an unfair advantage in international trade, for example, by subsidy or price fixation. We were tightly held on these matters as members of EFTA. The restrictions in EFTA were very tight, and rightly so, and I understand that the EFTA convention with the EEC requires it to observe EEC rules on the question of internal methods which might distort competition between nations.

Mr. Marten: As one who has always taken the broader view to which the Prime Minister referred, and who did not attach very great importance to the fact that he was trying to renegotiate, may I ask whether he agrees that the political control and flexibility which he said had increased in the recent year or two is very much related to the change of personalities of the leaders within the Nine, and that, equally, if these personalities should change we could well go back to the situation of previous years? Will the Prime Minister reflect upon one aspect in his manifesto which, as he knows, I carry very close to my heart, that if the referendum says we stay in – and I do not want to argue that point now – it will be right for the Government to play a full part in the development of a new and wider Europe? In that context will the Prime Minister say clearly whether the Government are in favour of a directly elected European Parliament, and how is political union defined?

The Prime Minister: There may be something in the hon. Member's point. There have been changes of personalities. Seven of the nine Heads of Government have changed in the last 12 months and there have been changes in the political complexion of member States in that time. The majority of the Nine are either Social Democrat or Democratic Socialist led, or are coalitions involving such parties.

That makes some difference. We must guard against retrogressive and reactionary changes within the

leadership of the Nine, although that lies within our control only in the case of one country.

On the question of the European Assembly and elections, I refer the hon. Member to the statement made in the communiqué issued after the Paris meeting in which our position was entirely reserved on all these matters until after the referendum.

Mr. Marten: That is the point.

Mr. Gwynfor Evans: In renegotiation of the terms, was any consideration given to the relationship between Wales and Brussels? Since the Common Market has now decided to establish a permanent office in Wales and to put it under the charge of Mr. Gwyn Morgan, a past assistant general secretary of the Labour Party, should not Wales now have an office in Brussels?

The Prime Minister: It is entirely appropriate that the Commission should recognise all the important areas, the individual regions, within the United Kingdom. However, I heard nothing said in any of the talks in which I was involved – I do not know whether my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary heard anything – saying that they wanted to negotiate directly with the hon. Member's party or with anyone else who has been an elected Member of Parliament for Wales. They were dealing with the duly constituted Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

On the hon. Member's other question, he knows, especially in relation to internal matters of trade and industry and so on, that these are very much part and parcel of what we have been discussing and on which in due course we shall be legislating in relation to devolution.

Mr. Skinner: Does my right hon. Friend appreciate that it comes somewhat ill from him to make rather snide comments about the Labour Party and the National Executive Committee in responding to the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport (Mr. Hughes), especially when we take into account that it was a joint meeting of the Cabinet and the NEC that drew up the manifesto to decide the terms? If that is the case, why did my right hon. Friend not report back to the NEC and ensure that, before any decisions were made by the Cabinet, this joint meeting also declared itself and upheld the Labour Party conference? But then it might not be my right hon. Friend's last word.

The Prime Minister: When my hon. Friend has had about 20 years' experience of the national executive and conference he will speak with even more authority than he does at the present time. I have never been in doubt about my hon. Friend's credibility on almost any subject, but he must realise that many of those who have taken exactly the same view as he takes on most issues had to spend years of their life fighting against conference decisions and the executive, and fighting for their rights as Members of Parliament – and my hon. Friend knows exactly to whom I am referring – over many years. I do not think, therefore, that he can stand on his head and say that the conference and the executive should now be regarded as respectable because they are a little nearer now to his way of thinking than the thinking of those who fought against them in the past.

I certainly do not accept what my hon. Friend says. He will be glad to know that I have already talked to the general secretary of the party and that there is to be a special meeting of the national executive committee. I am sure that he is not suggesting that I should not have made a statement to Parliament before I met the national executive. There is to be this meeting of the executive committee next week and we have been discussing the advancement of the projected date of the annual conference. I hope he will be very pleased with all that.

Mr. Hurd: Could the Prime Minister help the House in a very real practical difficulty? When the list of dissenting Ministers is published, are we to take it that, over the range of EEC subjects, statements, letters and answers to hon. Members from those Ministers are worthless as statements of Government policy?

The Prime Minister: I am always anxious to help the House and hon. Gentlemen. I will make it my business to deal with the exact question of the conduct of business in respect of such matters when I give the

information that the hon. Gentleman is seeking.

Mr. Luard: Will the Prime Minister accept that, given the substantial success of the Government in securing terms meeting those set out in the Labour Party manifesto, large numbers within the Labour movement will welcome the statement that he has just made as being the only decision that is fully consistent with both the words and the spirit of the manifesto, and will he agree that, provided the British people now decide that Britain should stay in the Common Market, this will not only provide this country with an opportunity of playing a more important rôle on the world stage than otherwise would be the case but will also provide an opportunity for the Labour Party to play a more important role in building democratic Socialism in Europe?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and of course I respect his deep knowledge of and interest in these things. I am sure that I would be the last person to suggest that our influence in world affairs depends solely upon this particular aspect. It depends to a very high degree on our transatlantic relationship and it depends upon our Commonwealth relationship, and I am also happy to feel that relations between this country and the Soviet Union are very much recovered from what has happened in the past.

Several Hon. Members *rose* –

Mr. Speaker: I would remind hon. Members that there is to be a two-day debate on this subject immediately after the Easter Recess.

[...]