

'Wilson's game' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (21 June 1974)

Caption: On 21 June 1974, the German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung criticises the political strategy of the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and questions the true determination of the United Kingdom to remain in the Common Market.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Eick, Jürgen; Welter, Erich; Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Deschamps, Bruno; Fest, Joachim; Reißmüller, Johann Georg. 21.06.1974, Nr. 140. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Wilson's Spiel", auteur:Wiemann, Udo , p. 1.

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Wilson's game

by Udo Wiemann

Europeans in the nine Member States of the European Community are beginning to breathe easily again. After the cold shower that the British Foreign Secretary, James Callaghan, administered to his counterparts on 1 April in the form of a threat to withdraw from the Community, warm rain once again seems to be thawing the ice between London and Brussels. Callaghan rediscovered a much-praised engaging tone when, on 1 June in Luxembourg, he presented Labour's 'shopping list' for its 're-negotiation' of membership terms. And the Agriculture Minister, Frederick Peart, who this week at the same venue spelled out British ideas on European agricultural policy, was later able to read flattering reports that he had, by and large, pulled his punches. Prime Minister Wilson's visit to Bonn also seems to have had a calming effect.

These various reactions could almost suggest that the clamour about 'renegotiation' in the Labour Party may have been little more than theatrics, that the Government, in the three and a half months it has been in power, has quickly come to its senses and is now concerned to avoid withdrawal, with its disastrous consequences. And it may indeed be that the views of particular British ministers have actually changed. However, optimistic judgments of this kind disregard the fact that, for Wilson, Britain's relationship with Europe is not, or not primarily, a question of good sense but rather a question of power.

There was once no more eloquent a spokesman than the current Prime Minister for the view that Britain belongs in the European Community, that only there does it have a future. Wilson it was who, in January 1967 in Strasbourg, acknowledged the historical importance of the sought-for accession and brushed financial considerations aside as petty. And Wilson it was who persuaded the House of Commons a few months later to vote by an unusually large majority to reapply for membership, an application that his successor, Edward Heath, was finally able to push through after the death of de Gaulle. That is why it would be surprising if the benefits of British membership were no longer apparent to him. His 'basic position' is more positive than negative.

Yet for Wilson, this question is not and never was primarily about the national interest. His sharp about-turn is more a matter of tactics. It can be traced back to his fear of losing the party leadership after the shattering and unexpected election defeat in mid-1970. His change of position was part of a game of poker, in which he was playing for power and for the favour of the strengthened left wing of his party, whose ideological hostility towards the 'capitalist' Common Market was increasingly being supported by the centre from traditional xenophobic motives, a left wing which was making effective use of the accession issue to bolster its hitherto weak position. Wilson took a leftward shift, and today — for the sake of party unity — he must more than ever take the views of the left into account.

To stay intact, the Labour Party — split over Europe — has up to now avoided taking any clear decision. Its 'renegotiation' line is a compromise. While some party members hope that this line will lead to conflict and hence withdrawal, others expect that Britain's one and a half year union with Europe will be confirmed after an accommodation with its partners. Similarly, Wilson's amicable declaration of intent, to the effect that his aim in going into the negotiations is to come to an arrangement with the Community, is in no way yet a decision. For what else could the Cabinet have decided to do? Negotiate with the intention of quitting the Community afterwards? Why then negotiate in the first place? A Cabinet resolution to opposite effect would have amounted to a decision, thus creating the danger of a split. However, Wilson cannot afford that at the moment. He has to envisage going to the country soon and he needs to summon up all his forces for an election victory.

For that reason, the question of accession will only indirectly be an election issue, albeit a very important one. Wilson is not putting up for debate whether Britain should turn its back on Europe or not. He is rather confronting voters with another alternative, which he outlined immediately after his return from Bonn, in demagogic terms: who should have the final decision over entry — the British people, if the Labour Government thinks this the right course, or the men in Brussels? Wilson is thus seeking to make political capital out of a plebiscitary conception of democracy. He is pushing the referendum — an instrument,

foreign to the British constitution, that he rejected for many years but now welcomes — into centre-stage in the debate.

So, the game of poker with Europe continues. No one knows for sure how it will end. Optimism encouraged by emollient words is premature. Scepticism is certainly in order given the still not fully resolved power struggle within the Labour Party, in which trade unions hostile to Europe have a decisive say. Experience teaches us that little reliance can be placed on Wilson's word.