

'A political choice for Great Britain' from Le Monde (12 February 1970)

Caption: On 12 February 1970, French daily newspaper Le Monde comments on the main points in the first white paper published by the British Government on the possible implications for the United Kingdom of its accession to the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. FAUVET, Jacques. 12.02.1970, n° 7 802; 27e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Un choix politique pour la Grande-Bretagne", p. 1.

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A political choice for Great Britain

The White Paper that Mr Harold Wilson's Government has just published on the consequences for Great Britain of possible entry into the EEC could be accused of adding to the list of questions rather than addressing the issues that are exercising public opinion in Britain. But that would be to underestimate the difficulty of the task entrusted to the experts.

The Paper is already coming under fire for giving weapons to the virulent, if not very numerous, opponents of the opening of negotiations with the Six. The 'anti-Common Market' committee, under the impassioned leadership of former Labour Minister, Douglas Jay, has lost no time in issuing a press release stating, on the basis of the estimates in the White Paper itself, that to join the Brussels club would be to impose on British families an 'intolerable' increase in their expenditure: they point, for example, to a projected increase of about 25 % in the price of food, which would lead to an increase of 5 to 6 % in the cost of living. There is an argument likely to give not only housewives but also many economists pause for thought in a country which, since the heroic days when Richard Cobden campaigned to abolish import duties on foreign corn, has deliberately built its industrial prosperity on cheap foodstuffs.

It is easy enough to argue in return that, while it is possible, in broad terms, to assess the, generally unfavourable, short-term consequences of Great Britain's adopting the Community's agricultural regulations as they stand today, it is impossible to assess the advantages in the long term — judged on the contrary to be very substantial — that entry into a 'market of 300 million people' would bring to British industry. In these conditions, the White Paper inevitably makes unattractive reading, at least at first sight.

The taxpayer learns from it that if the United Kingdom were already part of the Common Market, it would have had to pay into the European Agricultural Fund a sum that 'would not have been less than 150 million pounds and that would not have exceeded 670 million pounds.' Likewise, it is not very encouraging to learn, in a country that until recently suffered from a quasi-permanent deficit in its external finances, that entry into the EEC would carry a balance-of-payments penalty of between 100 and 1 100 million pounds a year. These figures, it is true, leave so much scope for judgement that it can be asked whether they have any predictive value at all ...

But that is probably not the main purpose of this document. What is important to note is that the government experts, in placing such a broad range on the probable cost of joining the EEC, are clearly indicating that, for them, the terms of membership have not been fixed in advance. As Henri Pierre reports, Mr Wilson's intention is for Her Majesty's negotiators to engage in discussions with the Six from a position of strength. Is that to say that, in the minds of UK leaders, the die are not already cast and that we could, as some commentators are suggesting, witness a spectacular reversal of official policy?

Apparently not. The White Paper provides a valuable pointer in this regard where it says that, over and above the arguments of an economic nature in favour of joining — increased outlets for businesses, probable faster GNP growth, etc. — there is another of a political nature of which sight must not be lost: it is by entering the Community that Great Britain will have the greatest chance of influencing the course of world events once again.