Caption: In his memoirs, former British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, recalls the decisions adopted by the Nine following the first Dublin European Council (10-11 March 1975) before listing the results of the British referendum of 5 June 1975 on the country's continued membership of the European Communities.


Copyright: (c) Weidenfeld and Nicolson and Michael Joseph Ltd

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/harold_wilson_final_term-en-d60356ee-fefb-4b8c-854d-ab0ae90bc069.html

Publication date: 13/09/2013
Harold Wilson, Final Term

[...]

But before the Government could make a recommendation to Parliament and the country, we had to face one further negotiating hurdle, the meeting of the European Council in Dublin on 10-11 March.

The preparations made by the Irish Government were admirable. Consultation between Governments had rejected the idea of a continuing secretariat for Council meetings, as the French had wanted. Each host country would make all the necessary arrangements.

[...]

Unlike the procedure followed at the Paris Meeting, the Taoiseach proposed that the first item should be the British renegotiations. A great deal of work had to be done, through bilateral meetings, by Foreign Ministers meeting separately, by officials, and not least by the President of the Commission, who played a leading part in the detailed negotiations, and indeed produced at critical times a series of compromise proposals to get over a problem of substance or a drafting difficulty.

I was therefore asked to lead off with a statement on the progress made, and the outstanding problems we had to solve. My statement raised three issues, the Budget, New Zealand, and a specific problem which had risen on the steel industry. I made clear that apart from these Britain would raise any other new issues before the referendum. This last remark was widely welcomed.

On the Budget I expressed pleasure at the progress made by the Commission which was moving towards a GDP-related solution.

On New Zealand I stressed our need for reasonably-priced dairy products and lamb. As I later pointed out, our EEC partners’ objection to Britain’s imports of lamb from New Zealand was not that they wanted to keep their own lamb prices up — they produced very little. They wanted to protect their high-priced beef.

On steel we had the problem that while the Government had to control prices and capacity in our publicly-owned steel industry, the private steel-makers under EEC rules were free of all controls. So when the British Steel Board, in the interests of efficiency, were closing down plants, perhaps in areas of high unemployment, private industry could open up in competition there or elsewhere. There was, in fact, a proposal for a new private steel works which was regarded as highly provocative by the Board and the steel unions.

[...]

The negotiations on these items continued until very late on Tuesday 11 March, particularly on the Budget. But thanks mainly to President Ortoli’s indefatigable production of increasingly helpful drafts, agreement was finally reached on terms acceptable to us. Interpreting it in United Kingdom terms, a whole set of criteria was laid down for the assessment of a refund if in any year our Budget contributions were to go significantly beyond what would be fair in relation to our share of the total Community GNP. The criteria covered GNP per head, the real rate of national growth, an assessment under the ‘own resources’ rule excessive in relation to the share of Community GNP, and a general rule relating to ‘net potential foreign exchange liability’, that is an excess of contributions over direct receipts, as a result of the operations of the Community’s budget mechanism.

On steel, as we had some reason to hope, there has proved in practice to have been no problem: we knew as well as our partners that other countries were taking this problem in their stride without challenge.

On New Zealand a reasonably satisfactory outcome was reached including improved arrangements for continued access for her dairy products after 1977. But in practice what we thought we had gained has since proved illusory. The market has been squeezed, and in fact New Zealand herself soon became more
interested in moving up towards EEC prices than in continuing to supply large quantities to Britain at the favourable prices to which we were accustomed.

[...]

On 12 March I reported to Parliament on the Dublin discussions, and — an unusual practice — arranged for Hansard to print the relevant statements agreed by the conference.

Mrs Margaret Thatcher had by this time been elected Leader of the Conservative Party. She asked me if I would use my personal authority 'to recommend we stay in Europe'. I replied that the Government’s decision would be made before Easter. James Callaghan and I had not at that time reported to Cabinet, which we did the following day. (On a personal note, that was the only time in nearly eight years that I was ever called out of Cabinet by my wife: it was to inform me that our daughter-in-law had had twin daughters.) Cabinet further met on Monday 17 March to finalize the statement for the House.

The recommendations of the Foreign Secretary and myself were accepted by a substantial proportion of the Cabinet. Since it would be necessary to announce the names of those who would be free to dissociate themselves in the referendum campaign, I counted heads, declared a majority in favour and asked each of the others if he (or she) would wish to dissociate publicly. Seven did — Michael Foot, Barbara Castle, Eric Varley, Willie Ross, Tony Benn, Peter Shore and John Silkin. Sixteen Cabinet ministers were in favour. This was not the result of having packed the Cabinet with a pro-Market majority a year earlier. A quick calculation I made after the decision — which I mentioned to Cabinet — was that on all the facts known to me in 1974, twelve would have been assumed to be anti-Market, nine in favour, with James Callaghan and myself agnostics, depending on the terms we got in the renegotiations.

[...]

The national and provincial press were in favour of a 'Yes' vote almost without exception. Ministers were of course free to campaign for the side of their choice, subject to two rules I laid down. The first was: no personal attacks. At one stage Tony Benn and Roy Jenkins got into a public brawl, and were promptly instructed to stick to issues: no personalities. Second, ministers were told that the 'agreement to differ' ended on 6 June, the day following the poll. From 6 June full collective responsibility would apply on EEC as on all other issues. This was fully observed, and on the day when the results were declared I was happy to see Tony Benn on TV handsomely accepting the verdict.

[...]

On Thursday 5 June the country voted. It was a high poll, shown the next day to be 64.5 per cent of the electorate, only 8.3 per cent lower than in the October 1974 General Election. Of an electorate of 40,086,677, 25,848,654 voted. The figures, announced from the Albert Hall by Sir Philip Allen (now Lord Allen of Abbeydale), the National Returning Officer, were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOR membership</th>
<th>17,378,581 (67.2%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGAINST</td>
<td>8,470,073 (32.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Majority | 8,908,508 |
| Spoilt papers | 54,540 |

The figures for individual countries were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>FOR</th>
<th>AGAINST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>14,918,009</td>
<td>6,812,052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>869,135</td>
<td>472,071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>1,332,186</td>
<td>948,039</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The turn-out for England was 64.6 per cent; for Wales 66.7 per cent; for Scotland, 61.7 per cent; and for Northern Ireland, 47.4 per cent. The low figure for Ulster probably reflected the fact that the Republic of Ireland was a member country and might also gain economic advantages in her trade with Britain at Northern Ireland’s expense.

What was remarkable, as the results were declared county by county, was the almost uniform pattern shown everywhere. Every county recorded a majority for membership, with the exception of the Western Isles and Orkney and Shetland. (The last two, of course, are much closer geographically to Norway than to the Scottish mainland, and Norway’s referendum had led to her failure to enter the EEC.)

I had heard the results at Chequers and returned to Downing Street in the early evening. To quote The Times:

At 6.30 p.m. Mr Wilson stood on the steps of 10 Downing Street to make his historic announcement. He said:

'The verdict has been given by a vote with a bigger majority than has been received by any Government in any general election. Nobody in Britain or the wider world should have any doubt about its meaning. It was a free vote, without constraint, following a free democratic campaign conducted constructively and without rancour. It means that fourteen years of national argument are over. It means that all those who have had reservations about Britain’s commitment should now join wholeheartedly with our partners in Europe, and our friends everywhere to meet the challenge confronting the whole nation.'

In its leading article The Times commented: 'Mr Wilson found in the referendum the answer, perhaps the only answer, to the problems of getting Labour consent to Britain staying in Europe. He has shown great political skill and insight.'

True or not, it was a matter of some satisfaction that an issue which threatened several times over thirteen years to tear the Labour movement apart had been resolved fairly and finally, despite the anti-EEC vote at the Special Conference and the spread of Labour MP’s votes in the Commons vote, and that from 6 June, as I had asked months before, all that had divided us in that great controversy was put behind us.