

Address given by Harold Wilson in the House of Commons (19 July 1965)

Caption: In an address to the House of Commons on 19 July 1965, the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, expresses his hope that a rapid solution will be found to the internal crisis affecting the European Community and reaffirms the importance of political unity in Europe.

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But I must make reference to another aspect of European affairs, namely, the strains that have recently developed with the European Economic Community. I hope that we can all agree on this ; that no one in Britain, and certainly not the Government, can find any cause for rejoicing in the situation that has developed within the EEC in the past two or three weeks. We have had many debates in this House about whether Britain should join the EEC - or, more precisely, about the terms on which Britain could join the EEC - but, whatever the disagreements, and there have been disagreements within parties at least as much as between them, I think that we are all united in one belief, which is that the success of the Community itself is vitally important for the countries concerned and for Europe as a whole.

I have had occasion in the past to quote the Labour Party's statement, endorsed by an overwhelming majority at the Brighton Conference three years ago. I think it right today, in this present set-up, to remind the House of the opening words of that statement, because they express the views of Her Majesty's Government today as surely as they expressed our views as a Party in 1962. The statement opened :

"The Labour Party regards the European Community as a great and imaginative conception. It believes that the coming together of the six nations which have in the past so often been torn by war and economic rivalry is, in the context of Western Europe, a step of great significance. It is aware that the influence of this new Community on the world will grow and that it will be able to play - for good or for ill - a far larger part in the shaping of events in the 1960s and 1970s than its individual member States could hope to play alone."

Our arguments were not about whether we wished to see the Community succeed, but about the question whether Britain could or could not join it on the particular terms open to us without perhaps fatally compromising our essential national and Commonwealth interests. We had those arguments, perhaps we shall have them again, but, at any rate, the fact that we have had these arguments about the conditions in which Britain could join, should not detract from our earnest hope that the present difficulties in Europe will be overcome on terms acceptable to the member countries. It is not for us to take sides or to express opinions, still less to exploit this serious difficulty which has arisen for advancing a particular conception or a particular doctrine about European unity or about British participation. I hope no one is going to start saying, "Ah, well, because there are five who hold one view and the others hold another view, we can take advantage of the split between the five and the one." I hope no one will say that an assertion has been made that supranationality is unacceptable. That fits in with our doctrines, which most of us hold, against a supranational solution in political and defence matters. I think we can be most helpful by not attempting to take sides but by using such influence as we have to make sure that our European friends settle this problem amongst themselves on terms acceptable to them, because by so doing they will not only be helping themselves but peace in Europe.

Our position remains, too, that means should be found as soon as possible to begin the dialogue between EFTA and the Common Market countries with a view to reducing and ultimately ending the economic and political damage which results from this costly and far from economic division of Europe.

There is no immediate issue of our being asked or being able to join the Common Market, and so we do not need to argue at this moment about the terms. What all of us agree about is the need to get a single trading market for the whole of Europe, first covering the countries of the Six and EFTA, and, as political realities permit, capable of bringing about closer economic relations between Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Equally, we are anxious to play our full part in increasing political unity within Europe on the basis of a growing and more intimate inter-governmental co-operation. My right hon. Friend has repeatedly urged - indeed, we all have - the need for Britain to be in on the ground floor in any such political discussions.

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