

'Should Britain join the Common Market? No, says the Labour party majority' from Corriere della Sera (4 October 1962)

Caption: On 4 October 1962, commenting on the heated debates at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton, the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera gives an account of the British Labour Party's opposition to the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: Corriere della Sera. 04.10.1962, n° 223; anno 87. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "La maggioranza laborista contraria all'ingresso dell'Inghilterra nel MEC", auteur:Pieroni, Alfredo , p. 6.

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Should Britain join the Common Market? No, says the Labour party majority

Gaitskell, laying down terms that are unacceptable at present, proves intransigent, while his Deputy, George Brown, takes a softer approach — Overall, however, the party line is one of firm opposition

From our special correspondent

Brighton, 3 October, evening.

The Labour Party Conference today approved the Executive's policy on the Common Market by a very large majority. In doing so, the party voted for more or less complete opposition to Britain's entry into the Common Market. Mr Gaitskell, who not so long ago passed for a Europeanist, proved surprisingly intransigent. Although he has not ruled out the possibility of Britain's entry into Europe, his terms are unacceptable at present; today, taking friends as well as foes by surprise, he stressed that Britain did not need to join Europe, that he was reluctant to accept a Europe guided by the principles of Adenauer and de Gaulle, and that an alternative could be sought.

The day, opening with Mr Gaitskell's very uncompromising statement, ended with a more open-minded speech by the Deputy Leader, George Brown. Overall, however, Labour party policy is now officially clear: a policy of opposition to the Common Market.

This result has largely to be seen in electoral terms. By providing a curve starting from his intransigence and ending with Mr Brown's softer approach, Mr Gaitskell has managed to unite the party to an extent unprecedented for years, offering the grass roots and the electorate a policy which encapsulates and breathes new life into the historic sentiments and prejudices of the British, whose progress along the path of Europeanisation is somewhat slow.

The document approved today makes Britain's entry into the Common Market subject to five conditions: (1) absolute safeguarding of the interests of the Commonwealth; (2) Britain's freedom to decide its own foreign policy; (3) respect of Britain's commitments to the EFTA countries; (4) Britain's right to plan its economy; (5) defence of the interests of British agriculture.

Mr Gaitskell knows that these conditions are unacceptable, at least at present. This explains his speech, which looked not so much at whether these five conditions could or indeed should be achieved, as at the drawbacks of joining Europe. 'It is true,' he said, 'that the problem cannot be seen in absolute terms and that the arguments for and against balance each other out. It is true, however, that by joining, Britain is ending its existence as an independent nation.'

Three outcomes

Mr Gaitskell went on to review the economic and political effects of joining the Common Market. 'From an economic point of view, are we forced to join?' he asked. 'No. Would we be stronger if we joined or weaker if we did not? No. Is it true that if we joined under any conditions we would become wealthier in a way that would also benefit the Commonwealth? No. Has Europe become wealthier as a result of the Common Market? No: economic growth in Europe was greater between 1950 and 1955 than in the following five years.

What about the political effects? Europe is moving towards a political union that will undoubtedly have an influence in international affairs. It is also true that Britain could play a major part in this influence. Nevertheless, not all political unions are good per se. European union is likely to have three outcomes: (1) the Common Market countries will hold periodic consultations. They will not be harmful, but it is unlikely that they will do anything to change de Gaulle's attitude to NATO or Adenauer's opinions on Berlin; (2) decisions will be taken by a majority. Is this what the British want? In all likelihood, we will be

able to exert considerable influence over these decisions, but I should like to be sure of that; (3) there is the possibility of a European federation that will strip national governments and parliaments of their power. I am not saying that a federation could be good or bad for the Europeans: that is their business, and their problem, but not necessarily ours. We are not simply part of Europe: at least, not yet. We have a different history, different ties, etc.'

Mr Gaitskell then examined what terms needed to be set and achieved. It would be good to build a bridge between Britain and Europe, but not if it meant giving up the Commonwealth. Britain should be able to plan its economy and decide on its foreign policy. 'We have to be free to decide whether or not we want new political developments with Europe. I do not believe that the British are at present ready to accept a supranational system where decisions are taken by a majority, possibly against their will.'

'In conclusion,' Mr Gaitskell said, 'we are not shutting the door. If our terms are accepted, we will join. If they are rejected, the decision has to be put to the electorate. If we do not join, however, it will not be a disaster. We can do more than the Common Market: we can, for instance, reduce tariffs throughout the world. Furthermore, as long as de Gaulle is in power, he may listen to words and speeches, but he will not accept any real progress towards political unity. Why, therefore, is the Conservative government in such a hurry?'

The speech, as can be seen, was largely negative and, to some extent, even contradictory. Why, for instance, fear political developments, when General de Gaulle's continuing presence is the best possible guarantee against these developments? Why not agree to join and fight to make Europe take the right direction and develop in the right way?

Mr Brown took a rather softer approach than Mr Gaitskell, thereby blurring the party line and confusing public opinion. 'Can we join?' he asked. 'Yes, and indeed we should join if our terms are met. Will there be advantages for us? Certainly, there will be. Can we influence European policy developments? We certainly can: we can change the geographical, political and economic balance of Europe. If we can join on our terms, we will be able to exercise "an enormous influence in the world".'

The answer lies with Macmillan

The Conference thus wrapped up the problem for the time being at least, although it is likely to rear its head again when Macmillan announces the terms set in Brussels to Parliament. At that time, since the terms demanded in Brighton will not have been met, the Labour party stance will be one of active opposition. At today's conference, it was decided not to use a general election as a means of pressure. Both Gaitskell and Brown ducked the issue of whether, if the Conservative government takes Britain into Europe, a future Labour government could renounce the Treaty. The solution to the problem therefore lies in Macmillan's hands. And in the hands of the Europeans, especially General de Gaulle, whose intransigence will undoubtedly be given fresh impetus by the Brighton Conference.

Alfredo Pieroni