

Address given by Harold Macmillan on the United Kingdom's application for membership to the EC (31 July 1961)

Caption: On 31 July 1961, Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister, announces to the House of Commons his Government's decision formally to apply for the accession of the United Kingdom to the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: Parliamentary Debates. House of Commons. Official Report. Second session of the Forty-Second Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Tenth year of the reign of her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Dir. of publ. Hansard. 1960-1961, No 645; fifth series. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office. "European Economic Community (Government Policy)", p. 928-931.

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[...]

The future relations between the European Economic Community, the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth and the rest of Europe are clearly matters of capital importance in the life of our country and, indeed, of all the countries of the free world.

This is a political as well as an economic issue. Although the Treaty of Rome is concerned with economic matters it has an important political objective, namely, to promote unity and stability in Europe which is so essential a factor in the struggle for freedom and progress throughout the world. In this modern world the tendency towards larger groups of nations acting together in the common interest leads to greater unity and thus adds to our strength in the struggle for freedom.

I believe that it is both our duty and our interest to contribute towards that strength by securing the closest possible unity within Europe. At the same time, if a closer relationship between the United Kingdom and the countries of the European Economic Community were to disrupt the long-standing and historic ties between the United Kingdom and the other nations of the Commonwealth the loss would be greater than the gain. The Commonwealth is a great source of stability and strength both to Western Europe and to the world as a whole, and I am sure that its value is fully appreciated by the member Governments of the European Economic Community. I do not think that Britain's contribution to the Commonwealth will be reduced if Europe unites. On the contrary, I think that its value will be enhanced.

On the economic side, a community comprising, as members or in association, the countries of free Europe, could have a very rapidly expanding economy supplying, as eventually it would, a single market of approaching 300 million people. This rapidly expanding economy could, in turn, lead to an increased demand for products from other parts of the world and so help to expand world trade and improve the prospects of the less developed areas of the world.

No British Government could join the European Economic Community without prior negotiation with a view to meeting the needs of the Commonwealth countries, of our European Free Trade Association partners, and of British agriculture consistently with the broad principles and purpose which have inspired the concept of European unity and which are embodied in the Rome Treaty.

As the House knows, Ministers have recently visited Commonwealth countries to discuss the problems which would arise if the British Government decided to negotiate for membership of the European Economic Community. We have explained to Commonwealth Governments the broad political and economic considerations which we have to take into account. They, for their part, told us their views and, in some cases, their anxieties about their essential interests. We have assured Commonwealth Governments that we shall keep in close consultation with them throughout any negotiations which might take place.

Secondly, there is the European Free Trade Association. We have treaty and other obligations to our partners in this Association and my right hon. Friends have just returned from a meeting of the European Free Trade Association Ministerial Council, in Geneva, where all were agreed that they should work closely together throughout any negotiations. Finally, we are determined to continue to protect the standard of living of our agricultural community.

During the past nine months, we have had useful and frank discussions with the European Economic Community Governments. We have now reached the stage where we cannot make further progress without entering into formal negotiations. I believe that the great majority in the House and in the country will feel that they cannot fairly judge whether it is possible for the United Kingdom to join the European Economic Community until there is a clearer picture before them of the conditions on which we could join and the extent to which these could meet our special needs.

Article 237 of the Treaty of Rome envisages that the conditions of admission of a new member and the changes in the Treaty necessitated thereby should be the subject of an agreement. Negotiations must, therefore, be held in order to establish the conditions on which we might join. In order to enter into these negotiations it is necessary, under the Treaty, to make formal application to join the Community, although the ultimate decision whether to join or not must depend on the result of the negotiations.

Therefore, after long and earnest consideration, Her Majesty's Government have come to the conclusion that it would be right for Britain to make a formal application under Article 237 of the Treaty for negotiations with a view to joining the Community if satisfactory arrangements can be made to meet the special needs of the United Kingdom, of the Commonwealth and of the European Free Trade Association.

If, as I earnestly hope, our offer to enter into negotiations with the European Economic Community is accepted we shall spare no efforts to reach a satisfactory agreement. These negotiations must inevitably be of a detailed and technical character, covering a very large number of the most delicate and difficult matters. They may, therefore, be protracted and there can, of course, be no guarantee of success. When any negotiations are brought to a conclusion then it will be the duty of the Government to recommend to the House what course we should pursue.

No agreement will be entered into until it has been approved by the House after full consultation with other Commonwealth countries by whatever procedure they may generally agree.