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What does Wilson really want ?

by Dick Taverne, Q.C., M.P.

Whether Britain makes another move to join the Common Market depends on a number of factors. Firstly, it depends on the personal inclinations and views of the leading figures in the Government, particularly the Prime Minister. Secondly it depends on public opinion — opinion in the country and opinion in the Labour Party. Thirdly, there are the outside factors : the economic situation, the state of the Western Alliance, and the attitudes of the EEC members themselves, especially France.

First, Wilson's own attitude. Wilson was never a strong champion of the Common Market cause. Nor, for that matter, was he one of those, like Douglas Jay, who set his face rigidly against joining Europe. In fact, throughout the 1962 negotiations, his line was very close to that taken by Gaitskell.

Gaitskell, it should be remembered, started off as neutral. He had no great enthusiasm for the European idea. He had a strong emotional commitment to the Commonwealth. He was averse to the idea of Britain being absorbed into a federal union. But he was prepared to accept membership of the Six if the terms were right and Britain could become a link between a wider Europe and the Commonwealth. In August, 1962, as he subsequently told me, he became convinced that the terms were wrong.

Meeting Labour leaders from the Commonwealth soon afterwards confirmed his fears : The result was his Brighton speech at the Labour Conference and the hardening of the Labour Party's opposition to entry. From saying "Yes, if the terms are right", it gradually became "No, not on these terms".

Throughout this period Wilson took much the same view. Since then he has referred several times to "the five conditions". He has stressed the adverse effect on our balance of payments of the EEC's agricultural policy if we should join. He has mooted bridge-building between EFTA and EEC. None of these statements or suggestions have exactly inspired great hopes amongst the "Europeans". The idea of bridge-building in particular has been received among many people in the Six with well concealed enthusiasm. Are we really back to Maudling in 1958 ?

In fact, I think it would be wrong to be too pessimistic. Throughout his political career, both in office and in opposition, Wilson has always shown a thoroughly pragmatic approach to the problems facing him. Unlike Gaitskell, I do not believe he has any emotional commitment to the Commonwealth. Certainly he has always shown the deepest concern for lessening the inequality between rich nations and poor. He wrote a book on the fight against world poverty in 1953. It is also true that Britain's relations with the newer states of the Commonwealth are central to the contribution Britain can make to reducing these inequalities. But membership of the Six is hardly an obstacle to these aims. Many of us fail to see how they can possibly be achieved without our joining. Moreover, the Nigerian negotiations with the EEC show clearly that Commonwealth development and Britain joining Europe are not conflicting interests.

Again, "bridge-building" must be seen in its proper context. This is not a Maudling-type alternative to joining the EEC. The phrase is perhaps unfortunate. A bridge is a permanent structure linking separate units. It seems to imply that they will remain separate. But what Wilson is trying to achieve can also be seen in another way : If Britain (and one hopes others) are at some stage to join the Six, one still has to face the fact that in the meantime trade barriers are dividing Europe. The division is deepening every year. Its effects are deplorable. Surely something should be done in the meantime to lower the barriers and lessen the divisions. The aim is sensible and more important than the language used.

Still, why the harping on the five conditions ? I think many people in Europe have often failed to appreciate the strong feeling that existed in Britain, and particularly in the Labour Party, against joining. If the Government made a new move, it would have to carry the Party with it. To renounce publicly at this time the five conditions on which Labour's previous stand was based would create an unholy row. Why do so now, when, in any event, the French attitude prevents Britain from joining ? When pressed specifically, therefore, Wilson has referred to the conditions. Nevertheless, there is no doubt, to my mind, that all the

time these conditions are being eroded. Walter Padley has said publicly in the House that they are not the Ten Commandments. Michael Stewart said at a Foreign Press Club luncheon that one must look to the principles behind the conditions rather than the particular terms in which these principles found expression in the past. My conclusion, therefore, on the first factor, as far as Wilson himself is concerned, is that his own views and convictions offer no special obstacles to Britain's joining Europe. The feeling in the country and the Party will play a considerable part. Above all, the outside factors are likely to influence the course that he adopts.

Feeling in the Party is undoubtedly in a delicate state. Perhaps, however, it is more amenable than I had expected after the election. Originally, in 1962, about one-third were strongly against joining; about one-third felt strongly in favour; the rest were prepared to follow Gaitskell's lead. After the Brighton Conference in that year, opinion became more and more hostile, particularly the further down in the hierarchy of the Party that one probed. The Shadow Cabinet and the National Executive of the Party were almost equally divided and the Trade Union leaders almost overwhelmingly in favour of joining. But among candidates and active Party workers the current ran strong against. I expected only a small minority of the eighty-odd new Labour M.P.s to favour joining the Six.

In fact, this has not been the case. Perhaps our balance of payments difficulties have been the major catalyst. A substantial number of Labour M.P.s, and a significant number of Ministers who were previously hostile, are now convinced that Britain needs a larger home market than she has. The matter has not been tested by any vote or any public debate. To do so would merely re-open old wounds. Nevertheless it is my strong impression that when in due course a new chance for joining Europe comes, Wilson could carry the Party with him.

Feeling in the country, too, has moved in favour. Polls have shown strong support for a move to join, stronger than there was in 1962. Certainly leaders of industry are emphatic that our future lies in Europe.

So far I have mentioned factors which need not prevent a move. I now come to the positive factors, which I think would be decisive.

First, the economic pressures on the Government will be compelling. It was, after all, the logic of the situation which influenced Macmillan in 1961. The Conservative Party has always been the Party of Empire. Macmillan stood it on its head and made it for a time the Party of Europe. This was essentially because he could not see any great economic expansion for Britain in the context of a small home market. The argument is even more telling today. Mr. Brown's National Plan depends on an annual increase in exports of five and a half per cent. This will be infinitely harder to achieve if British exporters are at an increasing disadvantage in the markets of the Six where perhaps the greatest opportunities for expansion lie. The recurrent crises in Sterling are much less likely to occur if the British economy is closely linked to the economies of the Six. These sort of arguments are bound to sway a clear, hard-headed economist like Wilson.

Further, the Government is firmly wedded to the Atlantic Alliance. True, at this moment, perhaps the major part of its military effort lies East of Suez, but the Government is determined to shrink its commitments. Its East of Suez role will be gradually whittled away with a greater consequent preoccupation with Europe. In Europe itself it has set its face strongly against national defence solutions. Even despite French objections it is likely to move closer towards the integration of NATO. European agreements for the manufacture of weapons are likely to grow. All this points towards greater political commitment to Europe.

It is, of course, easy to oversimplify and underestimate the practical difficulties. It is still a fact that there is no enthusiasm in Britain, let alone in the Government, for the concept of a federal union which underlies the Treaty of Rome. But perhaps this need not be an issue of principle to be cleared first. Once Britain was a member, it is not unlikely that support for close political unity would grow.

Secondly, no one can now predict when the chance for a new move will offer itself. France's attitude has made it almost impossible to foresee how the Common Market itself will develop. Until the position is cleared, a British application would be quite inappropriate, even if we were ready to apply.

In my view, Wilson and the Labour Government will, in due course, make another move. To join the Six is, I think, something he intends to do. At the same time, the longer the decision can be delayed, the easier it will be for him to make it without a major division in the Party. I realise that Britain's friends in Europe long for a clear indication of our intentions. It would help them in their present difficulties to know clearly where Britain stands. But to British "Europeans", delaying the moment of decision has its advantages. And while the present uncertainty exists in the EEC, it is understandable that no clear statement has yet emerged.