

'Into Europe?' from The Guardian (13 April 1960)

Caption: On 13 April 1960, British daily newspaper The Guardian speculates on the chances of closer relations being established between the United Kingdom and the European Economic Community (EEC).

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Into Europe?

British opinion — and not least parliamentary opinion — has until recently been extraordinarily complacent about the implications of the development of the Common Market. A minority of economists, politicians, and business men have been deeply concerned; but the repeated warnings they have uttered during the past two years have failed to make any deep impression. Now at last there are signs that a wider public has begun to wake up to the danger that this country may soon find itself isolated — economically and politically — from its most powerful European neighbours. Mr Macmillan's remarks in Washington, unfortunate though they may have been in their effects on opinion in the Common Market countries, have at least helped to open the eyes of people in this country to the perils of a disunited Europe. Why else would the Prime Minister indulge in vague talk of anti-Napoleonic alliances, and run the risk of further damaging our relationships with Europe, unless he felt that vital British interests were at stake? But now that the danger has been grasped, there is also a chance that the Government's policies will come under a more critical scrutiny. No good can be done at this stage by crying over missed opportunities. It is easy now to point to the errors of past British policy; but the Government was not alone at the time in miscalculating the strength of the drive towards European integration. The question now is whether Ministers are prepared to reconsider their aims and to adapt their policy to meet realities. The alarming fact is that, in spite of what Mr Macmillan said, there is no real sign of a change. On the contrary the Government seems to be clinging still to the hope that the Six will eventually modify their plans to suit the British notion of a Free Trade Area.

How little ground there is for this hope at present has been brought out plainly in the series of articles by our Financial Editor, surveying the Common Market in action, which has been appearing on this page. It is true that the prospect of a European trade split has aroused considerable misgivings among some members of the Six. Germany and the Benelux countries have good reason to fear the loss of export markets in the "Outer Seven" group if they are forced to raise the level of their external tariffs, and business men in these countries have been particularly hostile to the so-called Hallstein plan for accelerating the Common Market, which would result in almost immediate discrimination against the rest of the world. Now that it seems that the opponents of this scheme may have succeeded in winning a further respite, there is a danger that the British Government may be encouraged to think that it need not, after all, adjust its sights in Europe. But this is a dangerous illusion. The reports from our Financial Editor show that, whatever reservations may be made by some sections of the business community, there is now little chance that any of the Six will turn back on the Common Market. Everywhere on the Continent industry is busy adapting its plans to the new pattern of trade which will emerge with integration. Mergers are being formed, commercial and financial links are being forged among business groups from all the Common Market countries; factories are being built, often with American money, to serve the new European market. It is hard to see now what could be done from outside to bring this process to a halt; certainly that is not likely to be accomplished by any threat of retaliation which it is in the power of the Seven to make.

What then ought we to do? A strong case can be made out for saying that we should apply forthwith to join the Common Market.

The reasons given at the time for our refusal to enter into the European Community have worn progressively thinner through the years. The farmers have long since ceased to be a problem; the Six have made it clear that the last thing they want is a free market for agriculture. As for the Commonwealth, sooner or later most of its members will be driven to make their own bargains with the Common Market, unless we can do so on their behalf. There remains the issue of sovereignty; but how serious is the loss of independence entailed when set off against the potential gains from participating in the growing European economy? Nevertheless, there are difficulties attached to the idea of going into the Common Market at this juncture — even if the Six would have us. For one thing, we cannot simply cast off overnight our commitments to the "Outer Seven." A more serious doubt is whether the British public is yet sufficiently convinced of the need for such close ties with Europe; the Government has done little to educate opinion. But even if we are not yet able to join fully in the Common Market we can do more to improve relations with the Six and to remove the potential causes of economic friction. The first step is to make it clear — with actions as well as with words — that we accept and welcome the formation of the Common Market. We should stop insisting on a Free Trade Area; instead we should offer substantial unilateral cuts in industrial tariffs, while at the same time inviting the

Common Market to do the same in return. If the Six can be persuaded to remain liberal in outlook the steps towards a wider association need not prove ultimately too difficult.