

The United Kingdom's position

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At the end of their conference held in Messina on 1, 2 and 3 June 1955, the Foreign Ministers of the six Member States of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) decided to invite the United Kingdom, already associated with the ECSC, to take part in the process of reviving European integration. A few days later, albeit with a good deal of hesitation, Harold Macmillan's government sent Russell F. Bretherton, Under-Secretary in the Board of Trade, to Brussels to take part in the consultations by the six national delegations to the Intergovernmental Committee set up by the Messina Conference. The technical discussions covered the definition of the respective advantages of a union or a free trade area, the option preferred by the British. However, the more the autumn 1955 negotiations focused on the possible creation of a general common market based on a customs union with unified external tariffs, the more reluctant the British Delegation became to commit itself to its partners. The entry into force of the Treaty of Association between the ECSC and the United Kingdom on 25 September 1955 reinforced the sentiment among the British that their links with continental Europe were already sufficiently close.

In reality, the British Government, knowing that the British people were not in favour of strengthening European integration, feared that a European common market might gradually lead to political federation. London was also concerned about the repercussions of Britain joining a common market on its preferential relations with the Commonwealth countries, with particular regard to the system of imperial preferences. The United Kingdom was also anxious to maintain its standing on the world scene by retaining its autonomy in matters relating to tariffs and its total freedom of negotiation, especially with the United States. In November 1955, moreover, Bretherton left the negotiating table and returned permanently to London. The diplomatic efforts of Paul-Henri Spaak, Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Chairman of the Brussels Committee, proved fruitless: the British did not take up Spaak's proposal that the discussions between the Six and the United Kingdom be continued in Western European Union (WEU). Profoundly irritated by this attitude and by what he regarded as diversionary tactics, Spaak then persuaded the Six to continue with the revival of European integration without the United Kingdom. Long sceptical as to the chances of success of the European revival, the British were nonetheless to harbour growing fears in the face of the determination of the Six, something which was, moreover, supported by the United States.

It was for this reason that the United Kingdom was very soon to show its preference for a strengthening of economic cooperation within the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC). Invited by the Six to join them immediately following the Venice Conference of 29 and 30 May 1956, the OEEC partners, prompted by the British, responded by setting up a special working party known as the Group of Seventeen. That Group was instructed to review the options for a free trade area or for a multilateral method of association between the customs union envisaged and the countries not taking part in that union. The Group worked from July 1956 to January 1957, in other words, over the period when negotiations among the Six on drafting the Common Market and Euratom Treaties were at their most active. Accordingly, the European revival was concluded without British participation.