

The reaction of the Six to the United Kingdom's second application for accession

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On 11 May 1967, the British Government submitted its second application for accession to the European Communities. Since French President Charles de Gaulle vetoed Britain's first application for accession in 1963, his position on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Communities had not fundamentally changed. But as London was certain of the backing of France's partners in the Community, it believed that this time it would be possible to convince the French President, especially given that the British Government had considerably reduced its demands in comparison with the first application for accession in 1961. France's partners in the Community had already indicated that they were in favour of a second British application for accession, but uncertainty remained over General de Gaulle's position.

His initial reaction prolonged the doubts about his intentions. He expressed his support for an association between the Communities and the United Kingdom, but did not officially oppose an enlargement of the Communities, thus enabling the Member States to examine the British application. France's partners reacted favourably to the United Kingdom's involvement and declared their support for a Europe of Ten.

London, however, was not content with association status, particularly as the British Government was willing to accept the Community acquis and the terms of the treaties, subject to a few financial adjustments and a transitional period for some of its trade. Moreover, the United Kingdom had expertise in the nuclear field and capabilities in new technologies, and accession would enable it to open up new markets and develop its technological industries. Confident of this potential contribution and of the Five's support, Harold Wilson reiterated his request for full accession.

A lengthy period of discussions was therefore launched between France and the Five on the opening of accession negotiations and the conditions in which they should take place. Finally, in July, in accordance with Article 237 of the Treaty of Rome, the Six decided to ask for the opinion of the Commission of the European Communities on the applications for accession of the United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark and Norway. On 29 September 1967, the Commission delivered its opinion. It noted that, even though accession of the applicant countries would bring major changes, it would not modify the fundamental objectives and individual features of the European Communities or the methods they used. But it also emphasised that the applicant countries must accept the Community acquis, the term given to all the decisions adopted before enlargement, and criticised some problems in the British economy which would need to be settled before accession, such as the re-establishment of the balance of payments equilibrium and the definition of the role of the pound sterling. Before giving its final opinion on the applications for accession of the applicant countries, the Commission suggested the immediate opening of accession negotiations. The Commission's opinion therefore did not enable the question to be resolved; the Five and France each found arguments in favour of their respective positions. France continued to express strong opposition to the immediate opening of accession negotiations, arguing that a solution first needed to be found to the British problems raised by the Commission.