

The negotiations for British accession to the EC and the question of the Commonwealth

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During the 1960s, the United Kingdom's policy towards Europe changed. The wait-and-see approach of the 1940s and 1950s, which, at most, allowed for European cooperation at intergovernmental level, was gradually replaced by a determination to participate more actively in the European unification process.

A fear of being sidelined in international affairs and the resounding success of the European Economic Community (EEC) were the main factors behind the change in direction of the British Governments in the early 1960s. The 'special relationship' between the United Kingdom and the United States grew strained after the Suez Crisis in 1956, and the colonial empire, which had justified the United Kingdom's status as a global power until the Second World War, began to break up. The political and strategic links forged with the Commonwealth grew weaker, and the complementarity between the British economy and the economies of its former colonies diminished throughout the 1960s.

Public opinion and the major political parties, with their commitment to national sovereignty, appeared to be divided. The Conservative Party was more pro-European than the Labour Party. The latter, together with the trade unions, was keen to protect the welfare state and state control of the economy against what it popularly perceived to be a capitalist Europe too wedded to the idea of free trade.

The United Kingdom's interest in Europe met with mixed reactions abroad. The strongest opposition came from France, which, although it had been keen to develop the European project in cooperation with a reluctant UK in the 1940s and 1950s, changed its stance when General de Gaulle came to power and rejected British accession. This was symptomatic of the two countries' jostling for position as leaders of Europe.

A major problem was the United Kingdom's relations with the Commonwealth. London, playing its imperial card, called for the Community rules to be bent in several areas. The UK was loath to accept the common trade tariff as it feared this would force it to abandon its privileged relations with the Commonwealth countries.