

The United Kingdom's second application for accession to the Common Market

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The United Kingdom's second application for accession to the Common Market

The October 1964 elections in the United Kingdom were won by the Labour Party. The Labour Party leader, Harold Wilson, took over from the Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, who had come up against the opposition of French President Charles de Gaulle in the bid to accede to the European Communities. The new Prime Minister, who had previously been opposed to the United Kingdom's accession to the European Communities, gradually began to pursue a more Europe-oriented policy. This new direction in foreign policy was largely a result of the difficulties encountered by the British economy in the mid-1960s. Relations with the Commonwealth continued to weaken and trade relations within the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) were developing at a slower pace than expected. Participation in the European Communities therefore seemed the best solution to revive the British economy, all the more so because exports to the Communities' Member States were constantly on the rise. The Communities also seemed to provide the necessary framework in which to overcome the balance of payments deficit and to devalue the pound sterling, a measure which had become essential. Finally, accession offered the United Kingdom the prospect of playing an active role in the development of the Communities, which were experiencing continued growth, and of reducing its dependence on the United States by choosing the path leading towards an emerging Europe.

However, during Harold Wilson's first term of office, conditions were not yet favourable for an open policy change towards accession to the Communities. Opposition to accession within the Labour Party itself was too great and the memory of the failure met by the first application for accession in 1963 was still too vivid in the minds of the general public. It was only following efforts made to persuade his party and after the elections held in March 1966 that Harold Wilson had a large enough majority to take the decision to make a second application for accession to the European Communities. At the same time, the empty chair crisis served to highlight General de Gaulle's opposition to the majority vote and to the Communities' evolution towards a federal structure. This reassured the British leaders, because even if Harold Wilson was ready to accept the economic terms associated with accession to the Communities, the Prime Minister was not keen on accepting the slightest limitation of British sovereignty in terms of foreign and defence policy. On 10 November 1966, the Prime Minister announced to the House of Commons that he had decided to visit the European capital cities to see whether conditions were favourable for a British application for accession.

In early 1967, Harold Wilson and his Foreign Secretary, George Brown, carried out a series of visits to the leaders of the Six. The reactions in the capital cities were mostly positive, owing to the fact that London had stated its willingness to accept the terms of the treaties and to fulfil the same obligations as its future partners. The most muted welcome came once again from France, in particular because of the economic difficulties experienced by the United Kingdom and the country's special relationship with the United States in foreign policy matters which, in the eyes of the French President, threatened to hinder Franco-German plans for political cooperation. However, the British Prime Minister was convinced that lessons had been learnt from the failure of the first application and that this time he would be able to convince General de Gaulle that British accession was essential.

On 2 May, after ascertaining the reactions of the members of the Commonwealth and EFTA, Harold Wilson announced to the House of Commons that the government had decided to apply for accession to the European Communities. The Prime Minister's announcement was approved by a large majority. On 11 May, with the backing of the majority in the main parties and a general public that had come to support the idea of accession, the British Government submitted to Brussels its second application for accession to the European Communities. As with its first application in 1961, the United Kingdom's application for accession was accompanied by those of Ireland, Denmark and Norway.

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

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 an opinion in which it proposed the immediate opening of accession negotiations with the applicant countries.

General de Gaulle's second veto

Despite this opinion, France's partners in the Community, who were in favour of the first enlargement of the Communities, continued to meet with opposition from General de Gaulle. The French President pointed to the economic difficulties experienced by the United Kingdom and demanded that a solution to the major problems be found before its accession to the Communities. Unlike the Five, Paris was convinced that the United Kingdom's accession to the Common Market, even on the condition that it accepted the terms laid down in the treaties, would fundamentally change the nature of the Community and cause it to move in the direction of a single free trade area.

Aside from the economic arguments put forward to block the United Kingdom's accession, the French President had other concerns. Despite the commitments made by his government in economic matters, the British Prime Minister did not agree with the French views on foreign and defence policy. Harold Wilson continued to advocate the need for United States involvement in European defence and rejected the establishment of a European nuclear force. The French President feared that in an enlarged Community, France would not only be at risk of encountering greater difficulties in defending its economic interests, but that it would also be in danger of losing its leadership role to a more Atlanticist policy with the arrival of the new Member States.

On 18 November, the British Government was forced to devalue the pound sterling. The French President did not hesitate to voice his reaction. He believed that this was proof that the British economy was not ready to meet the conditions of the Common Market. On 27 November 1967, even before the accession negotiations with the applicant countries could begin, General de Gaulle held a press conference in which he declared his opposition, for the second time, to the United Kingdom's accession to the European Communities. In his statement, the French President particularly emphasised the incompatibility of the British economy with Community rules and stressed that the United Kingdom's accession to the European Communities firstly required that the country undergo a major political and economic transformation. He reiterated his proposal for an association between the European Economic Community and the applicant countries to promote trade, but London immediately rejected the idea of an association, which would exclude it from the Community decision-making process.

However, France's partners in the Community were not willing to accept this unilateral decision. They therefore tried to find alternative solutions to break the deadlock and maintain the prospect of accession for the applicant countries. But all the proposals came up against the opposition of General de Gaulle; he became increasingly isolated from the other Member States and even went as far as threatening to leave the Community if Britain were to accede. The difference of opinion between France and its partners on the issue of British accession affected the Communities' activities. It became essential to find a solution to the British question in order to break the deadlock and pursue the development of the Communities. The Five's mistrust of France's European policy was increased when, in February 1969, the French President proposed to the British Ambassador to Paris, Christopher Soames, that the United Kingdom accede to a single European free trade area which would replace the Community structures. The British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, not only rejected France's proposal but revealed its substance to the Five, thus contributing to France's isolation. Only when Charles de Gaulle's tenure as President of the French Republic came to an end three months later were negotiations able to be relaunched.