

Special

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The United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland: Ten years after

In January 1973 the European Community of Nine was born. Six years after applying for membership, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland joined the six founder countries and shifted the focus of Europe northwards. Since then it has been joined by Greece.

Unfortunately their entry coincided with the beginning of the world economic crisis, which has not made their integration into the rest of Europe any easier and has caused British, Danish and Irish public opinion to often blame the Community for economic ills that it didn't create.

Excluding superficial disagreements, however, strong political, economic and human links have been forged over the past ten years, which show to what a huge extent the Community has become a factor in the everyday lives of Europeans. But what are the real pros and cons of membership, ten years after the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland decided to join? How have they managed to fit into the Community that they only decided to be part of after fifteen years of deliberation?

The biggest plus on the balance sheet is the increase in trade between Community countries. The removal of tariff barriers has opened hitherto undreamed of markets and intra-European commerce has boomed.

British and Irish imports from the rest of the Community have increased fivefold and in Denmark they quadrupled.

In 1973 32 percent of British exports were going to the Community and by 1980 the figure had risen to about 43 percent. Imports from the Community rose from 32.8 percent to 41 percent and Europe now accounts for about 40 percent of Britain's total foreign trade.

The increase in trade has not generally been as marked for the three newcomers as it was for the original six member states, but last year Denmark's exports to the rest of Europe rose from 42 percent in 1972 to 47 percent.

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Entry has meant changes in traditional trading patterns for all three countries, Denmark, for example, which had always enjoyed preferential trading treatment from the Nordic countries, and in particular Sweden, now does most of her trade with the Federal Republic of Germany and Britain. Similarly, British exports to the Commonwealth have fallen away dramatically from a peak of 40 percent in 1950 to 15 percent in 1978.

Ireland also became less closely linked to the British market. In 1982 50 percent of Irish exports went to the United Kingdom, compared to 60 percent in 1972. The possibility of reducing their economic dependency on Britain has continued to be, for the Irish, a powerful argument in favour of Community membership.

At a time when every country in Europe is experiencing the same sort of economic problems, it is clear that the Community dimension is an important factor on the road to economic recovery.

Community policies include measures designed to guarantee the future of Europe's declining industries like steel, shipbuilding and textiles. There are also policies aimed at new industries, such as information technology, which can be developed by cooperation at Community level to overcome tough competition from the United States and Japan.

The adoption of common policies in the agricultural, social and regional sectors has already shown that together we can face the challenge of the 1980's.

The Common Agricultural Policy has encouraged food production in Europe, and in the new member states has particularly helped Danish and Irish farmers. Farmers incomes have remained relatively stable despite the recession and in Britain self-sufficiency in food production has risen from 63.3 percent to 74.8 percent in ten years.

But economic interests are not the only things that hold the Community countries together. In 1979 direct elections to the European Parliament were an important symbolic and pragmatic step on the road towards closer political cooperation.

In world affairs the Community states have repeatedly adopted a shared policy stance. On Angola, on apartheid in South Africa, on Afghanistan, on the Siberian pipeline and in their support for Britain during the Falklands crisis, they have been united.

Thanks to regular meetings of European foreign ministers, a new common foreign policy could be in the making.

But as Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the Community once observed, "we're not in the business of bringing states together, we're in the business of bringing people together". At a human level the advantages of Community membership are far harder to quantify.

The European idea is really about the day-to-day lives of Europeans. The free circulation of workers allows millions of people from the northernmost tip of Scotland to the southernmost tip of Sicily to choose where they want to live and work. Mutual recognition of qualifications in Community member states has also nearly been achieved, particularly in the health sector.

Many more human links have been forged over the past ten years by an upsurge of tourism and cultural and scientific cooperation.

Europe's "human face" is taking shape. The European Social Policy means that Community member states today can attack problems like unemployment, together.

Since 1973 the European Regional Policy has sought to bridge the gap between the richer and poorer parts of Europe. Recent changes in the policy will allow it to concentrate funds in the very poorest parts of the Community. Ireland has been a major beneficiary.

But the economic crisis has not helped the process of integration. Whereas the six founder members did extremely well, the three new members joined at the beginning of an economic recession which was to limit the opening of new markets.

The blustering positions that some national politicians and the media have adopted over disputes like fishing, British budget contributions and the problems of agricultural surpluses mean that the Community has still to find whole-hearted acceptance in certain quarters in the new member states.

Participation rates in the European Parliamentary elections in 1979 were below the Community average, compared to the original Six, which registered an average turn-out of about 68 percent. Ireland registered 62 percent, Denmark 46 percent and the United Kingdom 32 percent.

Opinion polls commissioned by Eurobarometer have confirmed the trend and in an April 1982 poll, which asked "Are you for or against European integration?" Denmark was the only country in Europe not to respond positively.

In the Six founder nations, seven or eight people out of ten were for integration and one was against. In Denmark the poll was half in favour and half against and in Britain one person in three was opposed to the idea.

But what is the betting that in 25 years, when the Community celebrates its 50th birthday, further progress will have been made on uniting Europe?

It only takes a little imagination and political will.