

# EUROPEAN BACKGROUND INFORMATION COMMUNITY

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE

2100 M Street NW, Washington DC 20037 Telephone (202) 872-8350

New York Office: 277 Park Avenue, New York NY 10017 Telephone (212) 371-3804

BACKGROUND NOTE

No. 19/1975

June 10, 1975

## EC VICTORY IN BRITAIN

British citizens gave an overwhelming "yes" to the European Community June 5 in Britain's first referendum, laying to rest once and for all the complicated and controversial issue of UK membership. Approximately 63 per cent of the 40 million eligible voters turned out to cast a two-to-one vote (67.2 per cent) in favor of continuing in the European Community. Commission President Francois-Xavier Ortoli hailed the British decision and added that "This result proves to me that the British people too share the conviction that has inspired us all, namely that there is no way for the countries of our continent to solve the problems of today other than by acting together.... A whole people has just demonstrated its confidence in Europe. We must not disappoint them."

### Rocky Road to Referendum

The path leading to the June 5 vote has not been a smooth one. Britain was offered a place in the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) when it was founded in the early Fifties, but refused because of a fear of the ECSC's supranational elements. Neither did the United Kingdom request membership in the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community when they were founded in 1957. However, by 1960, the British Government began to feel left out of the mainstream of important developments in Western Europe and asked for negotiations to explore possibilities of Community membership in 1961. French President Charles de Gaulle vetoed the British bid in January 1963, blocking the unanimous approval of the EC-Six needed for a new member, and negotiations were broken off.

Britain made a formal application for membership in 1967, but de Gaulle's opposition prevented negotiations from getting started. The June 1969 election of Georges Pompidou to the French Presidency, following de Gaulle's resignation, ended French opposition and gave Britain's case a boost. It was at The Hague summit meeting in December 1969 that the EC-Six agreed to open negotiations with Britain and the other three nations that had applied for Community membership -- Denmark, Ireland, and Norway. Britain, along with Denmark and Ireland, triumphantly entered the Community on January 1, 1973, lead by Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath with the full support of the British people. Norway withdrew its application after a national referendum indicated a lack of support for joining the Community.

But Britain's place in the Community was put into question when Harold Wilson's Labor Party returned to power in February 1974 with the pledge to "renegotiate" Britain's terms of entry into the Community and to achieve more favorable membership conditions for Britain.

The complicated "renegotiation" machinery was put quickly into motion. In the months following the Labor victory, Britain's position was outlined to the Council of Ministers and the renegotiation "requests," as the British preferred to call them, were drawn up in detail. Agreement on the requests -- principally, a reduction in Britain's contribution to the Community budget and improved terms for Commonwealth dairy exports -- was reached at this year's March EC Council meeting in Dublin, and the stage was set for the referendum.

#### Referendum Novelty

A popular referendum to decide an issue is an alien concept to the British voter -- decisions of such importance are traditionally taken by the elected representatives of the people, their Parliament. However, the Wilson Government was bound by the promise made in a February Labor Party Manifesto to let the people themselves determine their future in the Community.

The two camps -- the pro- and the anti-Marketees -- campaigned with great fervor. Both sides set up committees to inform voters of their respective positions and to plead their respective causes. Britons were supplied with three popularly-written documents, outlining pro- and anti-Market positions, as well as that of the Government, to facilitate their choice. The official British position on the Community was made manifest on two occasions. A UK cabinet vote on March 18 and a House of Commons vote on April 9 pledged full support for Britain's continued membership in the Community.

The campaign grew heated as the June 5 voting day approached. Politicians aired their views in public debates. Regional factions arose to complicate the issue -- certain Welsh and Scottish nationalist groups consistently opposed continued membership and campaigned vehemently against the Community. When the votes were counted in the 68 counties, however, only two tiny outward islands had said no to the Community.

Even religion was brought into the campaign. The Protestant Northern Irish clergyman, Ian Paisley (according to a New York Times article) took pains to point out to largely Protestant Britain that the Community is a "Catholic superstate." Pro-Marketeers, the article continued, admitted that their job could be easier if the "treaty establishing the European Community had been signed anywhere but in Rome."

Throughout the campaign, Britain received US support for Community membership. After the election, State Department spokesman Robert L. Funseth, answering a question at a June 6 briefing, affirmed that "We (the United States) welcome the decision of the British voters to remain within the European Community. We consider their choice an important reaffirmation of European unity which we have consistently supported."

Britain's partners in the Community welcomed the results of the referendum. German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, speaking in Hamburg on June 6, was "happy with the results of the convincing decision of the British people." Schmidt went on to say that from the beginning Germany has tried to win over Britain as a member of the Community and that it is hard to imagine the viability of Europe without Britain and its great international experience. French Foreign Minister Jean Savagnargues, quoted in an article in the French newspaper Le Monde, said "France can only rejoice at this. The victory of the "yes" ends the period of uncertainty which was ill-fated for everyone."

#### Issues Ahead

Now that it has secured its place in the Community, Britain can fully participate in all aspects of Community life. British Labor delegates to the European Parliament will play their full roles. Trade unions will participate in the Economic and Social Committee. With the help of its Community partners, Britain must squarely face the challenge of putting its economic and financial house in order.