
Britain's European dilemma in the 1960s

❶ The ambiguities of Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister who made the first British bid for an EEC membership in the early 1960s.



On the one hand Macmillan was an enthusiastic participant in the Council of Europe from its creation in 1949 until his entry to government in 1951 made further involvement impossible, leading the Conservative delegation to Strasbourg in 1950 and 1951. (...) Yet, on the other hand, many historians seem to have taken the view that this self-identification was more apparent than real. Macmillan has been universally condemned as having spent the rest of 1955 trying to sabotage the Messina negotiations and the Spaak committee that paved the way for the Treaty of Rome. (...)

Macmillan's Cabinet memoranda can prove a fertile source for such interpretations, not least the anxieties he expressed in March 1953: "Are we really sure that we want to see a Six Power Federal Europe, with a common army, a common iron and steel industry (Schuman Plan) ending with a common currency and monetary policy?" All of this, he feared, threatened to hand to Germany "on a plate what we have fought two world wars to prevent¹."

❷ Speech by Hugh Gaitskell, leader of the Labour Party, against UK membership of the Common Market (3 October 1962).



We must be clear about this: it does mean, if this is the idea, the end of Britain as an independent European state. I make no apology for repeating it. It means the end of a thousand years of history. You may say 'Let it end' but, my goodness, it is a decision that needs a little care and thought. And it does mean the end of the Commonwealth. How can one really seriously suppose that if the mother country, the centre of the Commonwealth, is a province of Europe (which is what federation means) it could continue to exist as the mother country of a series of independent nations? It is sheer nonsense.

➤ Using those documents and your knowledge, in what ways do they exemplify the British dilemma in relation to the European Economic Community?

1. Quoted in James ELLISON, *Threatening Europe. Britain and the Creation of the European Community, 1955-58*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.