

Chapter One

Non!

Euro-Vision, Anglo-Disdain

The positive vision of a united Europe has a long pedigree from the Romans to Charlemagne to Napoleon, thanks to geography (there are relatively few natural frontiers in Europe, and correspondingly few barriers to the expansion of booming nations), ego and logic (why have lots of tiny states with lots of different systems of money, measurement, etc, when you could have one big one run on streamlined administrative lines?). All schemes overreached, and failed.

The united Europe that has grown today was founded on the negative idea of the failure of the nation-state system and the need to prevent war. The 'Great Powers' theory of diplomacy allowed big nations to pursue aggressive policies towards each other, as long as the network of alliances and treaties between them stopped any one of them getting more powerful than the others. This was a truly terrible theory; all that can be said for it is that it kept peace in Europe, except when there were wars.

The worst point of friction was in the West of the continent. Germany, new-minted and efficient, and France, slowly crumbling but acutely conscious of its heritage and the universality of its founding principles, proved to be too big to share the schoolyard. Germany never had much trouble rolling over its arrogant and complacent enemy, but its aggression meant that effective coalitions could be formed against it. The complete lack of wisdom of statesmen didn't help; in 1918, France disastrously insisted on impossible conditions for German surrender. It took Germany a mere couple of decades to engage France again.

1945 saw a little more far-sightedness. It was held, not unreasonably, that the Great Power system had failed and a new order should link European states so inextricably that war would be unthinkable. The main theorist of this view was Jean Monnet, who had indeed suggested the idea as early as 1940, and the cheerleader-in-chief was

Britain's wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Churchill, rejected by the electorate in 1945, spent an amiable six years as leader of the opposition being an international statesman and celebrity, happily upstaging Clement Attlee by coming to a rapid and eloquent understanding of the post war settlement.

But though Britain was sympathetic, it was not involved, and the union that gradually emerged from a decade and more of painstaking negotiation and institution-building was centred around conservative *Mitteleuropa*. With the lack of official British input into the negotiation process, the idea gradually developed of a European Community as a superstate based around the Rhineland that would be a Catholic buffer against the rise of communism.

The European Union as we know it came into being in 1957, with the ratification of the Treaty of Rome. The original proposal from Dutch Foreign Minister Jacques Beyen was for a customs union with full free trade, but no-one thought that France would drop its protectionist instincts, and it didn't. Free trade was only applicable to vulgar industry; and although national barriers for agriculture were dropped, free competition was not implemented. Instead food prices were to be maintained, and farmers kept artificially solvent, by an executive based in Brussels. The European Economic Community was born on 25th March 1957, with France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg ('the Six'). The British dubbed it the 'Common Market', the difference in terminology—'community' v 'market'—hinting at a difference in understanding that persists, with malign results, half a century later.

There were immediate arguments about whether other countries should be allowed to join. The German Christian Democrats, for example, were happy having united the Catholic centre of Europe and wanted to go no further. Socialists worried that a right wing majority would try to bring in fascist Spain and Portugal. On the other hand, more idealistic feeling supported the idea of a club open to all. The compromise was a clause in the preamble of the Treaty of Rome that invited other countries to join, tempered by strict procedures for evaluating a bid, including provision of a veto for all the member states.

So was created a *cordon bleu* recipe for trouble.

The British Inferiority Complex

All should have seemed tickety-boo. Europe had implemented an imaginative plan to end war, and as we know with hindsight the

Community succeeded admirably in that fundamental aim. The British, who would have preferred a looser free trade area, still benefited from strong commercial connections with the newly expanded market. Furthermore, Britain had many ties of commerce and emotion with the countries of the Commonwealth and Empire, and joining the EEC (which promoted freer trade within its borders, but erected barriers against the rest of the world) might have disrupted those. So the good result for Europe should have translated into a positive outcome for Britain.

But it didn't. Just as the Europeans were going their own way without the benefits (dubious or otherwise) of British patronage, and devising a regime in their own interests, the British got cold feet. The Empire was collapsing, and British-Commonwealth trading relations were looking decidedly less favourable. A rival European Free Trade Area (EFTA – the British forgot their antipathy to initials in this case), set up by Britain and others looked like a pale imitation of the Common Market. The economic situation was worsening. In the Autumn of 1960, a special budget had to be brought in to stop a run on the pound. In the wider world, too, Britain looked less like one of the WWII victors; the Suez debacle loomed large in British culture and politics, a demonstration of the new impotence.

And while Britain stagnated under Harold Macmillan, Europe boomed. The post-war British inferiority complex began to kick in, and the suspicion started to spread that maybe the foreigners had got it right – or even if not, to be in their club would be better than being out of it.

Macmillan finally announced a formal application to join the club in a statement timed for the moribund week before the August bank holiday. The Commonwealth was not happy about losing access to British markets; there were some in the Tory Party who were not happy with the loss of sovereignty; the Labour Party was not happy about downgrading Britain's non-European international connections; the public was totally unprepared. Macmillan had been of necessity circumspect, but many were worried that he had not properly prepared the ground.

The French Superiority Complex

French President Charles de Gaulle was a unique phenomenon, a ghastly man who makes Jacques Chirac seem like a model of sweet reason. By the end of the Second World War, he had reinvented himself as not only the saviour, but the personification, of France, and

seemed to regard the Anglo-Saxons (British and Americans) as the real enemy. He could sulk, lie, ill-treat his own supporters or turn a blind eye to torture by the French army and police (in Algeria). He saw WWII as a national affair, the re-establishment by France of its own government of which the restoration of European democracy was a minor collateral effect.

It is not quite true to say that he loathed Britain. Better to observe that he admired it, and saw it, like France, as an important player on the most important continent in the world. But, incapable of seeing anything in other than purely nationalist terms, that meant that Britain was *de facto* an enemy. In de Gaulle's oddly-shaped head, Euro-politics was a zero sum game; if someone else was up, France was down. And France and Britain had learned different lessons from Suez – the French would never again rely on the Americans, the British would never cross them.

Having inherited the EEC project upon becoming President in 1958, de Gaulle saw it as a counterbalance against the Atlanticist Anglo-Saxon powers. In his mind it was, in effect, a Greater France. It would work in French interests, pay for the inefficiencies of the French agricultural sector, and support France's international territories. Its industrial heartland on the Ruhr would boost French industry. It would project French interests on the international stage, where they belonged, in opposition to US and Soviet hegemony.

Whether or not de Gaulle ever considered the British application seriously, there is no doubt that the Gaullist view of the EEC would be threatened by British entry. British agriculture was much more efficient after its pre-war rationalisation, and eventually would balk at ladling endless quantities of moolah at less efficient peasant farmers. And no British government then or now would ever try to undermine America's superpower status.

But de Gaulle would need to be persuaded otherwise, because de Gaulle had a veto.

The Lord Privy Seal

When Macmillan decided to move Britain towards an application for membership in the Summer of 1960, he prepared the ground for a long haul of discussion, exploration and negotiation with a cabinet reshuffle. The key move, which altered the course of British history over the next fifteen years, was of the Chief Whip, Edward Heath, to the meaningless courtesy position of Lord Privy Seal. Heath was

assigned special responsibility for matters European, and would deputise for Foreign Secretary Lord Home in the Commons.

Heath was of the great generation of Tory politicians elected in 1950, after the Labour landslide of 1945 had swept away the dead wood of the squires and blimps. A new group of Tories, younger, more energetic, and crucially (thanks to war service) with enough experience of a wide range of people to understand the problems of the nation of a whole rather than of a privileged class, had returned from the war to take their place; within this group, there was much jockeying for position to replace the prewar generation.

Heath, if not typical of the new wave, was certainly more typical of the country as a whole. A grammar school boy, he owed his position to brains and political skills, rather than parentage or wealth. As Chief Whip he had performed rather brilliantly, somehow holding the Tories together as a Parliamentary force during the Suez crisis and after, as well as engineering Macmillan's succession.

When one surveys the major politicians of the 1960s and 70s – as we shall have cause to do in Chapters Five and Six – the phenomenon that leaps to the eye is that they were all so very much larger than life, in contrast to today's grey managementspeaking clones. Heath was no exception. He was, it is true, a very dull, very stiff and very charmless man. But he was *so* dull, he became interesting by that very fact; he was *so* stiff that in his awkwardness he seemed one of us; he was *so* charmless that one couldn't help but nurture a sneaking soft spot for him. And yet at the same time there was a sort of cosmic aspect to him, as if he were the Platonic ideal of dull, stiff charmlessness.

His intellect was undoubted, and his energy was colossal; nowadays, energy is the premier requirement for a politician, but in the more relaxed 60s Heath stood out. His being unmarried seemed to symbolise much about him; he had no family to divert his energies, and his bachelor status chimed with his crustiness and coldness. Foreign affairs of the diplomatic kind were what really interested him, but, despite a maiden speech deploring the then Labour government's unimaginative response to the development of the Coal and Steel Community, Heath doesn't appear to have had a great deal of interest in the European project until round about Macmillan's conversion.

Other Cabinet changes put key Europhiles in important positions; Duncan Sandys took over Commonwealth Relations and Christopher Soames Agriculture (these two were Churchill's sons-in-law),

each charged with the tricky task of squaring membership with potentially hostile interests. Sceptical players within the cabinet were cleverly neutralised. Macmillan's great rival Rab Butler, who was less appalled by Europe than unenthused by it, was placed in charge of the ministerial committee directing negotiations; Butler's careful, plodding and mild reformism probably held back progress, but ensured competence and one more positive voice within Cabinet. Heath's great rival Reggie Maudling, who had been instrumental in setting up EFTA, was shunted away from European policy.

A Thousand Years of History

On the Labour side of the house, there was relatively little sympathy for the European cause. There were, to be sure, some Euro-enthusiasts, George Brown, Anthony Crosland and Roy Jenkins among others, but their position cut little ice in a party riven by muscular shoving between left and right. They were in the inner circle of leader Hugh Gaitskell on the right of the party, but Gaitskell himself held a "so what?" position not unlike that of Rab Butler. Furthermore, he had only recently survived some very bruising encounters with the left of his party, having tried and failed to modernise its position on Clause 4 nationalisation and controlling the commanding heights of the economy, stood firm against unilateral nuclear disarmament and seen off a leadership challenge from Harold Wilson. Presumably he was hardly looking for another punch up.

Gaitskell tried to avoid any kind of a strong position, but as the membership application became a reality he found himself pushed to oppose it, partly on party political grounds, partly out of solidarity with the Commonwealth, and, one supposes, partly out of personal conviction. He did not relish the decision, particularly as it was an endorsement of his enemies' ideas made in the teeth of his friends' opposition. But he was a very able advocate of the anti position, most notably in his triumphant speech to the Labour Party conference in Brighton in 1962, in which he famously asserted that membership would involve sacrificing "a thousand years of island history".

It was one of the great political speeches, though his Deputy Leader George Brown, of whom more later, followed up Gaitskell's brilliant triumph with a clever, understated speech that, while not contradicting anything Gaitskell had said, left the door open for a future Labour *volte face*. Gaitskell had the last laugh, though. As leader of the opposition, likely, given the polls, to be the next Prime

Minister, the Common Market negotiators couldn't help but take his opposition into account.

Kangaroos

The talks, which began formally with Heath's presentation of the application in Paris in October 1961, were incredibly detailed. The important issues were the position of the Commonwealth with respect to the Community, the integration of the British into the Common Agricultural Policy (known as the CAP—the British, though they also provided artificial support for an uneconomic agricultural sector, had a different and arguably superior system), and of course the level of Britain's contribution to the budget. These actually don't sound too daunting in principle, and one possible option, urged by Jean Monnet among others, was that Britain could join the EEC quickly and in principle, and leaving the details to be thrashed out after joining. Monnet realised correctly that once in it would be hard to leave (actually, nothing in the Treaty of Rome allows for a country withdrawing from the EEC), whereas if all the details had to be worked out in advance, it would be infinitely harder to agree the conditions for entry. Better to move into an empty house and furnish it, than to insist on buying all the furniture in advance and hope the house is still for sale afterwards.

However, Monnet's suggestion was ignored, and as the Government's involvement in trade and industry was so much greater than we are used to now, that meant very tedious negotiations indeed. In her contemporary account of the arguments, Nora Beloff lists some of the commodities that had to be included separately and individually, with tariff levels set for each product of the Commonwealth countries: cricket bats, polo sticks, desiccated coconut, extract of mimosa. The six countries of the EEC worried about being swamped by British bacon and eggs unless British farmers were put immediately onto the European system of featherbedding farmers, rather than remaining for a transitional period on the British featherbed. Some agreements were straightforward: tariffs were abolished for Commonwealth-produced tinned kangaroo meat, for instance

Nor was the comprehensiveness of the negotiations the only problem. There were two obvious and sensible ways of conducting them. One would be a seven-way conference, with Britain and the Six sitting around the table together. Another, perfectly good, would be for bilateral talks between Britain and the European Commission. Given the choice between two sensible structures, need it be said

that the Six chose a third, hopeless compromise? Britain would negotiate with the Six, who would act not as individual governments, but in concert as far as possible.

Under this diabolical system, for each and every item on the agenda, the Six would therefore have to conduct their own internal negotiations in order to thrash out a common position. That could be very time-consuming in itself. Then, given the common EEC position, they would then enter the negotiations proper with the British. In the event that the British demanded some movement or compromise, the Six would then have to disappear into a conclave again and reopen delicate issues that everyone hoped had been settled. This not only took terribly long periods of time, but also deterred compromise. It made Britain appear intransigent whenever a sticking point was reached. To cap it all, there was a rotating chairmanship, so that issues settled under one chairman were liable to be reopened under another.

Even that wasn't fiendish enough. To complicate things further, the Six themselves, even by the Autumn of 1961, had not yet finalised the details of their agreement. In particular, the final form of the CAP had not been settled. It would have been helpful, not only to the British, had the British been able to sit in on these separate negotiations and develop a policy that could cover a wider range of agricultural interests than the Six could envisage. Failing that, a quick conclusion to the membership negotiations would allow the British into the CAP talks as full members. But the French aim was to shape the CAP in their favour before worrying about how the British fitted in. It suited the French to drag out the membership negotiations to allow for the prior conclusion of the CAP talks between the Six.

Agreement on the CAP in early 1962 was followed by the Six's flat rejection of the British proposal to allow the Commonwealth favourable access to European markets. That suddenly increased the scope of the talks still further, as negotiations then had to deal with each country and each product separately, kangaroo meat and all.

The French continued to procrastinate even after the terms of the CAP were finalised, setting out a completely new set of proposals on temperate foodstuffs (whatever they may be) at the end of July 1962, and also demanding an impossible financial package for the British—all in the face of the opposition of their five supposed partners—in order to prevent the talks being completed provisionally before the August Summer break (which, for good measure, French

Foreign Minister Couve de Murville doubled in length, insisting on reconvening in October).

Given all this, Heath's conduct of the negotiations was masterful, his grasp of the detail extraordinary, his deployment of his hand-picked team deft. By January 1963, agreement had been reached on most matters, including tariff levels for 2,500 import products from the Commonwealth. Fewer than 30 product tariffs remained to be settled.

Pulling the Plug

But time was against Heath and the British. French Assembly elections strengthened de Gaulle's hand, while Macmillan's Government was faltering, and the anti-EEC Labour Party looked likely to become the next British government (as they duly did, in 1964). As public opinion moved against the Tories, it moved against the Common Market as well.

At the same time, Macmillan was getting to know President Kennedy in the US, which worried de Gaulle. When Kennedy cancelled the development of the Skybolt nuclear air-to-ground missile, which was behind schedule and over budget (like every defence project ever in the entire history of the world), Macmillan persuaded him to give the British access to Polaris missiles instead.

This merely convinced de Gaulle that Britain was primarily an Atlanticist power, not a European one. He might have changed his mind had the British agreed to share its more advanced nuclear technology with the French (who were desperate for it), but Macmillan made no such offer. And so, on the 14th January 1963 – when virtually all the major sticking points of the negotiations had been cleared – de Gaulle called a notorious press conference at the Elysée Palace, and exercised his veto against British membership. The General said “Non!”

He cited Britain's special habits and traditions, its incompatible trading system, its early scepticism of the European project. But the main reason was that Britain would be the thin end of a wedge; if Britain came in, a number of other countries would too, and the result would be an Atlantic community dominated, if not joined, by America.

The other five EEC nations were even more outraged than Britain; de Gaulle was isolated. Indeed, it wasn't even clear that the French negotiating team were aware of de Gaulle's intentions. Like a newly decapitated chicken, the negotiations carried on for a while, but once

it became clear that de Gaulle was unmoveable and the veto would stay in place, the talks were called off on 29th January.

Four days later, Hugh Gaitskell died after a short and sudden illness; the leadership, and soon afterwards the post of Prime Minister, fell into the lap of the Labour left, in the shape of Harold Wilson. Heath's reputation, already good, was made by his conduct of the negotiations, despite their ending in failure. By 1965, he was the leader of his party.

Coda

This was not the last of Britain's doomed attempts to get into de Gaulle's Europe; a second attempt went off half-cocked in 1967. George Brown was another of those bizarre, larger-than-life 60s politicians. Short, jowly, argumentative, a brilliant populist on the right of the Labour Party, his greatest contribution to British politics was his fondness for alcohol, combined with a splendid ability to shake off tedious inhibitions under its influence. In these days of khaki Hoons and grey Hewitts, of family-friendly hours, of merciless press coverage of every deviation and peccadillo, it is impossible not to be nostalgic for the days when George Brown bestrode the world.

Brown was an outspoken pro-European, but he never let that get in the way of a good argument, even when he became Foreign Secretary. His biographer Peter Paterson tells the story of a discussion in the Quai d'Orsay when Brown suddenly began to abuse Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (future President of France, and later chairman of the EU constitutional convention). Giscard, whose English is fluent, understood every word, but Brown capped off his performance by telling a translator "You translate that for this Frog". On another occasion, at a banquet given by the Belgian government for Brown and his entourage, he only left after making the following contribution to international relations: "While you have been wining and dining here tonight, who has been defending Europe? I'll tell you who—the British army. And where, you may ask, are the soldiers of the Belgian Army tonight? They're in the brothels of Brussels."

On the topic of Europe, Harold Wilson's views were not dissimilar to Gaitskell's; initially, he didn't really care. As something of an internationalist, he was more interested in the Commonwealth and the problems of the developing world. However, by 1966 the Labour Party was becoming more interested in the EEC. Relations with the Commonwealth were souring, and the economy was a disaster area, thanks to a misguided policy to keep a strong pound. So—as in

1961 – getting Britain into Europe began to look like a fresh policy initiative after a bad period for the Government.

Wilson does not seem to have made Brown Foreign Secretary in 1966 in order to promote the European cause, but that was the net result. Brown presented Wilson with a series of reports about European relations in the Autumn, which seem to have persuaded him. Eventually, despite some divisions, Wilson got the Cabinet's agreement by majority (although some anti-marketeters, like Richard Crossman, acquiesced in the application confident that de Gaulle would veto it again).

To prepare the ground, Wilson and Brown decided on the odd course of making flying visits, in early 1967, to all Six nations of the EEC to meet their premiers and foreign ministers. Inevitably with Brown on board, one or two of the welcoming banquets and beanfeasts got out of hand, but no-one declared war, so that was alright.

The surprise effect was on Wilson. Lukewarm to begin with, accepting the case for entry with his head but not his heart, the requirements of diplomatic advocacy seem to have energised him, so that he became almost as committed as Brown. His main mission, as was obvious after the debacle of 1963, was to persuade de Gaulle. What he actually did, ironically, was persuade himself.

Did he persuade de Gaulle? Not in the least. Lanky de Gaulle received his two diminutive visitors with politeness, and listened to their pitch. He responded with faint praise, recognising the distance that the British, and the Labour Party in particular, had moved, but adding only that that was an encouraging sign. He suggested a couple of ways that Britain could be associated with the EEC without actually being a member thereof.

Wilson was too fired up to take the hint and, with the backing of his fractious Parliamentary party and the Cabinet, announced his application on 2nd May 1967. It took de Gaulle two whole weeks to reject the doomed proposal. On his analysis, only three options were possible. First, the EEC could be destroyed and a new one built by the Six, Britain, and any others who were interested (he added that this would merely be the precursor to an Atlantic free trade zone that would take away Europe's personality). Second, Britain (and the other EFTA countries) could be associates of the EEC. Or third, everyone could "wait for the change to be brought about by the internal and external developments of which, it seems, England [*sic*] is showing signs."

In still other words, “Non, toujours!” De Gaulle waited until November to deliver the inevitable official veto. But that was the moment when George Brown’s clever political instincts overcame the buffoon in him. At a difficult Cabinet meeting (the veto had coincided with yet another run on sterling, a humiliating devaluation and a Cabinet reshuffle), where the majority opinion was one of relief that the veto had got the Labour government out of a pickle, Brown carried his argument that the application should stay on the table, for a future government to revive after de Gaulle had left the scene.