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The Labour Party's Dilemma

The time for decision is drawing near. In October the Commons will have to decide about Britain's entry into EEC, an issue sharply dividing the country. Not only is there no agreement among the electorate, but the split goes right through the parties. There has been a most vehement debate inside the Labour Party though the trade unions have expressed themselves against entry and the party executive has officially come out against joining on the terms negotiated in Brussels and been calling for new elections.

Parliamentary elections however would avail Labour nothing in this instance. A Labour Government could not have obtained better terms nor could it get them now. Mr Wilson's fierce attacks on the terms of entry in the Commons debate were therefore without any foundation. It was indeed surprising to see Mr Wilson display more concern for New Zealand interests than the New Zealand Government itself which concluded long ago that the New Zealand issue had been resolved satisfactorily. The position of the West Indies is similar.

Of interest however is that Mr Wilson and his party's executive, unlike the powerful trade union wing, did not come out against entry *as such* but relied on the terms to justify their opposition to British accession. Much has been said about these Labour tactics and the somewhat inglorious conduct of the party leader. But it has meanwhile become fairly clear that Mr Wilson and his executive were guided primarily by party political considerations and only secondarily, if at all, by British interests.

That Mr Wilson, an economist by training, appreciates that Great Britain has a future only as part of a larger Europe cannot be disputed. He was ready to join EEC himself. He knows that, as the Home Secretary, Mr Maudling, put it, the decision on entry is not one between disaster and automatic prosperity but that the greater opportunities and chances are in EEC and the greater dangers outside. This is equally true of the economic and political spheres. The only political choice for Great Britain is this: either play a leading part in a progressively stronger EEC or act as an appendix of the USA or else adopt the role of an insignificant outsider.

Given these alternatives, Labour's tactics make sense only on the assumption that Mr Wilson and the party executive take it for granted that the Commons vote in October will be for entry whatever happens and think that their opposition will maintain or save the party's unity and mollify the trade unions. Such tactics may serve their purpose, with or without the party whips, for the vote on the principle of accession. The real test will be later when the many sequential bills come up for debate and decision; for it is they which will give real substance to the decision to join.

The history of the EEC knows of many instances of such discrepancy between a basic decision and the settlement of points of detail. This is a dilemma which was reflected by the Rome Treaties as well as the Declarations of The Hague at the end of 1969 and, to a special degree, by the EEC's attitude over many years to British entry. Agreement was invariably achieved only on the basis of rather vague ideas about the aims and substance of a European Community. (Not even de Gaulle's opposition to British entry was a matter of principle.) Agreements were extolled when concluded, only to be followed the very next day by fierce controversies on matters of detail which give a practical meaning to the aims and substance.

The British will come up against this kind of constant controversy not only in the EEC but even more in their own country, in the Commons and inside the political parties. The Conservatives will certainly not escape it, but Labour will most probably have to submit to a long endurance test unless it alters course. For no political party can in the long term afford conflicting attitudes in its ranks on such an important issue as EEC entry and its sequels—and it does not matter whether they show up at voting time in the Commons or are papered over by three-line whips—unless its very existence is to be put in peril. It can only be hoped that when the Commons have taken their —positive—decision on joining EEC the Labour Party will not try to torpedo the numerous elementary bills on grounds of principle and thereby impede the progress of integration on the British side and possibly upset the time-table. A positive attitude to European integration is crucial for the future of Great Britain, and also the Labour Party. Labour should not doubt it. Otto G. Mayer