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Wilson's Referendum

By the end of next June we shall know whether the European Community can still count on Great Britain as a member or not. Prime Minister Harold Wilson has announced that the promised referendum is to be held before the summer recess of Parliament and that its outcome will be binding on his Government. The ruling Labour Party which is deeply split on the issue of Europe and therefore incapable of making a decision has in this way passed the responsibility to the people. The referendum is unprecedented in British history. It is ironic that the people are being called upon to defend the sovereignty of their Parliament against the Europeans by absolving this same Parliament of its duty of decision.

For Harold Wilson the hour of truth has drawn near. He had pledged himself to a referendum in the belief that this was the only way of keeping the strife-torn Labour Party together and his own leadership intact. He will need great skill now to free himself of the shackles he put on himself for the sake of political peace inside his party and to complete what will be his third turnabout. For it is hardly any longer in doubt that Wilson will recommend continued membership of the Community to the electorate. His cautious re-metamorphosis into a pro-European who against a minority in his own Cabinet comes out in favour of continued membership may, however, not carry conviction with a majority of his countrymen. If the majority really votes "No", Wilson will have to take the country out of the EC or resign from office; if he chooses to stay in the EC and in office, he is unlikely to survive the inevitable clashes with Labour's left wing. But even if the electorate decides for Community membership, the Left can be expected to rise in revolt; and Wilson can hardly exclude its representatives from the Cabinet without endangering his majority. So Wilson's fall as a consequence of the referendum is feasible.

The British renegotiations, or rather what Wilson is selling to the British electorate under this label, are meanwhile continuing on the European stage. Sugar prices and the ratio of contributions to national product are being discussed there while in Great Britain the debate was long ago brought back to first principles – to the question

of sovereignty. The European partner countries can certainly by a few financial concessions here and there help the British Government in its attempt to escape from the trap it set for itself. But the crucial question whether there exists the willingness to surrender sovereign rights to a supranational Community must be answered by the British people themselves. There can be no negotiations about sovereignty. Nations must either accept the Community concept or stay outside.

What economic consequences would ensue for Great Britain from withdrawal from the Community is a matter of keen argument. Some debaters speak of economic suicide and a stricken Britain vegetating on the outskirts of Europe while others say that ex-Prime Minister Heath's calculations have proved wrong. Heath's intention was to give British industry a wholesome shock by confronting it with the European competition. But this cure-or-kill treatment does not seem to have done the British economy much good, for while imports from the Continent rose by leaps and bounds, British exports to the EC partners lagged clearly behind. Withdrawal from the Community might isolate Great Britain but could, many observers believe, have curative effects; most of the ingredients of the British malaise – price and wage inflation, proneness to strikes, investment shortfalls – were home-made and could only be removed by Great Britain itself. The country could be delivered from its lethargy, they say, only by the knowledge that it was standing alone.

What would Europe lose if the referendum went against continued membership? Basic to the wish to incorporate Great Britain in the Community was – apart from the hope of gaining a counter-force to Germany's growing power potential – chiefly the conviction that a Europe without England would be too small to play a really significant role in world politics. Great Britain has not vindicated either of these two tenets since joining. Under this aspect British withdrawal would be no disaster for the countries remaining in the EC, at least not in the short term, and it can in any case only be beneficial for the progress of European integration if the uncertainty about Great Britain's attitude to Europe is at long last removed.

Claus Hamann