

# Britain and the EEC: analysis of the referendum's 'yes' vote

By W. L. Luetkens

The British referendum firmly supporting membership of Britain in the Common Market proved in the upshot to be a more positive and constructive event than anyone had had any right to expect. Though it was conceived of originally for transparently tactical reasons, and though the level of the campaign arguments was no better than it ought to have been, the result provided evidence that some of the clichés of doom lately lavished upon the country were not really justified. The 2 to 1 majority for staying in the Common Market, which included varying majorities within all the three national political parties, demonstrated that, after all, there is a potentially strong political consensus in Britain; and the affirmative votes, albeit less pronounced, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, show that Britain is not in immediate danger of disintegration; the size of the majority and its distribution can hardly be reconciled with the taunt that the country has become ungovernable. Far from it; one is left with the impression that there is a solid majority of moderate opinion, distributed through the three national parties — Conservative, Labour and Liberal — that wants to be governed more effectively than has often been the case of late.

That reading of the referendum, perhaps, is even more important than the immediate effect of the vote, which is to keep Britain within the European Community. Yet the vote was, of course, a

historic event, marking the conclusion of a long evolution. The first milestone along that road was Winston Churchill's encouragement, in his 1946 Zürich speech, of unity in continental Western Europe, to be smiled upon but not joined by the British. When the EEC of the Six had become a fact, Britain, with the Scandinavians, the Irish and the European neutrals, sought to arrive at a trading relation with it in a free-trade area, providing for tariff-free trade but no common economic or other policies. That overture was rebuffed by France, as were two attempts, made in the 1960s during the prime ministerships of Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson, by Britain to join the EEC. Only when General de Gaulle was out of the way did the third attempt, made by Edward Heath as Prime Minister, finally achieve success. It is noteworthy that governments of both the big British political parties in turn attempted to gain entry, though, when in opposition, Labour was always more critical, whereas Mr. Wilson's endeavours did have Conservative support. Nonetheless, the historic evidence supports the results of the referendum: that, in spite of the arguments and the debates, there is a national consensus in Britain in favour of EEC membership.

Its existence, however, was at times obscured by the electoral system, which, the existence of the Liberal Party notwithstanding, has developed into what is really a two-party pattern. It used to be argued that it was the great merit of the British electoral system (which is identical with the Canadian) that the extremists of each party inevitably became the captives of the moderates. Increasingly that has not been the case in the Labour Party, within which the left has exercised more influence than its numbers would warrant. (The displacement of Mr. Heath by Margaret Thatcher as leader of the Conservatives may have heralded a similar development within their party, with the right increasing its say.)

*Moderate opinion desires effective government*



*Mr. Luetkens is a member of the foreign editorial staff of the Financial Times of London, England. He has his master's degree in modern history. After a period of service with Reuters News Agency, he was the Financial Times correspondent in Bonn from 1958 to 1969. Today he writes about a number of countries, including Canada. He says he has always led a sheltered life, which may explain his affection for Canada. The views expressed in this article are those of Mr. Luetkens.*