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22 January 1975

CABINET

REFERENDUM ON EEC MEMBERSHIP

Note by the Prime Minister

I attach a draft of the statement which I propose to make in the House of Commons tomorrow. We shall have an opportunity to discuss this at tomorrow morning's meeting of the Cabinet.

H W

10 Downing Street

22 January 1975

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BRITISH MEMBERSHIP OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER

Mr. Speaker, I will with permission make a statement about the means by which the British people will decide the issue of our membership of the European Community.

2. It is the declared policy of the Government that, once the outcome of our renegotiation of the terms of membership is known, the British people should have the right to decide, through the ballot box, by means either of a General Election or of a Referendum, whether Britain should continue in membership of the European Community or should withdraw.

3. The Government has decided that this should be done by means of a Referendum.

4. Prolonged uncertainty and delay on the decision of the British people are in the interests neither of Britain nor of other members of the Community. After fifteen years of discussion and negotiation it is an issue which all of us in this House and in the country want to see settled; and uncertainty about the future of British membership is inhibiting the work of the Community. The Government is committed to putting the issue to the people before 10 October this year. Provided that the outcome of renegotiation is known in time, we intend to hold the Referendum before the summer holiday, which means in practice not later than the end of June. We shall therefore propose to the House arrangements which would make it possible to hold the Referendum on that timetable, tight though it will be.

5. When the outcome of renegotiation is known, the Government will consider what its own recommendation should be, whether for continued membership of the Community on the basis of the renegotiated terms, or for withdrawal, and will announce its decision to the House in due course. That announcement will no doubt provide an opportunity for the House to debate the question of substance.

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6. The circumstances of this Referendum are unique; and the matter is one on which strong views have long been held which cross party lines. The Cabinet has therefore decided that, if when the time comes there are members of the Government (including members of the Cabinet) who do not feel able to accept and support the Government's recommendation, whatever it may be, they will, once the recommendation has been announced, be free to support and speak in favour of a different conclusion in the Referendum campaign.

7. As to the arrangements for the Referendum, I told the House on Tuesday, the rules for the test of public opinion must be made by this House. The Government proposes within a very few weeks to publish a White Paper on the rules and arrangements for conducting the Referendum. The White Paper will set out the various possible courses and the Government's proposals on such matters as the information policy of the Government, the question of expenditure by campaigning groups, and arrangements for conducting the poll, counting the votes and announcing the result.

8. The Government will find time for a debate on the White Paper in this House before the Easter recess. That debate will of course be separate from, and will precede, the Parliamentary debate which will be necessary on the outcome of the negotiations. The debate on the White Paper will enable the Government to take full account of the views expressed by Rt. Hon. and Hon. Members of this House, and by public opinion generally, in drafting the necessary legislation for the Referendum.

9. The Government proposes to introduce the legislation around Easter-time. As it will be constitutional legislation, we shall propose that all stages should be taken on the floor of the House. If we are to be able to hold the Referendum before the summer holiday, the Bill will need to complete its passage through both Houses and to receive Royal assent by the end of May.

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