



BRITISH INFORMATION SERVICES

POLICY AND REFERENCE DIVISION

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POLICY BACKGROUND

6/75. EUROPEAN MEMBERSHIP II: THE REFERENDUM

Special legislation will provide the framework for Britain's first referendum, to be held on the issue of whether to remain within or to leave the European Community. The Government's proposals, set out in a White Paper published in February, have been incorporated into a Bill and will be debated by Parliament, which has now returned from its Easter recess, this week.

It is hoped to hold the referendum as early as possible in June since, says the Government, "prolonged uncertainty and delay on the decision" are "inhibiting the work of the Community" and are "in the interests neither of Britain nor of other members."

The experience of other countries in conducting polls on issues of special importance and the views of major political parties and interested organizations in Britain have been given full consideration, in order to make the process "efficient and fair."

Organization of the Ballot

The Government is anxious to keep polling procedure simple and familiar, retaining as far as possible the existing election machinery. Polling stations will be open from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. on referendum day, and all registered electors will be eligible to vote. The ballot paper will carry a single straightforward question, requiring a "Yes" or "No" answer. The suggested phrasing is: "The Government have announced the results of the renegotiation of the United Kingdom's terms of membership of the European Community. DO YOU THINK THAT THE UNITED KINGDOM SHOULD STAY IN THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY?"

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The Government considers that a central count would be more appropriate than traditional local counting arrangements because "the constituency is the whole of the United Kingdom," and the result should be announced as a national decision. However, since this is an issue on which Members hold strong and differing views, the decision on how to arrange the counting cannot be known until after the House debate on April 10.

The most significant departure from usual practice is in connection with campaigning in the period leading up to the referendum. The Government has decided that all its members, including those in the Cabinet, will be free to speak out and campaign as they wish. This freedom will not, however, extend to parliamentary proceedings or official business. Ministers will continue to represent the Government position at home and abroad, whatever their private views.

Cost of Campaign

Campaign expenditure will not be limited but major organizations and interests will be required to disclose the amount spent.

Official polling procedures will, it is estimated, cost the public a total of about \$22 million.

Television and Radio Coverage

During General Elections, special arrangements are made for election broadcasts by the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Independent Broadcasting Authority in consultation with the main political parties. These broadcasts, carried as a public service, are relayed simultaneously by both networks. Neither the BBC nor the commercial IBA carries political advertising.

The Government is encouraging a similar approach to the referendum. There is to be no political advertising. Instead, it is hoped, those responsible for news and feature programming will make time available to the two main campaigning organizations for a short series of referendum broadcasts, to ensure a "fair balance between the opposing views."

Government Information Activities

In order to make sure that British voters are sufficiently well-informed, both about the EC and the referendum, two official documents are to be prepared and delivered to every household:

- A popular version of the March 1975 White Paper, which will contain a non-technical account of the renegotiated terms and the Government's reasons for its recommendation.

- . An explanatory note on the conduct of the referendum.

In addition, the Government is concerned that a clear statement of both sides of the case should be made available. It is therefore proposed that a further document, containing a short statement of each viewpoint together with a set of questions and the answers of those advocating membership and those opposed to it, would be included in the package.

When the British people have voted and their votes have been counted, the Government has undertaken to defer to a simple majority decision, without qualifications or conditions.

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