

**John Allan May\***  
**Writes:**

## STILL AN ALTERNATIVE

"The Veto is likely to foster argument and unrest."

THE ALTERNATIVE to the Common Market was always presented as isolation. We should be left alone in the world, it was stated, while the United States ignored us, Europe grew rich and powerful and the Commonwealth turned its attentions elsewhere.

But there was—and there still is—a quite different alternative. It can only come about now if Parliament is unable to pass the enabling legislation to give effect to the vote in principle to join the Common Market, or if the Market itself collapses, or if history forces it onto quite a new path. Nevertheless it exists.

The alternative is, of course, to bring Europe into a single Free Trade Area. This would include both the EEC and EFTA, and all others who wished to join. Or the same job could be done by forming a partnership between the two organisations, regulated by periodic meetings of a joint Council of Ministers and obligated to reconsider its development and constitution in, say, ten years time.

I suspect that this proposal was never officially put forward by Britain's "Europeans" because it was just too darn' attractive and would have stopped the Common Market bandwagon in its tracks. But the "Europeans" knew that this would keep Britain out of political entanglements on the Continent and it is these entanglements which they see as the main advantages of joining the market. We relinquish some of our Parliamentary sovereignty in exchange for an equal say in the future policies of France and Germany and a veto on any policy that is seriously to our national disadvantage. There are solid arguments for judging that this will help to ensure peace in Europe. In my own judgement, however, it is as likely to foster argument and unrest.

It is for this reason, rather than for any lack of Europeaness on my own part, that I have always personally favoured the easier if longer road to European Unity. That is the road that I have outlined above, through a Free Trade Area or an EEC-EFTA Partnership.

I believe it will be safer for us if Unity grows in the natural order of things and more dangerous if an effort is made to force it upon Europe.

However my purpose here is simply to explain why I believe that the Alternative has always existed and, if things go wrong, can still be chosen instead of enlarging the Market.

Some people believe that the Free Trade Area idea was tried (in 1958) and failed. This is not the case. After the formation of the Common Market it was proposed by the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation, now defunct, that a Free Trade Area be formed between the Market and all OEEC countries that could not be, or did not wish to be, members. In the Spring of 1958 a recommendation to this effect was unanimously passed by representatives of the sixteen then members.

When the time for negotiations arrived something ominous to the proposition had occurred. General de Gaulle had returned to power. His first "European" act was to require his government to veto the plan. This the new French government did, in Paris in December. It was to be the first of three French vetoes.

EFTA was formed in the following year, partly with the intention of somehow arriving at an accommodation with the EEC. Two years later, however, Harold Macmillan decided to apply for EEC membership instead.

The unhappy record of negotiations since then is well known. But the idea of a Free Trade Area remained in the background. In 1963 de Gaulle himself proposed that it should be taken up again, a proposition he repeated to Harold Wilson in 1967.

Mr. Wilson also turned it down. For he too then believed that we could get into the market on generous terms and that the relinquishment of a limited amount of Parliamentary sovereignty was worth the gain of a continuous say in French and German foreign policy. For this, not economic growth, is what we gain from entry.

All the economic advantages of a larger market can be obtained through free trade agreements and the independent harmonisation of company law, welfare costs and so on. There is not, and never has been, any need to join the EEC to obtain a larger "home market."

Now this is not a political judgement. It is a fact of life. Any government can make free trade agreements if it likes and its proposed partners are willing.

It is for this reason that I personally believe that the unpublicised Alternative to the Common Market still exists and will be waiting there for us if, as is at least conceivable, things go wrong. But even if they go right (from the "European" point of view) I think it quite probable that the Common Market itself will tend in this direction in the future. As the recent currency upheaval has shown, its present make-up is just too inflexible to be realistic. In the end realism will win.

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John Allan May, London Bureau Chief of *Christian Science Monitor*, has written this article specially for LAND & LIBERTY.