

LETTER FROM LONDON



# Britain's toe on the Continent

**Technological cooperation  
goes forward exclusive of  
the Common Market**

by David Fishlock

**D**uring the 1950's some individual European nations began to feel themselves at an economic disadvantage in competing for world markets against large-scale units like the United States and the Soviet Union. So six nations joined together to form the European Economic Community, or Common Market, with the ultimate goal of uniting their economies.

Great Britain did not join the Common Market at the time it was founded because the British felt their commitments to the Commonwealth took precedence. Later the Commonwealth looked like less of a bargain, and the British for years have been trying to get into the Common Market.

Even without the presence of de Gaulle, French policy remains a major stumbling block to British entry. French farmers have been having economic troubles lately because of crop surpluses and declining prices. At a meeting of Common Market members in The Hague last week, French diplomacy scored a major success in persuading the other members to adopt a program of agricultural support that would guarantee good prices for French farmers.

For the British the new agricultural policy means that entry into the Common Market would be costly. British food prices would go up about 15 percent. Added to the other costs of membership this would mean an extra British outlay of about \$900 million per year, according to a French estimate.

In return for adoption of their agricultural policy, the French agreed to start entry negotiations with Britain no later than June 30. But no early admission is expected in London, certainly not within a year of the start of negotiations and probably not before 1973 or 1974.

Nevertheless, the British are going in for increased technological cooperation with Common Market countries.

An important example of such collaboration is a project involving the gas centrifuge apparatus for enriching uranium (SN: 5/3, p. 438).

The capital requirements of gaseous diffusion plants have made the United States very nearly the world's monopoly supplier of enriched uranium. But about two years ago the Dutch broke the news that they had designed a successful gas centrifuge, a device that would cost relatively little and would, in array, separate uranium 235 from natural samples.

The Dutch development fitted very well with the plans of the West German Government. The Germans have plans to develop some 40,000 megawatts of nuclear power by 1980 but are reluctant to become dependent on the United States for enriched fuel. A German attempt to use centrifuges—there is also a German centrifuge design—to enrich uranium would be taken by many as a cover for weapons development, an activity forbidden to West Germany under the Brussels Treaty of 1954. In 1968 the Germans began negotiation with the Dutch to merge their design activities and construct a joint enrichment facility on Dutch soil.

The British, meanwhile, had been pursuing plans of their own to build up an enrichment facility that would offer enriched fuel to the world while supplying Britain's domestic power industry. The British plan to derive a quarter of their domestic power supply from nuclear reactors by 1976, and the scale of this development, they hoped, would support a competitive effort in the world market.

But the German-Dutch collaboration looked like troublesome competition, so the British revealed one of their most closely guarded secrets: They too have a centrifuge. Tripartite talks began at the end of 1968, and an agreement on a three-way pool is about to be concluded.

Italy and Belgium have both asked for admission to the centrifuge consortium. France, however, has a small gaseous diffusion plant on which she hoped a European enrichment facility would be based; her attitude toward the centrifuge agreement has been unfriendly.

In September, in another important collaborative decision, a British engine was chosen for the new European multi-role combat aircraft (MRCA).

This is another project that began without a British presence. Now, however, Germany, Italy and Britain have agreed on the shape of an aircraft for which the potential market—like that for enriched uranium—is huge. The three want to build a total of 1,185 planes, but each will pay for development and tooling only in proportion to its share of the order. Britain's share is one-third.

More collaboration may come from talks about to begin that will cover computers, meteorology, telecommunications, transportation, oceanography, metallurgy and pollution control.