

Pierre Werner, Luxembourg and European meanderings

Caption: In his memoirs, Pierre Werner, former Luxembourg Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, discusses the empty chair crisis of 1965–1966.

Source: WERNER, Pierre. Itinéraires luxembourgeois et européens, Évolutions et souvenirs (1945-1985). Volume II. Luxembourg: Editions Saint-Paul, 1991. 351 p. ISBN 2-87963-124-6. p. 64-65.

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[...]

On 30 June, we met to discuss the financial arrangements. As one statement followed another, second thoughts began to emerge, and the overall approach for the application of the Commission's programme began to unravel. At one point, Paul-Henri Spaak made a suggestion, which he would live to regret, that a clean sweep be made of the idea of strengthening the European Parliament's budgetary powers. Some colleagues decried the abandonment of his position of a parliamentary democrat. However, in the minds of the majority, it was understood that we could not let ourselves run aground on that ineffable taboo. However, the discussion on this point became so heated that the Chairman, Maurice Couve de Murville, exclaimed in a sarcastically haughty tone, 'Just because we are talking about the Parliament does not mean that we should behave like parliamentarians.' The evening session had got off on the wrong foot. An agreement had to be found on how to finance the agricultural policy during the transitional period, however long that might be, which was still under discussion. The Ministers were caught up in tedious, depressing talks on accounting matters. Time was short for a consideration of all the ideas put forward. But Couve de Murville held out for the 30 June deadline. It was an ill omen. On the stroke of midnight, a power failure plunged the Conference Centre into darkness. We decided to meet in a select group, as we often did when the situation seemed intolerable. At 2 a.m., Mr Couve de Murville, keeping his usual cool posture, spoke of a serious crisis and breach of commitments and then closed the meeting.

We were bewildered. Mr Couve de Murville did not want to set a date for the resumption of discussions. The French Government would call us, he said.

Before he closed the meeting, I cried out, 'A famous French statesman once said, "Let us negotiate, always negotiate!"' I was quoting from my failing memory. Mr Couve de Murville snapped, 'I have never denied that Talleyrand was French!' In fact, the quotation that I voiced came from Richelieu, who wrote in his political memoirs, 'Negotiating continually is absolutely necessary for the good of the state.' So the meeting broke up on a literary misunderstanding. But that did not diminish the impact of my words, which were in line with the efforts that I had made to find compromises.

[...]

I must add that, during this critical phase, I was not particularly dismayed. I felt that the Six had already come too far to let the Community unravel. France, in not only accepting but indeed calling for the integration of agricultural markets, had seized a golden opportunity to boost the benefits of the Community and tip the scales in favour of an economic sector in which she enjoyed a strong and promising position for the future. The idea that had occurred to some of moving ahead without France, or with another partner, would unquestionably have wrecked European unity for a long time. France needed its partners, just as her partners needed France. But how could we overcome our differences?

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