

'What the average Englishman thinks of the European Community' from Communauté européenne (November 1962)

Caption: In 1962, the High Authority, the National Coal Board and the Charbonnage de France jointly organise a press visit to British coalmines. Jean Choffel seizes the opportunity to interview a few people about the United Kingdom's possible accession to the European Communities.

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What the average Englishman thinks of the European Community

By Jean Choffel

During an fact-finding visit to the British coalfields, organised for the press by the High Authority, the National Coal Board and the French Mining Authority, Jean Choffel wrote a report for ‘La Vie Française’ on the possibility of the UK joining the ECSC and the EEC. We asked him to summarise his findings.

In the mines, optimism is a must

From the London office of Lord Robens, Chairman of the National Coal Board, to the foreman in the East Midlands colliery, there is total confidence in the future of the British coal mining industry.

Does this stem from a superiority complex? Perhaps it is, in as much as the two hundred million tonnes mined here each year is the equivalent of the production of the whole ECSC. Furthermore, the NCB is convinced that the competitiveness of British coal mines is far superior, overall, to that of its European rivals.

If it was not necessary to subsidise the Scottish coal mines (of which there is no question of closure), the British could, they assure us, cut prices by 10 %. Without going that far, increases in productivity and concentration will gradually improve cost prices.

It is true that senior managers deny any aggressive intentions towards the Continental market. Their number one hunting ground seems to be the North German coastal regions where they hope to sell several million tonnes of coal for the power stations.

But let us come back to ground level! What is the opinion of the man in the street as to the possible entry of Britain into the Common Market? This is their ‘Great Problem’, a title hitherto reserved for controversies over the true identity of Shakespeare. Let us note, first of all, the sincerity, albeit negative, of those involved. The average Frenchman will offer a view on any subject; the Englishman will say that, frankly, he does not have enough information to form an opinion. That is the first finding.

As for the emotional reactions, I personally did not encounter one that was hostile. The simple notion that the Continent, visited by more and more Britons every summer, is now ‘next door’ or that one must unite to withstand the Russian and American giants is the gut reaction of any taxi driver or shop assistant.

The thinking stops there in general. The destiny of the Commonwealth does not seem to bother anyone unduly. As for the economic arguments, they are vague to say the least.

Must the Government be blamed for this ignorance which it is only just now trying to overcome? It undoubtedly has a problem. Should it play up the dramatic impact of entry by stressing that national destinies are at stake, or should it stick to the technical aspects of the ‘Common Market’ at the risk of seeing possible dangers brought up by specific interests?

In fact, the decision has been taken out of their hands. The average Englishman knows that what is involved is a ‘fight to the death’ between Macmillan and Gaitskell and that one of them will not survive.

Britannia, wake up!

For the objective observer, the decisive argument is about – excuse the expression – ‘a kick in the pants’. Economists talk knowingly about the low rate of return on investment; the visitor need only look around to see the apathy into which the country is gradually sinking.

Is the famous British ‘efficiency’ a thing of the past? A colleague of mine, outraged by the time it took to

sort out even the most minor problem, compared the atmosphere in London to that which he had found in Moscow! The cult of 'take it easy', the British version of the French 'pas de zèle', has reached disquieting proportions. Heads of industry that I have met are totally convinced; in their eyes, British entry is inevitable.

Allow me to conclude on a more familiar note. At the dance hall in Nottingham, young people were dancing the twist as if it was a slow waltz!

Wake up, maestro!