

'Cannot be taken seriously' from Der Spiegel (2 August 1971)

Caption: In August 1971, in anticipation of the likely accession of the United Kingdom, Denmark, Ireland and Norway to the European Communities, German weekly publication Der Spiegel describes the difficulties encountered redefining the links between the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

Source: Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. Augstein, Rudolf ; Herausgeber Engel K., Johannes; Gaus, Günter. 02.08.1971, Nr. 32; 25. Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein KG. "Langsam unseriös", p. 65-66.

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Cannot be taken seriously

Ministers and EEC Commissioners have clashed in a ‘crazy dispute’ (in the words of one European official) about future relations with what is left of EFTA.

The emissaries from Bern and Stockholm were disappointed. On Monday of last week, the diplomats from Switzerland and Sweden had waited for hours in the Brussels Charlemagne Conference Centre for the verdict of the EEC Ministers. Then, on Tuesday morning at 3 o’clock, the Italian Foreign Minister, Aldo Moro, currently President of the Six, told them sleepily: ‘everything remains as it is for the time being.’

Sweden and Switzerland, along with Britain the greatest beneficiaries of the European Free Trade Association, have, like Austria, Portugal and Finland, set their hopes on early agreements with Brussels, the reason being that the desertion of Great Britain, Denmark and Norway to the EEC reduces the free trade area to ‘a hotchpotch of countries with diverse problems’ (to quote one Swedish diplomat). That is why the countries of the rump of EFTA are pressing in Brussels for the soon-to-be club of ten to loosen up its external customs and trade barriers.

To achieve that, Olof Palme, the Swedish Premier, has gone so far as to propose that Sweden participate in the economically senseless EEC agricultural policy, ‘including its financial aspects’. Admittedly, the Swedes, concerned to maintain their strict neutrality, shy away from anything that could look like concerted trade or foreign policies with the EEC. But they still hope that a customs union with the EEC could enable them to carry on trading undisturbed with their Nordic neighbours, which will be disappearing behind the protective walls of the Common Market.

Swiss diplomats, on the other hand, consider that what the Swedes are striving for would be ‘impossible’ for their country. The Swiss negotiators in Brussels have, it is true, expressed interest in cooperation on economic and monetary policies, but any idea of coming in on the EEC’s costly agricultural policy has been roundly rejected.

For the Swiss, a customs union with the EEC has to be ruled out simply because a common external economic policy would in itself contravene the Swiss doctrine of neutrality. What the Swiss want to negotiate in Brussels is a free trade area with the EEC. In a free trade area, in contrast to a customs union, Switzerland would remain completely independent in its trade policy with third countries. In a customs union with the EEC, on the other hand, Bern would have to impose the same duties as the EEC on such third countries.

The EEC Commissioners had already, at the beginning of June, discussed the special wants of the neutral countries, one of which is Austria, without managing to come to an agreement. Quite the contrary, in fact, for at that time, in the view of Ralf Dahrendorf, a high-ranking European official, ‘the EEC Commission had ceased to exist as a homogeneous entity’. The Commissioners had fallen out to such an extent that the Dutch Commissioner, Sicco Mansholt, stayed away from the following two meetings to show his displeasure.

Mansholt, along with the French Prime Minister, Raymond Barre, had painted a gloomy picture of the Community’s future (‘The EEC is on the way down’) and called for the customs and agricultural policies of the Six to be defended against the residual EFTA. Customs barriers, according to Mansholt, should punish the Swedes, Swiss, Austrians, Portuguese and Finns for refusing to opt for full membership of the Brussels-based organisation.

The President of the EEC Commission, Franco Malfatti, and his Commissioner for External Relations, Ralf Dahrendorf, countered the Mansholt faction by arguing that a strong EEC should not be small-minded in customs matters. If the Community really is so weak, then, according to Dahrendorf, ‘it is not worth defending’.

The absurd climax to this ‘crazy dispute’ (in the words of a high-ranking official) came when the Italian Altiero Spinelli, who had come out in favour of a large free trade area encompassing the rump of EFTA and

an enlarged EEC, was taken to task by Mansholt and Barre: 'What you are demanding is, in practice, that the EEC join EFTA.'

The EEC ministers showed themselves to be just as indecisive and divided as the Commissioners: the Germans and Italians believed that they had (according to one conference delegate) clarified relations with European third countries sufficiently with the formula 'Be nice to your neighbours'. French diplomats were more specific. They demanded that these countries obtain only minimal reductions in customs duties. In the end, the Dutch lost all interest.

After a twelve-hour debate, the six ministers admitted at three o'clock in the morning that they had virtually nothing new to say to the waiting applicants. One high-ranking Swiss diplomat in Brussels had this to say on the outcome: 'These all-night sessions in Brussels are gradually getting to the point where they cannot be taken seriously.'