

'The open door' from Le Monde (24 May 1971)

Caption: On 23 and 24 May 1971, French daily newspaper Le Monde welcomes the successful meeting, in Paris, between British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, and French President, Georges Pompidou.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. FAUVET, Jacques. 23-24.05.1971, n° 8 198; 28e année. Paris: Le Monde. "La voie ouverte", p. 1.

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The open door

Despite the unforeseen delays, mysteries and suspense that have quite unsurprisingly accompanied one of the longest negotiations we have witnessed at this level in Europe for a very long time, the outcome of the Heath–Pompidou meeting is clear at least on one point: the door is now open for the entry of Great Britain into the European Community.

Of course, not all the problems are resolved: neither side is hiding the fact that more ‘long nights’ can be expected in Brussels or in Luxembourg, and that not all the differences have been ironed out. While Paris and London now see ‘eye to eye’ on the workings of the Community and where it is going, long and difficult negotiations still lie ahead on issues such as the pound, the British financial contribution and New Zealand exports. What is important is that Mr Heath and Mr Pompidou have, on these issues, achieved a little more than the ‘mutual understanding’ of diplomatic discourse: neither of them any longer sees insurmountable obstacles on the road ahead.

As far as the French are concerned, this signifies a positive will to cooperate, a considerable step forward from the attitude of non-opposition that had already been clearly signalled 18 months ago in The Hague. Mr Pompidou, often criticised in the past for his hesitation, his wait-and-see approach, has now calmly and methodically assumed his responsibilities, with the active support of a number of his Ministers, especially Mr Maurice Schumann, the long-standing advocate of a resurrected Entente Cordiale.

The President of the Republic has stated in the clearest possible terms that there is no ‘new veto’ from Paris — which rather implies, contrary to what Mr Couve de Murville was maintaining just recently on television, that there was such a veto in the past — and that France would not, in the future, be prejudging British intentions. For the accusations of which the President today exonerated our neighbours — such as wanting to ‘destroy’ the Community or ‘divert it from its true path’ — closely resemble those implicitly expressed by de Gaulle at the time of the parting of the ways in 1963 and now taken up by the most hard-line Gaullists. Yet, before accusing the current leadership of a ‘reversal’ of doctrine, it should be remembered that the former Head of State did not hide the fact that he saw in Mr Heath a far more sincere ‘European’ than Mr Wilson and that he had himself attempted to make contact with London at the beginning of 1969. There is always a time when events come to a head and guards are lowered. Sooner or later, the continent’s two oldest nations were bound to settle their differences and put an end to friction that has brought nothing but vexation to them and to the rest of Europe.

The ball is now in Britain’s court, and this is probably where the most difficult part begins. Mr Heath, who is attempting to conclude an acceptable agreement with the Six next month and to secure a favourable vote in the Commons before the summer recess, is better equipped today to handle opposition from his anti-European compatriots. But the latter are going to double their efforts in the weeks to come. Mr Wilson’s statements suggest that the resolve of certain ‘Europeans’ is not itself unfailing. But this opposition and these reservations are, after all, normal: they testify to how great a conversion ‘entry into Europe’ means for the British. We hope and trust this is only a rearguard action.