

'The moment of truth' from Der Spiegel (24 June 1985)

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The moment of truth

Helmut Kohl is facing the most unpleasant summit of his Chancellorship

At the end of this week, nine of the ten EC Heads of State or Government will be setting off on quite a pleasant journey. Even before boarding their jets to fly to the EC Summit in Milan, the nine already know whom to blame for the failure of the Summit: Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

Mr Kohl had hoped that, together with the French President, François Mitterrand, he could make a bold bid in Milan to move Europe forward. The right of veto of individual Member States was to be abolished so as to make way for majority decisions.

But then, two weeks ago, the Germans of all people wielded the big stick of the veto in order to prevent a risible 1.8 % reduction in cereals prices. So it is now virtually impossible for the Milan Summit to succeed.

Mr Kohl is the only one not to understand why he, in particular, is supposed to have put a spoke in the wheel of the Summit. At the preparatory meeting of the responsible cabinet committees, the Chancellor came up with a very specious argument. Mr Kohl's premise was that, by using the veto against the reduction in cereals prices, not only had he not prevented this instrument from being abolished but he had actually promoted its abolition.

He argued that Bonn's action to prevent the reduction of cereals prices had once again shown quite blatantly the extent to which the veto hindered decision-making at European level. So long as this instrument existed, internal political pressure would mean that the veto was used lightly as a threat and, in rare cases, a formal objection would even be raised.

Naturally, Mr Kohl's major domo, Chancellery Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, takes the same view. He finds it absurd to blame the Chancellor for the difficulties to be expected in Milan: 'this game is called passing the buck.'

Bonn has chosen its own scapegoat for the bad mood in the EC in the person of Jacques Delors, President of the EC Commission. Now that the Commission has exhausted all its legal instruments and has disregarded Bonn's veto in the cereals dispute, the Federal Government regards the Frenchman once and for all as the ringleader of the anti-Bonn faction. According to a source close to Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, 'Mr Delors still has great ambitions for himself in France.'

Bonn accuses the Frenchman of needlessly having forced through the vote on cereals prices in the Council of Ministers. It thought Mr Delors had wanted to make the Germans look small. The Danish Commissioner for Agriculture, Frans Andriessen, had been prepared on several occasions to help the German Minister for Agriculture, Ignaz Kiechle. Yet, whenever Mr Andriessen took a softer position, he had been called to his boss, and he then returned to the negotiating table with inflexible instructions.

Whatever Mr Delors was trying to do to, the vote could not be prevented. The British wanted it in order to prove to the Germans how essential the right of veto was. Conversely, those against this instrument wanted to force Bonn to accept a majority decision for once.

The Netherlands Minister for Agriculture, Dirk Braks, showing great solidarity with his colleague Mr Kiechle, left no doubt about it: 'He has to drop his trousers; I want to see his bare bottom.' And the Italian President of the Council, Filippo Pandolfi, informed the Bavarian petitioner: 'There are moments when one has to face up to the truth.'

According to Mr Kiechle, the German Chancellor now has the chance to do so in Milan. His Foreign Minister, Mr Genscher, has chosen the Summit as the 'moment of truth'. The usual EC compromises would no longer suffice: 'We have to get somewhere now.'

To achieve this goal, Bonn will do its utmost to prevent the Heads of State from becoming embroiled in disputes about details. It wants the quarrels about cereals to be left outside the door in the same way as the row about catalytic converters for cars.

In fact, this fuss about cars proves just how troubled the mood is among the partners. Originally, the Environment Ministers had wanted to complete their work on this subject on Tuesday this week, a few days before the Summit. Provided Brussels produced the appropriate results, this would have given the hard-pressed Minister of the Interior, Friedrich Zimmermann, just enough leeway to ensure that the Bundesrat could approve his national system of tax preferences on 5 July.

Despite Mr Zimmermann's objections, however, the meeting of the Environment Ministers was postponed by a few days. In this instance, too, Mr Zimmermann cannot expect much in the way of accommodation on the issue of catalytic converters after the veto on cereals.

As one French diplomat put it: 'There are no German diktats in the Community.'

Once again, the German Minister of the Interior has been made a laughing stock. Brussels has not given him any limit values on exhaust gases that he can uphold in Bonn, and, added to this, he has had to postpone the deadlines for the long-promised tax reliefs.

In this sorry situation, Paris and Bonn hope they can bring at least some glory to the Milan Summit by taking a 'positive decision of principle to intensify cooperation in scientific research and technological development'. This open-ended programme has been around for some months now, under the EC acronym 'Eureka', although nobody knows exactly what it is supposed to mean. After several meetings between German and French experts and ministerial talks, its outline at least will be visible in time for the Milan Summit.

Eureka is designed for the carrying out of practical projects involving at least 40 % participation by industry. The research projects listed to date are mainframe computers and high-performance lasers, large-scale apparatus for basic scientific and medical research, and public projects such as combating the destruction of forests from pollution, the disposal of highly toxic waste and the cleaning up of contaminated sites. However, none of the governments knows where the money for these laudable projects is to come from.

The Europeans have just made it all too obvious in the field of defence that a decision of principle on technical cooperation still does not necessarily mean successful cooperation: Eurofighter 90, also known as the European Fighter Aircraft (EFA), hit strong turbulence before it was even launched.

France, in particular, whose aircraft industry is directed mainly at the export market, is causing great difficulties. The French not only want overall control of the project; they are also demanding the use of French engines and French radar equipment, even though better and cheaper equipment is available on the market. This has sparked such conflict that the firms that have been awarded contracts have not, to date, been able to submit a joint blueprint for the EFA project.

Chancellery Minister Mr Schäuble expects that, in view of these experiences, Milan will show that it is not the Federal Government that is putting on the brakes in Europe. According to him, if it comes to the crunch, Bonn, too, will make some sacrifices. In Mr Schäuble's view 'Europe must go beyond fine words.'

Meaning, of course, the others.