

'France's 'European tactics' revealed in a document' from La Dernière Heure (9 February 1963)

Caption: On 9 February 1963, the Belgian daily newspaper La Dernière Heure publishes a note sent on 29 August 1960 by Alain Peyrefitte, Gaullist Member of Parliament, to Michel Debré, French Prime Minister, concerning the way in which negotiations should be carried out with the United Kingdom on the British application for accession to the European Communities.

Source: La Dernière Heure. Le plus grand journal belge, le mieux renseigné. 09.02.1963. Bruxelles. "La tactique européenne de la France révélée par un document", auteur:Vanden Eynde, Charles.

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Why did the negotiations with Britain fail?

(From our special correspondent)

III. — Third condition: we must not give the impression of trying to exclude the British while at the same time adopting their model for Europe.

'Our partners' opposition is often inspired by Britain. For two years, the British have constantly insinuated that the reason why France wants to build Europe without them is so that it can dominate the continental countries more effectively and reduce them to the rank of satellites. This is one of the more dangerous fantasies that are poisoning the negotiations.

Clearly, no stable construction of Europe can be undertaken at the present time in conjunction with Britain. But there remains one paradox to be overcome. The Europe we are trying to construct looks (at least to the general public) almost identical to the model Britain has been advocating constantly since 1948. How can we make use of the intergovernmental model that has always been the preference of the British in order to exclude them? The least we can do — since we want to keep them out of the first stage — is to propose a plan that is so audacious that they themselves refuse to become involved. To assume responsibility for their exclusion would involve us in a quarrel, not only with them, but with Germany, which is increasingly tempted, following the example of Mr Erhard and the SPD, to seek a cosy relationship between Bonn and London, and is encouraged in this tendency by our very efforts to prevent it; with Italy, where Britain is engaged in intense diplomatic activity and on whose determination we would perhaps be wrong to rely; with Belgium and the Netherlands, which are mainly interested in trade and are counting on Britain to act as a counterbalance to France, whose increasingly prominent leadership is giving them cause for concern; and also with the United States, which the British will have no trouble convincing that our efforts are inspired by the desire to create a third force and break up NATO.

It is fair tactics to remind our partners that every step in the building of the Community of Six pushes Britain towards an association with the continent. And each time we balk at taking a step forward, we encourage it to do nothing. If there had been no Common Market, Britain would never have dreamed of creating a free-trade zone. The first successes of the EEC have incited the British to seek a form of association at all costs. Having first attempted to impede the Six's plans for political consultations, they asked to be allowed to take part in those consultations, in the framework of WEU, whenever the issues under discussion affect Britain. So, after doing everything it can to make a confederation fail, Britain will ask, if not to be admitted, then at least to be associated with it.

But Britain is still very far from ready to let itself be absorbed into a continental organisation. Consequently, we should be able to propose a pragmatic solution similar to the one we have so far successfully imposed in the economic sphere; for two years our goal has been to avoid both the division of Europe and the dissolution of the Common Market, and in this we have succeeded. For the time being, Britain should merely be offered a form of association with the future organisation. In the longer term, we should leave the door open for the day when it feels ready to accept the constraints of a confederation.

We should also emphasise that a confederal treaty offers many more possibilities for subsequent enlargement than an integration treaty. The Treaties of Paris and Rome were negotiated between specific partners, taking into account their particular circumstances, and laid down countless detailed provisions that determined the future of their relations. If other countries had been involved in the negotiations, the balance of the treaties would have been quite different. A confederal treaty, on the other hand, would be confined to establishing general arrangements and flexible institutions. It would therefore lend itself to the accession of new partners at any time by simple procedures such as the unanimous agreement of participants and a referendum in the candidate country.

In short, the British must be forced into a situation where they have to choose between joining the union of

Six without restrictions, or remaining on the sidelines while no longer being able to complain about being excluded.

And if, as is likely, they persist in remaining apart, at least they will have shown that responsibility for their exclusion lies with them. We will thereby expose their hidden motive, namely the fear that a European confederation will establish a dialogue with the USA in which Britain can no longer claim a privileged role of intermediary. We will have proved our desire to reach an agreement, while the British will have demonstrated that they put loyalty to outdated, insular, Anglo-American traditions above European cooperation. This will effectively turn the tables on them.'

IV. — Fourth condition: our proposals must not be too limited in scope

'The planned confederation should not be limited to a new Concert of Europe, which would scarcely differ from traditional alliances, or even from the Atlantic Pact. Its members, also being part of the Atlantic community, would not have any particular reason to meet separately from the others, since their overall policy would be defined by NATO. We risk being criticised for wanting to establish yet another international club, the futility of which was demonstrated by the experience of the Council of Ministers of WEU and the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. So it is essential that our plans appear innovative enough to break with traditional intergovernmental practice.

France's European model needs to be shown in a positive, altruistic light. We must not fear its being seen as a step — more realistic than full integration — towards a distant United States of Europe.

The meetings of heads of government, the diplomatic, economic, cultural and defence committees, and the permanent secretariat, should be presented as the first stage in an evolving system.

In a second stage, meetings of heads of government could be more frequent, with decisions being taken by a qualified weighted majority. This development, however distant and conditional, must be emphasised in order to demonstrate the innovative importance of our proposals.

After the transformation of the intergovernmental pact into a confederal charter, we would enter into the final and irrevocable stage when decisions would be taken by a simple weighted majority.

Moreover, if it were agreed that the transition from one stage to the next shall require a unanimous decision of the member governments, the more timorous states would be reassured, and we would still reap the psychological rewards of having initiated a process of unification.

There will be no significant progress in European integration unless a psychological shock is produced, and nothing of what is known of the French proposals at present seems likely to produce it. Nor is the prolonged secrecy of the negotiations necessarily working in our favour, since we are effectively gagging ourselves, not our opponents. In short, we are depriving ourselves of the right of reply. In any event, the negotiations will probably be transferred to the public arena in the very near future. The process has been under way for a month now, and is inevitable in the long run. There is no reason to fear it, provided we know how to win public opinion to our side. Since the success of the French initiative may depend on public reaction, we must realise that talk of political secretariats and technical committees will not sway the masses. "Is that what all the fuss about European revival is about?" the average European will say, "What an anticlimax!"

Behind a smokescreen of verbiage — ceaseless professions of faith in European integration, criticism of France for its reservations about integration — our partners are quietly pursuing their national objectives. It is not by remaining passive and silent that we will reverse this situation, which is weakening the government's position with respect both to domestic and to European and international opposition. The failure of the French proposal for a political secretariat was difficult to avoid without a generously funded public relations campaign. To fight on equal terms in the war of myths, which holds at least as much sway in European matters as elsewhere, forceful ideas are needed that express the unconscious desires of the masses and, if need be, modify or create them.

It is perhaps by carrying the debate to the peoples of Europe that France will be able to overcome the distrust of the diplomats. Two key ideas lend themselves to service in the war of myths, if they are put forward forcefully and imaginatively. They are “confederation” and “referendum”.

Confederation is a step towards a future United States of Europe that is reassuring enough to be realistic, since it leaves the autonomy of each Member State intact, confers the power of decision on each new step towards a united Europe to the national governments, and reconciles the European ideal with preservation of the nation. At the same time, by establishing permanent cooperation and de facto solidarity, it is sufficiently constructive to win hearts and minds to the prospect of a European Union that could rival the Soviet Union and the United States of America in the race to become the greatest world power.

The “solemn referendum” of free Europeans would give a spectacular start to the construction of this confederation. By force of numbers, the peoples of Europe would prove to themselves the strength of their will to unite, and prove to the world that their union is a democratic reality. They would thus be drawn towards a political community that all would have chosen and that would be practically indissoluble.

Moreover, the referendum would constitute, in the eyes of the captive nations, a trump card in the psychological war. France and Europe would reclaim the explosive ideas of 1789. Speaking the very language of the Charter of the United Nations, and winning the conscience of the international community to their side, they would give the free world the formidable weapon of the right of nations to self-determination. At the same time, how could our partners, who criticise us for refusing to have anything to do with European elections, reject the idea of a referendum, which would more clearly express the desire for unity of the peoples of Europe?

Conclusions

‘Let us not appear to undermine what already exists, or was about to exist; or to want to build Europe on the British model, but without the British; or to build too little. Any one of these psychological errors would strongly compromise the outcome of the current negotiations. To commit several or all of them would not only inevitably scupper the whole process but would damage France’s international standing and lay the responsibility for failure at its door. The four conditions for success described in this document can be resumed in one injunction: never be negative.

Which does not mean that we shall not arrange matters so that the new construction does away with what was harmful in the old; nor that we shall not take advantage of the innovations proposed by the communities to put forward conditions that will render them acceptable to us, or turn them into the accomplishment of our own plans; nor that we shall not make those plans audacious enough for the British to exclude themselves, once their bluff has been called, and spectacular enough for the European public to see them as an attractive “revival”. Let us therefore put ourselves in a position to unmask hypocrisy, instead of being overwhelmed by it. Let us no longer lay ourselves open to accusations of intent by emphasising the purity and realism of our own approach.

It is possible that we will fail to convince our negotiating partners. To prepare for such a situation, in which our plans are in danger of being completely frustrated, we should, as of now, envisage the possibility of transferring the debate to the arena of European public opinion and arguing our case there. During the difficult moments our country has gone through in recent years, General de Gaulle has often appealed, over the heads of politicians and a social elite forgetful of their responsibilities, to the deep inner resources of the French people. The Head of State could, in the same manner, call directly on the peoples of Europe to exert pressure on their leaders, which is probably the only way to defeat the ambitions, interests, complexes and hypocrisy that currently combine to frustrate the French initiative.

A brief statement at a press conference will not suffice. Only impressive statements of position, preferably during trips abroad, would be capable of reversing the situation. A tour of the Federal Republic, comparable to General de Gaulle’s tour of the United States, would vastly increase the chances of a successful outcome

to the negotiations. Germany, which has kept the cult of hero-worship, would probably enthusiastically welcome a soldier who had come to preach Franco-German reconciliation, and a leader who refuses to accept the “decline of the West”. A well-prepared trip could be a triumph. Why leave Eisenhower or Khrushchev the monopoly of publicity campaigns in the two Germanys and the two Berlins? “An imposing confederation that respects its constituent nations” presented in Munich to a Bavarian audience that remains profoundly autonomist would soon put supranational integration in the shadow. A “solemn referendum” and the right of the peoples of Europe to self-determination, proposed in West Berlin to an enthusiastic population in the face of their enslaved neighbours, would have an enormous impact.

These concepts would cease to be empty slogans and a subject of scholastic bickering. They would become strong ideas capable of mobilising the masses and creating myths that governments and politicians would have difficulty in resisting.’

Charles Van den Eynde