

'Disappointed by Britain' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (10 March 1975)

Caption: On 10 March 1975, the day before the first Dublin European Council, German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung lists the issues at stake in the renegotiation of the conditions for the United Kingdom's accession to the European common market.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Eick, Jürgen; Welter, Erich; Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Deschamps, Bruno; Fest, Joachim; Reißmüller, Johann Georg. 10.03.1975, Nr. 58. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Von England enttäuscht", auteur:Götz, Hans Herbert , p. 1.

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Disappointed by Britain

By Hans Herbert Götz

Dublin, whither Heads of Government, Foreign Ministers and their retinue of civil servants and journalists are heading, is the venue for the 'Premiere' of the European Council of Heads of Government. Dublin is also supposed to bring an end to what the British, for more than a year, have been calling 'renegotiations' about their continued membership of the Community. The result of these 'renegotiations' is to be submitted, if possible, to the nation in a referendum in June. Over the past year, the Labour Government, internally deeply split over staying in the Community, has made life in the Community difficult for its continental partners.

The Commission, Ministers and officials are beginning to tire of the British habit of blowing up virtually every Community problem into a 'renegotiation' issue. And when the British Foreign Secretary graciously declares, as he recently did, that parts of the European Coal and Steel Community Treaty will also have to be changed, though not as part of the 'renegotiations', then everyone openly voices their displeasure.

It would be wrong to interpret the attitude of a few British Ministers as the general position of 'the British' towards the Community. On the contrary, the majority of politicians, civil servants and diplomats are honouring their European commitment, but they are also advocating that everyone remain patient during the final few weeks. There are, indeed, explanations for the constantly changing and cunning game being played by the British Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary. Wilson is head of a 'coalition government' in which the 'coalition partners' engage in hard and relentless fights: those in favour of continued Community membership and those against it.

Wilson and the majority of his colleagues are certainly aware that Great Britain has a political and economic future only as part of the continental Community. Common sense tells them this. But their temperament, like that of many Britons, points in the opposite direction: Let us grow poor and politically insignificant by ourselves; we do not want to keep swearing oaths of disclosure before the European public or even beg for favours. The decision between reason, pleading for staying in, and disposition, distancing itself from the Continent, will be taken in the referendum. The enervating position of some British Ministers can be understood only against this background of domestic politics and emotions.

According to schedule, the 'renegotiations' are to be concluded in Dublin and followed, one week later, by Wilson's formal statement of their conclusion before the House of Commons. The fight for the votes of the British people can then begin. It is difficult to imagine that the Heads of Government could not also reach an agreement now on the final question, that of the correction mechanism, intended to prevent unreasonable budgetary contributions. And, after that, nobody will want to hear another word about an overt or covert threat to withdraw from the Community. All parties in London are declaring that Great Britain will be a loyal partner, once the British nation has said 'yes' to the Community.

This may be true. But a lot of damage has been done over the past few tiresome months. Disillusion, annoyance and even anger have spread. Nothing that the British promised to bring into the Community seems to have been delivered: modern technology, parliamentary tradition, global political experience. Instead, there is only talk about all sorts of retreats: the British have even become too poor to build the Channel Tunnel. Their insistence on the Luxembourg Compromise, however, on unanimity for all Council decisions, would have been applauded by General de Gaulle.

The descent from world power to mediocrity must be painful, and the learning process as regards shared sovereignty takes time. Can the British be expected to understand life in a confederation, such as the Community, although imperfectly, has already started to become? Probably not. Confederation is nothing but constant 'renegotiation' without, however — and this is crucial — the constant threat of withdrawal.

It is a frightening thought that the accession negotiations and the 'staying-in negotiations' might have to be followed by withdrawal negotiations. The months between now and the referendum in Great Britain will

have to be endured. If Britain remains in the Community, we must assume that a reshuffled Labour Government will not regard the Community exclusively as an organisation for the protection of national interests but that, under that Government, Britain will take proper account of common European interests. There is every chance that the Federal Chancellor will tell Harold Wilson so in Dublin. It is still believed that Britain's withdrawal from the Community — possibly followed by the Danes, but certainly not by the Irish — would not only be fatal for those countries but also constitute a political drawback for the whole of Europe. If the negotiations with Great Britain continue along the lines of the past few months, however, this conviction will lose its validity.