'The revival of Europe' from Le Monde (28 June 1984)

Caption: On 28 June 1984, the French daily newspaper Le Monde sums up the efforts made by the Heads of State and Government during the Fontainebleau European Council concerning a re-launch of European integration.

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The revival of Europe

Following the success of the Fontainebleau Summit, the Ten intend to establish closer political links

In Fontainebleau, on the evening of Tuesday 26 June, the French were declaring, with well-feigned modesty, that, 'there were neither winners nor losers' at the end of the European Council meeting. Of the ten Heads of State or Government meeting in the imperial city with Gaston Thorn, President of the Brussels-based Commission, it was François Mitterrand who most desired and needed an agreement as well as a resolution, at least for a few years, of the budgetary crisis that had been poisoning the life of the Community for so long.

Not only does the agreement ensure a happy ending to the European Council Presidency in which Mr Mitterrand had clearly invested so much and which he hands over to Garret FitzGerald, the Prime Minister of Ireland, on 1 July; it also allows for serious thought to be given to the next stage, in other words to the revival of those efforts to achieve European integration that the Head of State has always been advocating. Before the Fontainebleau Summit, it is a fact that the French side was arguing strongly that such a revival would be possible whatever happened, with or without an agreement, and with or without the British.

To understand just how tactical such statements were, it was enough to listen to the Elysée spokesman on Tuesday when he asked 'what gave us the right' to continue down the path to Europe if we were unable to resolve the budget issue? Such words would have been seen as pro-British and, therefore, heretical just a day earlier.

For Mr Mitterrand, one of the tangible benefits of this agreement is that it will allow the issue of enlargement of the Community to include Spain and Portugal to be properly addressed. Continuing deadlock over the budget would clearly have made a theoretical exercise of any accession mechanism for these two countries that, at least in the immediate future, will be 'net beneficiaries' of the EEC. On Wednesday, the Head of State goes to Lisbon and on Friday to Madrid, mainly to discuss the enlargement timetable and the arrangements for enlargement with Mário Soares and Felipe González.

The plan should be ready by the autumn, but December seems more likely, and that would leave all of 1985 for the necessary ratifications and would allow Spain and Portugal to accede to the Community, as planned, on 1 January 1986. However, at his closing press conference, Mr Mitterrand emphasised the need to review in detail the future relations between these two new Member States and the entire EEC with respect to three issues: fisheries, wine and the links between agriculture and industry.

With regard to the European Union, despite the euphoria surrounding the agreement, the Fontainebleau Summit could not make much progress on that issue. But it was at least decided that an 'ad hoc' committee should be instructed to clear away the swathe of institutional issues that will arise.

In 1985, or perhaps even earlier, these 'wise men' are to submit a number of proposals on the setting up of a permanent Council Secretariat and on its working relationship with the Commission and the European Parliament, in accordance with the Treay of Rome, the Genscher–Colombo Plan and Mr Mitterrand's speech to MEPs in Strasbourg on 24 May 1984. In terms of its members (who are yet to be appointed) and its objectives, this committee will resemble the 'Spaak Committee', which, in the 1950s, carried out much of the groundwork for the Treaty of Rome.

300 million citizens

Another committee, consisting of eminent persons appointed by the Heads of State or Government and working totally independently from but in liaison with the Commission in Brussels, is to submit a package of proposals (probably at the next European Council meeting in Ireland at the end of the year) to create and foster the 'People's Europe' of which Mr Mitterrand is so fond. Some of these measures are already in place, such as the 'EEC passport' or the end to checks on individuals crossing the Franco-German border as of

1 July, a measure that will apply to all citizens of Member States of the Community.

Mr Mitterrand listed so many other measures that one wonders what the future committee will still be able to come up with: mutual recognition of academic qualifications, student exchanges, town-twinning, the setting up of a ‘European Peace Corps’, simplified customs posts (one post at each border-crossing instead of the current two, to be manned by either country’s customs service), a European TV station, the coordination of policies on the environment, health, industrial research (starting with bio-technology and telecommunications), space exploration and the fight against drugs, etc. Also, highly symbolically, the minting of an ecu coin and the creation of a European anthem and flag.

Simple gimmicks? Probably; at all events, they will be as long as these external signs of ‘European-ness’ merely duplicate rather than replace what are normally attributes of a sovereign state’s power. It is difficult, for example, to see how a European coin could enter circulation when its equivalent in each national currency is neither a round figure nor a fixed amount. For Mr Mitterrand, however, there is no such thing as a minor gain when it comes to how the citizens of the EEC (and, with Spain and Portugal, there will be over 300 million of them) perceive their joint membership of an entity that is not just economic but, profoundly, political and cultural.

As for selecting Mr Thorn’s successor as President of the Commission, it was finally decided that the same approach as last time would be followed. The then President of the European Council, the Italian Prime Minister, Francesco Cossiga, held separate talks with his counterparts on the possible nomination of the Luxembourg statesman, and they reached unanimity. It will, as Mr Mitterrand said, be up to Mr FitzGerald to do the same, ‘over the next few days’.

Clearly the Ten had neither the time nor, probably, the ability to agree on a name in Fontainebleau. This shows that the candidature of Kurt Biedenkopf, supported, it is said, without excessive pressure, by Chancellor Kohl, has not won the day, although it has long seemed likely that, this time, the Presidency will go to a German.

The feeling of relief at having brought the budget dispute to a conclusion and the manifest haste of the outgoing President to see the Community engage in the ‘real issues’ have somewhat concealed the fact that, in several areas (including perhaps the financial one), important issues have been relegated to committees that have still to be set up or have been put back to more or less distant deadlines. This is because François Mitterrand and Margaret Thatcher clearly do not see eye to eye on how long the agreement will remain in force.

At least the Head of State can pride himself on having passed on the baton to the Irish Prime Minister in the best possible circumstances. However trying this marathon Presidency might have been, he will also probably be feeling some regret at having to hand over at a time when the new phase for which he had so yearned may at last begin.