

'The French and the Italians are worried about their peaches and tomatoes' from Die Welt (31 December 1980)

Source: Die Welt. Unabhängige Tageszeitung. 31.12.1980. Hamburg: Die Welt. "Franzosen und Italiener sorgen sich um ihre Pfirsiche und Tomaten", auteur:Hadler, Wilhelm.

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Last updated: 06/07/2016

As from 1 January, Greece will also be a member of the European Community

The French and the Italians are worried about their peaches and tomatoes

By Wilhelm Hadler

Shortly before Christmas, the expressions of joy were somehow rather reluctant, once the Nine had granted Athens 'entry' into the European agricultural market for Greece, while leaving the conditions still open. In some quarters, the relief in Brussels about the long-winded compromise was even mixed with a feeling of bitterness. It seemed that the Minister of Agriculture, Kannelopoulos, had been quite determined to take the very first opportunity of teaching his colleagues a painful lesson.

The perseverance of Athens and its forceful approach in fighting at the eleventh hour for such high agricultural prices and for correspondingly advantageous financial regulations from the Brussels Treasury in Brussels were seen by some observers as being in very clear contrast to the negotiating tactics used by the Greeks hitherto. At all events, they surely must permit us to conclude that the EC newcomer will, in future, pursue its interests with just as much determination as the other Member States.

Athens has time to adjust

Before the signing of the Treaty of Accession in May 1979, the Greeks had obviously been constantly and acutely aware of the danger of becoming caught up in the wake of the far more difficult negotiations that the Nine has conducted with Spain and Portugal. What they wanted at that stage was to avoid a postponement of their own accession date at all costs. Considerations of that kind have since become quite superfluous.

What was important for the rapid progress of the accession discussions, however, was also the fact that the creation of the customs union with the Community no longer poses any particularly great economic problems. Greece has been associated with the EC since 1962. This means, in practice, that all Greek industrial products (with the exception of iron and steel products) have long since been entering the Community free of customs duties. At present, only one third of the imports from the EC of the Nine into Greece still attract a customs charge.

What is more, the five-year transitional period that has been granted to Greece for the adoption of EC legislation provides for a sufficiently flexible process of adjustment to the conditions of the larger market. It is only for the implementation of freedom of movement for labour that a seven-year period has been agreed. This same deadline for transition will apply for tomatoes and peaches, which are a cause of very considerable concern to the French and the Italians.

However, the question for the Community is not so much about whether or not the accession negotiations were conducted with sufficient thoroughness. A much more important issue is that the EC has let itself in for enlargement for the second time, without having even a rough outline of its future intentions and objectives.

The only certainty that prevails in Brussels is about the fact that the accession of Greece and of the two other Mediterranean states will bring with it fundamental changes in the character of the EC. A club of predominantly affluent industrial nations is threatening, increasingly, to turn into an 'amalgamation of unequals', who now have hardly any problems in common. On the other hand, it is clear that the 'enlargement to the South' is politically inevitable, since the applicant countries have rediscovered democracy.

The negotiations with the Greeks, however, concerned solely adjustment mechanisms and transitional periods but not which of the Community rules need to be changed in order to keep the enlarged EC operational at least to some extent. The reason for this is that the Nine themselves have repeatedly postponed consideration of the question of an improvement in their decision-making processes. The original political objectives of European integration have also become increasingly vague since the 1960s.

The EC is now already in the process of developing into a 'two-speed Community'. For example, Great

Britain is still not taking part in the monetary system (EMS) that was created with the objective of achieving greater convergence of decisions on economic and monetary policy. Equally Athens is not likely to be in a position to become part of this zone of monetary policy stability in the foreseeable future.

Brussels can only try to ease the problems

The key problem impeding genuine integration of the economies of Europe is the ever-widening North-South divide in the EC. The only way to ease the situation would be a generous financial transfer from the wealthier to the disadvantaged regions. For that to happen, the mentalities of the nations would have to be sufficiently comparable.

To date, however, the Council of Ministers in Brussels has never been able to make up its mind once and for all about a genuine regional policy. In the future, too, it will, at best, be possible to use funds from the Community to ease some of the problems that result directly from the introduction of the common policies of the EC.

Very generous financial aid for the approximation of economic structures has the effect, above all, of preventing the explosive increases in the costs of the agricultural market. In spite of the rising EC budget, they still continue to swallow up three quarters of the annual expenditure of the Community.

However, the agricultural policy is more beneficial to the northern than to the southern regions. A good 40 % of the EC budget is spent on the subsidies for the milk market alone.

Notwithstanding this fact, it can hardly be assumed that Greek accession to the EC will significantly increase the pressure to restrict agricultural expenditure. From what we have seen during the previous negotiations, it is more probable that the opposite will be the case. If guaranteed incomes have been granted to the farmers in the north of the Community, it will be difficult to refuse to allow the same for their poorer counterparts in the Mediterranean regions. This applies at all events to those agricultural products that are not too greatly in surplus.

Nevertheless, fair play dictates that we should state that the problems of the Community are not created by the enlargement, they are merely exacerbated and rendered more clearly visible thereby. Because of the tendency of the governments to cling on to the principle of unanimous decision-making, the ability of the EC institutions to take action was seriously impeded, even before the accession of Greece. The European agricultural market is threatened with imminent collapse, even without the effects of enlargement.

The Commission had issued a statement on the Greek application for accession as long ago as 1976 in which it gave a warning that any further enlargement of the Community would have to go 'hand-in-hand with an increase in the powers of its common bodies'. This demand has remained a dead letter, as has the progress in the internal development of the EC so sought after by Brussels.