

Denis Maher, The Tortuous Path

Caption: In his memoirs, Denis Maher, former Member of the Irish Delegation to the negotiations on the accession of Ireland to the European Communities, gives an account of the diplomatic talks with the Six.

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[...]

The immediate aim of the Irish Government was to persuade the Governments of the member countries of the Community to agree to the opening of negotiations, to concurrent negotiations and to simultaneous accession of Britain, Ireland and other applicants. A favourable response would require unanimity on the part of the Council of the Community. The Government, therefore, decided to adhere to their plan for bilateral discussions with each of the Governments of the Six.

The discussions took place over a period of six months, from June to November. Against the background of the stance adopted by General de Gaulle at his press Conference of 16 May, the discussions tended to centre on the likely fate of the British application on which the other applications were seen to depend. The first meeting was held in The Hague on 21/22 June and the last in Paris on 3/4 November 1967. The Irish Ministers participating were the Taoiseach, Mr Lynch, and the Minister for Finance, Mr Haughey. They were accompanied by Dr Whitaker, Secretary, Department of Finance and Mr McCann, Secretary, Department of External Affairs.

Meetings with Dutch, German and Italian Governments

At the meeting in The Hague, the Netherlands Government reaffirmed their commitment to the enlargement of the Community - and this extended to Irish accession to the Community at the same time as Britain - but they foresaw the possibility of delay in the opening of negotiations because of the complexity of the issues presented by the British application. These related principally to the change in the character of the Community which would result from the admission of Britain and other countries, the treatment of British agriculture, the condition of the British economy and the implications and risks of Britain's role as a reserve currency country. In general, the Netherlands Government were not optimistic about the prospect of British membership occurring within the following three years, or even much longer, e.g. if the solution adopted was temporary association with a commitment to membership by, say 1975.

The meeting in Bonn followed on 27 June. The German Government expressed themselves in favour of an open door for Britain, Ireland and other 'free' countries that wished to join the community. Because of the rigid French attitude towards Britain, the rate of progress might not be as rapid as Germany would hope. While willing to use argument and persuasion, the German Government showed reluctance to push General de Gaulle into early negotiations with Britain.

On the question of procedure, German Ministers saw the necessity of giving the British application some priority but were in favour of the greatest possible exchange of information and parallelism of negotiation and, particularly, of simultaneous membership for Britain and the other applicant countries, including Ireland.

The meeting in Rome on 21 July produced similar expressions of support from the Italian Government. On the likely progress of events, Italian Ministers were of the view that Community discussion of the political questions - bearing on the consequences of enlargement of the Community - would, on French initiative, be prolonged in order to slow down a reply on the British and the other applications; if the French attitude should prevail, one might have to wait many months for the commencement of negotiations, possibly to the end of 1968. In that eventuality, expectation of membership by 1970 would be optimistic. In the opinion of the Foreign Minister, Mr Amintore Fanfani, Britain was not likely to be put off by such delay, but neither were the Five likely to push their insistence to the point of putting the existing Community at risk. Even Britain had made it clear that they wanted a European Community including France. Italy's efforts would be directed to securing a viable enlargement of the Community without destroying the existing kernel.

Questioned by the Taoiseach whether Ireland could count on Italian support for simultaneous Irish entry with Britain to the Community, the Italian Prime Minister, Mr Aldo Moro, confirmed that the idea of different entry dates was not supported in the Six, and, in his opinion, would be irrational. While there might

be different timing on decisions, the entry date should be simultaneous. Summarising his views on the major issues arising, Mr Moro stated that (1) Italy favoured enlargement of the Community, (2) Italy would not facilitate those who might engage in obstructionist tactics, (3) the Italian Government would help to prepare the way on the political side, and (4) a new EEC without France was not a solution.

[...]

Meeting with Belgian Government

While the Dáil debate was still in session, the Taoiseach travelled to Brussels to resume his round of contacts in the capitals of the Community with a meeting on 26 July with Belgian Ministers.¹ The Belgian Prime Minister, Mr van den Boeynants, who stated that the Belgian Government supported the Irish application for membership of the Community, expressed his pleasure at the Irish acceptance of the full political and economic implications of membership, but commented that Ireland was not a member of NATO. He added that the Six wished to see members of the EEC also members of NATO. The Taoiseach gave the Irish Government's long-standing explanation of Ireland's non-membership of NATO.

It may be remarked that there is no evidence that the Six had ever expressed a collective view on the lines mentioned by Mr van den Boeynants. It is worth noting too that in the preceding year (1966) France had broken Community ranks by completing the withdrawal of all French forces from NATO and securing the removal from French territory of all NATO bases and the military headquarters known as SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe).² While remaining a member of NATO, France refuses to participate in its integrated command structure.

Meetings with members of Commission

The Irish Ministers availed of their presence in Brussels to have discussions also with some members of the Commission. Importance was attached to these discussions by reason of the fact that the Commission had the function under Article 237 of the Treaty of Rome of furnishing a formal Opinion to the Council before the latter body reached a decision on the opening of negotiations with an applicant for membership.

On 27 July separate discussions took place with individual members of the Commission, namely, Mr Jean Rey, former Vice-President and newly appointed President of the Commission, Dr Sicco Mansholt, Vice-President, Mr Raymond Barre, newly appointed Vice-President, and Mr Eduardo Martino, newly appointed member of the Commission.³

In the discussions the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance sought to ensure that the Commission, when drawing up their Opinion for the Council, would be fully conversant with the Irish economic situation and with the views of the Irish Government.

The Commission representatives expressed 'full approval' of the preparations made by Ireland for membership. On the subject of transitional arrangements, they emphasised the need for a common transitional period for agriculture and industry since 'it would be impossible to live with a situation in which there would be different periods for different economic sectors and for different applicants'. They recognised too that it would be 'logical' for all four applicants to accede at the same time.

Regarding the Opinion to be prepared for the Council, the Commission representatives indicated that the document would deal with two kinds of questions: (1) internal institutional arrangements of general application, and (2) specific problems raised by individual applications. In this latter connection mention was made of a number of issues affecting the Irish application. The first of these was the question of neutrality which, it was suggested, might pose a problem. The Taoiseach responded by emphasising that Ireland had no reservations on the political aspects of the Treaty of Rome. Supplementing the Taoiseach's comment, the Minister for Finance summarised his reply to the Dáil debate which had concluded the previous day and in the course of which he had spelled out Ireland's acceptance of the political, including any eventual defence, implications of membership of the Community.

These assurances appeared to impress the Commission, being described by the President as ‘very important’, seeing that, as he said, the basic cause of the 1963 rupture with Britain had been ‘the political difficulties, defence, nuclear questions, etc.’

A senior official of the External Relations Directorate-General contrasted the progress made by the other applicant countries - Britain, Denmark and Norway - in tariff reductions within the EFTA with those made by Ireland under the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Area Agreement which did not begin until July 1966. The Irish reply was that the tariff reductions to which Ireland was committed under the Anglo-Irish Agreement covered the great bulk of its foreign trade and that there would be little difficulty in exposing Irish industry to further competition from members of the Community.

The Commission representatives showed an interest also in Irish restrictions on the sale of agricultural land. These were explained and Dr Mansholt took the view that the Irish land settlement programme should cause no difficulties so long as they were a part of an overall structural improvement scheme.

Mr Barre whose area of responsibility in the Commission covered economic and financial affairs, took a particular interest in the Irish economic and monetary situation. The Minister for Finance outlined the principal features of the Irish economy. On the monetary aspect, Mr Haughey explained the monetary links with Britain and added that as a creditor nation with official reserves valued at £250 million - equivalent to eight months imports - Ireland had no monetary or balance of payments problems.

The Taoiseach touched also on a matter on which he thought Mr Barre should be informed, namely, the Irish scheme of tax reliefs on profits derived from exports. The Taoiseach said that the Irish Government would like to be able to fulfil the contractual obligations which they had undertaken in this regard to manufacturing industry. Outlining the nature of the reliefs the Minister for Finance explained that they would begin to diminish from 1975 and would finally be phased out by 1980.⁴ In keeping with his opening remark - that having joined the Commission only three weeks previously, he was in a better position to ask questions than to answer them - Mr Barre took note of the point but offered no comment. In the accession negotiations four years later, the question of retaining the scheme of tax reliefs was to become one of the more important issues.

Questions of more general import which arose in the discussion with the President of the Commission included the effect of enlargement of the Community on its institutional structure and the possible course and timetable of events. Mr Rey put particular stress on the need for strong institutions, pointing out that the EEC was not like WEU, the Council of Europe or Benelux: ‘only in the European Communities is it possible to create common policy’. The most important aspects of the question, according to Mr Rey, were majority voting in the Council and the power of the Commission. That comment can be said to be valid even to-day.

On the possible course of future events Mr Rey expected that the Council would discuss the Commission’s Opinion over a period of two months and gave it as his impression that ‘developments would not be blocked at the outset by any individual country’. He pointed out that not all the problems had their origin in Paris and instanced the example of Britain’s monetary difficulties which were a source of concern to other member countries.

Meeting with Luxembourg Government

On the following day, 28 July, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance met the Luxembourg Prime Minister, Mr Pierre Werner, and some of his Ministers. Having heard exposés on the state of Irish agriculture and industry, Mr Werner commented that a transitional period up to 1975 for industry seemed rather long. Turning to the question of the prospects for the opening of negotiations, the Luxembourg Ministers, while favouring the admission of the four applicant countries, were not optimistic about an early expansion of the Community.

The Irish side deprecated the delay foreseen because of the disruptive effect it could have on plans for economic development. It was important also, they urged, that negotiations on the Irish application should be conducted in step with the British negotiations and that the accession of both countries should take place simultaneously. The Luxembourg Ministers, who were understood to favour action on the British application first, acknowledged the force of the case put forward and came around to accepting the Irish point of view.

By the end of July 1967 the Taoiseach and Minister for Finance had completed discussions with Ministers of Governments of five of the member countries (the Five) and four members of the Commission. The Government had reason to be satisfied with the results of these discussions which had shown a substantial body of support for Irish membership of the Community. There were grounds also for hoping that negotiations with all the applicant countries would open in the course of 1968, that, while a certain priority would have to be accorded to the British application, negotiations with the applicants would be carried on concurrently and, if the negotiations were successful, accession would be simultaneous for all. There remained some uncertainty about the probable outcome of the negotiations. So far as the Irish Government were concerned, greater clarity had to await discussions with the French Government.

[...]

Discussions with French Government

On 2 November 1967 the Irish team travelled to Paris for discussions with the French President, General de Gaulle, and some of his Ministers. The most important session was a *tête à tête* meeting on 3 November between the Taoiseach and General de Gaulle accompanied only by an interpreter. The Taoiseach's report of the meeting recounted how he went over the history of the Irish application for membership of the Community and repeated the country's willingness to undertake all the obligations of membership subject only to a suitable transitional arrangement for industry and a few minor temporary easements. He added that Ireland was committed to the principles of the Treaty of Rome and was anxious to play its part in realising the objectives of the Treaty.

The General's response was encouraging so far as Ireland was concerned: France had no objection whatever in principle to Ireland becoming a member of the Community, indeed he looked forward to the day when this would be possible. There were few problems involved so far as Ireland specifically was concerned, but the candidature of Great Britain posed very great problems indeed. France's attitude was that these would have to be overcome before Britain's admission to the Community could be considered. General de Gaulle recalled that as these problems were complex and far-reaching and would undoubtedly take time to solve, he had, as far back as 1963 suggested to Britain a form of association with the Community but that this had not been well received. He still considered that it offered a reasonable interim solution for the difficulties posed by Britain's monetary and economic problems, for the adjustment of British agriculture to that of the Community and for other problems. He had repeated this offer of association the previous May and it was still open for consideration by Britain. He referred to the extreme difficulty for Ireland, because of the closeness of its economic ties with Britain, of accepting the obligations of membership of the Community as long as Britain was not a member and inquired whether thought had been given to association as a step towards Ireland's membership of the Community.

The Taoiseach in reply said that association had not been seriously considered by Ireland for a number of reasons: Ireland regarded itself as qualified for membership under the terms of the Treaty of Rome and was prepared, subject to reasonable transitional arrangements, to accept the obligations of membership; Ireland, moreover, was anxious to play a full part in realising a closer union of European peoples and had no reservations of a political character in this regard. The Taoiseach indicated, nevertheless, that if it appeared that British membership would be delayed for an unduly long time, he would wish to explore the possibility of an interim arrangement with the Community, envisaging ultimate membership at the same time as Britain. The conclusion of a satisfactory interim arrangement would, the Taoiseach pointed out, depend very much on the goodwill and support of France and the other members of the Community. General de Gaulle assured the Taoiseach that this support would be forthcoming so far as France was concerned.

A feature of the discussions with the French President was his request to meet the officials accompanying the Taoiseach after their talk. In separate meetings with Mr Whitaker and Mr McCann the President gave a summary account of his conversation with the Taoiseach.

The meeting was followed by a luncheon hosted by General de Gaulle which was noteworthy for certain remarks made by him in proposing the toast of Ireland. Adverting to what he described as the essential task, the construction of a united Europe, the President said:

For this Europe to be European, it must take into account the existence of the Community of the six continental States and it is of capital importance that this Community should reinforce itself and develop. It should include the association of other Western States with the Community. It should also include détente, understanding and cooperation with the States in the centre and eastern parts of our continent. Everything indicates that Ireland can and should be closely associated with the accomplishment of this great work.⁵

Subsequent discussions with the Prime Minister, Mr Georges Pompidou, and the Foreign Minister, Mr Couve de Murville, covered much the same ground as had been touched on by General de Gaulle. France was insistent that Britain's economic problems, and particularly the role of sterling as a reserve currency, must be solved before Britain could become a member of the Community. There were also the problems of agriculture, Commonwealth obligations and the watering-down effect on the Community of its enlargement. In the French view, the Community should discuss these various problems and arrive at a common position concerning them before there were any negotiations with Britain.

In the interim, association was a possibility. If Britain accepted some form of association, it would be easier for Ireland to come to an appropriate interim arrangement. French ministers, however, were not sure how far such an arrangement could go before running up against the obligations imposed by the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Area Agreement if Britain continued to reject any idea of temporary association pending membership. The French side confirmed that the kind of interim arrangement or association which they had in mind was one whose end product would be full membership of the Community. Indeed, for France, the question of Ireland becoming a member independently of Britain was a technical and not a political problem.

The Paris talks left the Irish team with the impression that there could be a long delay before the commencement of negotiations and that the prospect of membership of the Community was receding into an uncertain future. While, seemingly, the Community would be prepared to consider an interim arrangement, there were serious obstacles to Ireland's proceeding very far down that road without Britain, given the extent to which Ireland's external trade was concentrated in the neighbouring island.

French opposition

Within a fortnight there came a sharp reminder of the scale of Britain's problems when the British Government decided to devalue the pound sterling from \$2.80 to \$2.40, a decision which was described by *The Economist* as a 'botched, panic-stricken flight from an overwhelmed parity'. On 27 November 1967, General de Gaulle held another of his by now celebrated press conferences in the course of which he dealt with the applications of Britain and other countries for membership of the Community. Points made by him were:

1. France is not prepared at present to enter into negotiations with Britain and other applicants.
2. Britain must first make fundamental changes to establish its own equilibrium and modify its character before it can join the Community.
3. Any attempt to impose British membership in spite of everything would mean the break-up of a

Community whose rules could not bear so monumental an exception.

4. To ease Britain's task, France is prepared to enter into some arrangement which, under the name of association or any other, would promote commercial exchanges between the Community and the applicant countries.

5. It is possible that the storms which have carried away the sterling exchange rate and threaten that of the dollar may lead to the restoration of an international monetary system based on the immutability, the impartiality, the universality, which are the privileges of gold.

It remained to be seen whether the French view would prevail in the Community's Council whose function it was to decide whether or not negotiations should be opened. The answer was not long in coming.

[...]

1. The Minister for Finance joined the Irish group on 27 July having been detained in Dublin for the purpose of replying to the Dáil debate.
2. SHAPE to-day is located in Belgium, as are also NATO political headquarters.
3. Major changes in the membership of the Commission had taken place on 1 July 1967 when the merger treaty providing for a single Council and a single Commission for the three Communities came into force.
4. In fact by subsequent legislation the life of the scheme was extended to 1990.
5. It was not clear whether the word 'association' was used in its technical sense as defined in the Treaty of Rome or in a more general sense which might be interpreted as embracing membership of the European Communities. The former seemed the more likely.