

'On the eve of battle' from Le Soir (29 November 1979)

Caption: On 29 November 1979, in an article published in the Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir, Gaston Thorn, Luxembourg Foreign Minister, considers the agenda of the Dublin European Council and the heated debates among the Nine over the United Kingdom's contribution to the Community budget.

Source: Le Soir. 29.11.1979, n° 278; 93e année. Bruxelles. "Veillée d'armes", auteur:Thorn, Gaston , p. 1; 3.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

On the eve of battle

by Gaston Thorn (*)

Nine Heads of State or Government and nine Ministers for Foreign Affairs will be in Dublin this Thursday for the regular meeting of the European Council.

Were we to ask our fellow citizens — or at least those of them who still harbour a glimmer of hope in a united Europe — what they expect from the meeting, they would probably have three wishes.

Firstly that, given the dangerous prospects before us, the threats to peace and the perils facing the liberal, tolerant society to which we aspire, Europe's leaders will show solidarity and forget their differences in order to spare us and others from fresh tragedy. In other words, that Europe will manifest its identity and assert its existence.

Secondly that, in response to this challenge which affects us all, the Heads of State or Government will pull together to defeat both the recession that is fuelling unemployment and the inflation that is eating away the assets that we have worked and saved to build.

And thirdly that they will turn resolutely to the tasks that lie ahead, uniting the efforts and aspirations of the people of Europe rather than allowing pointless quarrels to divide them and erode the capital of trust that we have invested in them.

The British would probably add — or even put at the top of the list — a wish that the UK contribution to Europe's budget be reduced. I mention this point in all good faith, for I realise that it represents a real problem. We must avoid a situation in which the European Community is defined in the UK as 'continental policies paid for with British cash'.

Unfortunately, the public arguments over the last few weeks have not been about how best to unite, to reach an understanding and to respond to the challenges. They have been about how best to share out what is, at the end of the day, a fairly modest crust in the form of the EC budget (less than 0.8 % of the Member States' total GDP). The fact that this question has eclipsed any other aspirations or hopes merely fuels the simmering sense of crisis that is in the air.

It is a state of affairs that is not easy to explain, but I shall do my best.

A 'crisis' — and the concept is a familiar one in Euro-speak — is normally generated by a problem that has not been recognised, addressed and resolved at a sufficiently early stage. The history of European integration is littered with such crises — but they have become a permanent, unavoidable feature of life ever since the Community lost its compass and those attempting to navigate through the fog began arguing about the course, the cruising speed and the destination. And so Europe bumps along, devoid of ideals and even ideas, limping from compromise to expedient.

[...]

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