

'London wishes to save the Community: the story of how an idea was corrupted' from Le Soir (26 June 1985)

Caption: On 26 June 1985, the eve of the meeting of the Council of Heads of State or Government of the European Community in Milan, the Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir outlines the issues faced by the Summit with particular emphasis on the United Kingdom's position with regard to a European Union.

Source: Le Soir. 26.06.1985, n° 148; 99e année. Bruxelles. "Londres veut sauver la Communauté: histoire de la corruption d'une idée", auteur:De Waersegger, Serge , p. 20.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/london_wishes_to_save_the_community_the_story_of_how_an_idea_was_corrupted_from_le_soir_26_june_1985-en-9753dc2e-9db0-4b31-8bc4-945327f551da.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

Before the Milan meeting of the European Council (II)

London wishes to save the Community: the story of how an idea was corrupted

European Union, the key topic for debate at the meeting of the Council of Heads of State or Government to be held in Milan next Friday and Saturday, will lend supranationalism yet more weight by reinforcing European institutional mechanisms (see our previous issues). This is entirely to the liking of all those for whom further European unification, far from representing a *capitis diminutio* for their country, brings enhanced power and new opportunities on the world scene. Small countries such as Belgium also see it as a guarantee that the 'big' countries will be unable to dictate terms to the 'small' ones and that the general interest will prevail.

In contrast, Denmark, incapable of anything other than an economic perception of the EEC, fears that a political strengthening of the Community will deprive it of its identity, more heavily marked by Scandinavian civilisation than by the Latin substrates whose influence is felt throughout the 'Ten'. For its part, Greece views with disquiet the strengthening of a group of countries which it sees as relatively unconcerned with the problems specific to Greece and in relation to which it will therefore have greater difficulty in defending its interests. For both these countries, then, European Union is, if anything, a rather worrying construct, and one which they approach with hostility.

As for the United Kingdom ...

Building a more effective European Community by extending its powers to such areas as enhanced coordination of foreign affairs or security and defence is an option on which Margaret Thatcher's government is prepared to look favourably. Centuries of insular diplomacy have, however, left the United Kingdom allergic to the emergence on the continent of a politically structured block. It follows, naturally enough, that Great Britain is trying to pick out a path that will allow it to benefit from the real advances achieved by the Community — more vigorous internal market and the Community technology arrangements are two examples — without having to accept the institutional reinforcement and the greater supranationalism with which it is so uncomfortable. The development of this policy has also been prompted by the need to defuse a threat first made shortly before the Fontainebleau Summit a year ago with a view to forcing the UK into retreat on the British contribution issue: a threat to develop a two-speed Europe on the institutional front, tightening the political links between the six founder members of the Common Market and, possibly, Ireland as well.

Low profile

In Fontainebleau, it was, however, difficult for the British, who had at last carried the day on the question of their contribution to the European budget, to launch immediately into this new battle. So Europe's future seemed at that time to be sporting supranational colours.

Under the influence of the draft treaty on European Union which the European Parliament, on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli, had just submitted to the Ten, a special committee on institutional reform was set up. The committee was given the name 'Spaak II', after the Belgian statesman who had played a pre-eminent role at the Messina Conference which gave birth to the EEC. The idea was straightforward enough: to go for a super-treaty encompassing every aspect of European unification. The British took part in this effort, adopting a constructive attitude while stressing two things: to begin with, London would never agree to a curtailment of the powers of the British Parliament and Government; secondly, drawing up a new treaty was a long and complex process and one which was likely to spark a fresh conflict in the United Kingdom between pro- and anti-marketeters.

At the Dublin Summit in December 1984, Margaret Thatcher was deliberately off-hand in her treatment of the Spaak II Committee, and, last March, its findings were given covert consideration.

German misgivings

A new element came into play at this point: German misgivings. This development can be attributed to a number of factors: the character of Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the domestic political situation in the Federal Republic, the rivalry between the CDU and the Liberals (with Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as model advocate of the European Union), the tendency in some German business circles to prefer a free-trade area to a fully structured European Community, the attraction exercised by America, etc. All these things taken together called the traditional lines of Germany's European policy into question. Hence the German Chancellor's sudden passion for all things American, as manifested at the summit of industrialised countries in Bonn and as seen also in his reluctance to commit himself to European technological projects, which contrasted sharply with the ardour of his response to the American 'star wars' (SDI) proposals. It was not until a German mission had come back from the USA with negative conclusions concerning the development of collaboration on SDI that the German Government felt able, just a week ago, to give its unreserved backing to the *Eureka* project. Moreover, while the Federal Republic has been critical of the right of veto as an obstacle to the progress of the EEC, it did not hesitate to use it to oppose a modest reduction in cereals prices.

This attitude shook the Paris–Bonn axis on which the initiatives, launched in Fontainebleau, for institutional reinforcement of the EEC were dependent, prompting a corresponding retreat by the French Government: 'We may be able to oppose London on the institutional front, but not London and Bonn at one and the same time.' This is, no doubt, why France, in devising *Eureka*, the European technological project, imagined it outside the framework of the European Community.

With Greece and Denmark frankly hostile, Germany in two minds and France sceptical, the time was right for London to launch an alternative plan which would allow the United Kingdom to pass for the saviour of the European Union, while leaving out all those institutional reinforcements which London finds so distasteful. It is just such a plan that Sir Geoffrey Howe unveiled in Stresa. According to that plan, the right of veto would be retained, but use thereof would be regulated so as to forestall abuse, the roles of the existing institutions would be enhanced, political cooperation would be developed with the creation of a small, political secretariat, the European Parliament would be more closely involved in the drafting of Community policies and decisions, all of which can be done without any need for a new treaty.

The prospect of a Treaty on European Union thus becomes considerably more remote.

Serge de Waersegger