

'A bold dash to Brussels' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (20 March 1992)

Caption: On 20 March 1992, the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung comments on Finland's application to join the European Union and describes the attitude of the Finnish political class towards Community structures.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Fest, Joachim; Jeske, Jürgen; Müller-Vogg, Hugo; Reißmüller, Johann Georg. 20.03.1992, Nr. 68. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Husarenschritt nach Brüssel", auteur:Thielbeer, Siegfried , p. 14.

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A bold dash to Brussels

Finland's difficult declaration of belief in the European Community

By Siegfried Thielbeer

Helsinki, 19 March

The question as to why Finland wanted to join of the EC and of the future European Union was asked five times before Prime Minister Aho realised that he should perhaps, after all, make some kind of statement about the fundamental ideas involved, namely that Finland regarded itself as a part of Europe and a part of Western democratic culture. Another major reason was that Finland wanted to have a voice in the EC. It does, however, still have many reservations. It is noticeable that the exhausted politicians are victims of the endless Commission debates and party intrigues. Tactical manoeuvring was always at the centre of the issue: the resistance among the public and in the Centre Party (an agrarian camp where people are actually opposed to EC accession) was no longer so pronounced. It was unmistakable that they were in fear and trembling about saving the life of the government. Without the application for accession to the EC, the coalition would have split up, and the clear proponents of the EC, the Conservatives and the opposition Social Democrats, would have formed a new cabinet: the same coalition as before the Aho government.

Foreign Minister Paavo Väyrynen, the predecessor of Aho as Chairman of the Centre Party, says quite openly that he is not fond of the EC; apparently of the same opinion is the principal advocate for the EC, his colleague from the Conservative party, the Minister for Foreign Trade, Pertti Salolainen, who, in a speech in Parliament, recently described Brussels as the stronghold of bureaucracy and lobbyists. Väyrynen, whose cynicism may also occasionally be refreshing, says that he is actually opposed to the idea of entry. However, he has gleaned from talks with European politicians that there might perhaps be a place for Finland in the EC after all. Väyrynen is apparently convinced that, with more and more new members, the EC will become a 'looser association'.

MPs from all political parties freely admit that, without the dramatic disintegration of the Soviet Union, Finland would never have ventured to make an about-turn in its EC policy. Security policy had always been the priority for Finland, and consideration for the interests of Moscow was the price of its own freedom. Aho and Väyrynen claim, however, that the events in the Soviet Union had played 'absolutely no part' in their decision. They had apparently recognised by early 1991 that the EC-EFTA agreements on the European Economic Area were only a provisional solution. They had realised that the EC was developing a greater dynamic force than expected. This meant that Finland did not want to remain on the sidelines, and, ultimately, they had also succeeded in convincing themselves that it would be possible to negotiate with the EC and find solutions to the issues crucial for Finland.

This late recognition is surely explicable above all by the fact that Finland did not even dare to think about the EC until the break-up of the Soviet Union. The idea of joining the Community must have seemed too risky, and, for a country whose neutrality was precarious (in spite of the mutual assistance pact with Moscow) and had not been officially recognised by the Kremlin until 1989, participation in this clearly emerging political union must also have seemed too incompatible with its status. Then, however, politicians in Finland began to panic, because they were afraid they might be too late. This meant that the application for accession was rushed through in a final spurt of unprecedented boldness.

Perhaps initial consideration of the issue may have begun last autumn after the failed putsch in Moscow. However, a public debate was cut short (as 'senseless talk') by President Koivisto. Most Finns, practised as they are after decades of self-denial and self-censure, were simply ready to comply. If the politicians spoke at all about the EC, then it was only using formulations giving the impression that the only point of concern was the EC-EFTA negotiations. Few politicians dared to say that this was the issue 'for the time being'. The only ones who occasionally said what they meant were from the Conservatives — and for their pains they were, however, immediately reprimanded by newspaper commentators and ministerial colleagues. From President Koivisto, who bears sole responsibility for foreign policy, there was a stony silence or at most an

indication of certain doubts. If the EFTA negotiations were to fail, then Finland would also have other options, such as a free-trade agreement. In his New Year address, the President was still avoiding the subject. The government made reference to an inquiry that was in the process of being conducted into the advantages and disadvantages of membership. When this was finally submitted in mid-January, Prime Minister Aho still did not draw any conclusion. It was not until 7 February that Koivisto announced that the nation should decide on the question after an in-depth debate. In late February, the government stated that it was in favour of an application for accession. The citizens, who had been called upon to engage in an 'in-depth debate', had had a period of two weeks for consideration before the Parliament took the decisions.

The Swedes, after all, had taken eight months before they voted in favour of application for accession in December 1990. In May 1990, the then Prime Minister, Ingvar Carlsson, had still been formulating his objections so clearly in an article that only those who know nothing of Swedish affairs could have detected a back door. In Sweden, too, the debate is now being held subsequently, and the negative mood is increasing drastically in all the parties.

The fears that are arising in Finland may be explained by the lack of information. But the government did not want to allow the subject to be flogged to death. After a few days of internal party debates in the agrarian Centre Party, the leadership had carried the grass roots so far with them that, in a survey carried out internally, only 52 % of the members declared themselves to be against membership of the EC. For the government, this negative majority was sufficiently small for them to claim that they had a mandate for accession. The farmers, who are in fear of losing their livelihoods — the farmers of Finland, along with those of Norway, are among the most highly subsidised in Europe — are now being told that they will perhaps be even better off in the EC. Sceptics in the Centre Party in Parliament, where the majority was opposed to applying for EC membership, were lured by promises that there would be negotiations with Brussels. Three gave way, and, lo and behold, the Prime Minister had the majority in his parliamentary party.

In its comprehensive study document on application for accession, the government demonstrated just how many reservations it has about EC membership. It was able to provide evidence of its commitment to the farmers in the very large number of conditions that were set. Not that the actual application in Brussels was very lengthy. The Finnish Government's application is just as concise as every other one. However, for tactical reasons, the appearance of a conflict going on was given as a means of covering up the conflicts within the government itself. In the end, there was an absurd Punch and Judy show in Parliament, and, when a motion was tabled on EC membership, half of the ruling Centre Party voted against it. This made no difference, because, in the actual motion, the opposition Social Democrats voted in favour of the EC and ensured a clear majority. However, in conjunction with the vote of confidence, a vote then had to be taken on whether members were in favour of the Government's application for accession or of the Social Democrats'. Here, the people in the Centre Party were unanimously behind their government: half of them had, of course, already made their doubts quite clear in the earlier token voting.

Salolainen, the leader of the Conservative Party, joked: 'We will just count the Yes votes and the No votes and then take them both as pro EC.' (He thought that this witty little remark of his was so good that he has pointed out several times that, if he had been a journalist, he would have used it.) In the final vote, those who were against the EC and also those against the government, Communists and Greens, were able to register their No vote only by means of abstention. That is politics Finnish style, with the farce being further compounded by the fact that the President may in any case do whatever he likes in foreign policy. In the Green Party, the only group that frequently speaks the truth, there were complaints that the government was concealing its policies behind a whole series of manoeuvres and was deceiving the public by its 'a little bit at a time' tactics. Why were people still talking about clinging on to neutrality when it was quite obvious that they would very shortly be prepared to throw that overboard as well? After all, in the final debate, Aho told the Parliament that the Finnish application for accession meant that Finland accepted the decisions taken at Maastricht and the efforts to achieve a European Union.

Foreign Minister Väyrynen, known for his smooth agreements with Moscow, is nevertheless unable to recognise a lack of democracy in the Finnish decision-making process. In his opinion, it is, ultimately, not

the task of the politicians to demonstrate that they are ‘populists’ but instead to implement what they have recognised as a wise course of action. Prime Minister Aho, who is a proponent of political parties, is also of the view that Finland should not join the EC for the sake of its culture of democracy. His country was democratic, even without the EC.