

'Nigel Lawson's speech — (2) Stand up and be counted if you want to go further' from Europe (1 February 1989)

Caption: In his editorial of 1 February 1989, Emanuele Gazzo, Director of Agence Europe in Brussels, reviews the tactics used by the United Kingdom to prevent the establishment of an Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in Europe.

Source: Europe. Dir. of publ. Riccardi, Lodovico ; REditor Riccardi, Ferdinando. 01.02.1989, No 4945. Brussels.

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URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/nigel_lawson_s_speech_2_stand_up_and_be_counted_if_you_want_to_go_further_from_europe_1_february_1989-en-0acc31ab-d90b-4b55-a5a0-0f5fe20c86f7.html

Publication date: 17/09/2012

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It is now clear that the British Prime Minister is obsessed by the fear of seeing the 1985 process repeat itself and of becoming enmeshed in a mechanism which will drag her where she has absolutely no desire to go. At the Milan Summit held at the end of June 1985, the decision to convene an intergovernmental conference “in order to make European Union progress concretely” was taken at a majority (Article 148 of the EEC Treaty), i.e. against the strong opposition of Mrs Thatcher who thought that it was useless since the Council itself could have adopted practical measures (an adjective she really likes), and she announced that, in any case, its decisions could only be taken unanimously (Article 236 EEC). That day, the issue had clearly “singled out those who want to progress towards a stronger political union and those who refuse to do so” (comment by François Mitterrand). Now Mrs Thatcher regrets signing the Single Act. Despite all she says, she knows perfectly well what “European Union” means. For her, it is a war machine against her country's independence (which is false) and this is why she says (or has other people say) “halt”! She knows that Economic and Monetary Union would affect the independence of each Member State's economic and monetary policy (the logical consequence of the creation of a joint economic area).

In his article published in The Times, Ronald Butt, commenting that during the next European elections people will speak of everything except the fundamental questions raised by Mrs Thatcher, denounced a kind of “conspiracy of silence” to avoid having to make choices across party lines. Since the common vocabulary is now inspired by federalism, politicians are embarrassed and fear being accused of “anti-Europeanism”. Mr. Butt seems quite pessimistic faced with an intoxicated political opinion, and a Westminster Parliament incapable of defending the national interest against “a Brussels-dominated Europe without frontiers”. In particular, he seems to be worried about “a single European currency which must eventually mean a sole European currency”.

Mr. Lawson's speech is the logical follow-up to this warning. Like his Prime Minister, Lawson sees a “duality” in the vision of the 1992 objective. Some people want to eliminate the numerous institutional barriers which prevent the realisation of the customs union, “the Community's original raison d'être” (but Lawson does not question why this has not yet been realised: he would have recognised that it is due to the absence of a European power capable of imposing the respect of common rules). Some other people are Euro-visionaries who want to go much further in the economic, monetary and political areas. The action of the latter is not justified, does not fall within the Community's objectives and in reality proposes to erect a smokescreen to avoid the practical application of the demobilisation of national barriers. By saying this, Mr. Lawson not only denies all the history of a Community (he probably does not know it) which was founded as the first stone of a federation; not only ignores or pretends to ignore written and signed commitments; not only denies to the Community the means to realise its objectives, but levels gratuitous accusations against his partners.

In conclusion, Mr. Lawson reveals the tactic that his government will use. On the one hand, he announces that his government will “never” accept an Economic and Monetary Union as it is presently emerging, and hints that it will use its veto power. On the other hand, he “offers” “practical measures”, for example to quadruple the customs exemptions for travellers entering the United Kingdom (which would only consolidate borders since any concession requires a measure of control ...). Within the framework of the Delors Committee on Economic and Monetary Union, the governor of the Bank of England adopts a similar tactic.

The Commission gave an initial answer, but a reflection is called for. Is the situation similar to the one prevailing in Milan in 1985? Maybe it is. But it should be stated here and now that Economic and Monetary Union will be realised in any case. By those who, together with their peoples, “want to go further”.

Emanuele Gazzo