

'A victory for Europe' from Le Monde diplomatique (February 1966)

Caption: In February 1966, the French monthly magazine Le Monde diplomatique warmly welcomes the 'Luxembourg Compromise' which ended the empty chair crisis on 29 January 1966.

Source: Le Monde diplomatique. dir. de publ. Beuve-Mery, Hubert ; Réd. Chef Honti, François. Février 1966, n° 143. Paris. "Une victoire pour l'Europe", auteur:Honti, François , p. 1.

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A victory for Europe

By François Honti

A useful task has been accomplished in Luxembourg. While France and its five partners in the European Economic Community did not reach agreement on all points, the serious crisis that threatened the very existence of the organisation is virtually over. France will soon resume its seat in the Council of Ministers, and the Council will again be able to operate normally.

This outcome was possible because, at bottom, none of the six governments desired the breakdown and liquidation of the Common Market. Too many interests are at stake for any of the countries to take such an eventuality lightly. Moreover, in adopting a less rigid attitude, the French Government seems to have learnt one of the clearest lessons of the presidential election, namely that a large proportion of the public is attached to the idea of Europe. While it is less clear what kind of Europe French 'Europeans' aspire to, they would all have been greatly disappointed had they felt that their government had scuppered the European Economic Community.

As we know, the agreement that has been reached accepts the French position on relations between the Commission, which is the Common Market's executive body, and the Council of Ministers, i.e. the governments. The single Commission of the three Communities — Common Market, ECSC and Euratom — that will replace the present three executive bodies, will be obliged to cooperate closely with the governments, and its budgets will be strictly controlled by them.

No agreement was reached on the main issue of majority voting in the Council of Ministers, but the positions of the various parties are now close enough for there to be no further obstacle to French participation in the work of the Council. In this respect, the crisis has done some good. On the eve of a further decisive step, it has enabled each country to clarify its position on the application of the majority voting rule. The controversy over this issue quickly revealed that, although there seems to be adamant opposition on the question of principle, nobody in fact envisages applying the rule without restriction, which would risk damaging the vital interests of one of the Member States. This restriction is a matter of common sense. What European government would allow foreign governments to impose on it decisions that it considered harmful to its national economy? We must remember that the Member States of the European Economic Community have retained their independence in political and military matters, and they would reject any intervention in their economic affairs that ran counter to their political objectives.

The fact remains that the diverging positions on the issue of majority voting may prove difficult to reconcile in practice. In renouncing recourse to that procedure in advance, France has made it clear that it would refuse to submit to a majority vote if it risked endangering France's vital interests. Who will be entitled to decide whether the interests at stake in a given case are vital or not? If this decision depended on the representatives of the country in question, it could well be challenged. The spectre of further crises will continue to hover over the Common Market unless tact and diplomacy are employed on all sides.

Some will regret what they see as a weakening of the Community's federal nature. But we must face the fact that the centrifugal forces in Europe are still very strong and confronting them head-on could do more harm than good. In this case, the wise course is to proceed gradually.

The European Economic Community is an attempt to establish a federal system among ancient European nations that are used to seeing themselves as political entities and, placed as they are between two giants, are becoming aware of the need to combine forces in order to preserve their own nature and individual interests. While history and national feeling make them suspicious of each other, reason incites them to draw together, since they are no longer able, either economically or militarily, to ensure a solid basis for their independence.

It is still too soon to tell whether peoples of different origins and with different languages can be federated by economic means. There is no historical precedent. But the experiment is worth attempting. We should

therefore welcome the Luxembourg compromise which, as Mr Luns so rightly remarked, was reached without any winners or losers among the negotiating countries, and will enable the experiment to continue. It is Europe that has emerged victorious from the test.