

'The British application for accession raises the issue of political balance in the Common Market' from Le Figaro (26 September 1961)

Caption: On 26 September 1961, the French Conservative daily newspaper Le Figaro focuses on the progress of and the issues at stake in the negotiations on the United Kingdom's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: Le Figaro. 26.09.1961. Paris: Le Figaro. "La candidature britannique soulève le problème de l'équilibre politique dans le Marché commun", auteur:Lecerf, Jean.

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The British application for accession raises the issue of political balance in the Common Market

Brussels, 25 September.

The meeting of the Council of Ministers of the European Economic Community, which opens tonight, will hold over until tomorrow the issue which dominates the agenda: how to respond to the letters of application from the British and Irish, who are keen to open negotiations for accession to the Common Market. There is no uncertainty as to 'Yes' or 'No'; the fact that it will be a 'Yes' is widely accepted. But the reply will naturally indicate the procedure for negotiating terms; in other words, it will signal exactly who will have the power to accept or refuse the British requests. This immediately raises the whole issue of political balance within the Common Market.

Sensibilities come into it. In order for the process to work efficiently, Britain must have set out its wishes in writing. However, if the EEC Council of Ministers refuses to reply to Harold Macmillan's letter of application until a preliminary memorandum has been tabled, the British will consider it a very cold reception. If the Council's letter accepts the principle of the negotiations, calls for a memorandum and a period of one month in which to study it before opening discussions, the reception will still seem distant. More friendly would be a letter referring solely to the opening of discussions, even if this means making the President of the Council of Ministers responsible for verbally requesting specific files.

Community or intergovernmental negotiations?

As for the procedure itself, the debate is taking place between the more European members and the more nationalist members of the Six. The former want the executive body of the Common Market, the Commission based on the Treaty of Rome, and the mutual interests of the group of Six to play the widest possible role. The latter, driven by their individual interests, want negotiations to take place between governments so that each nation may retain the greatest possible room for manoeuvre. France is playing this second game.

Here, again, several solutions are possible. Everyone recognises that, in order to show strength in the face of the British, the Six must coordinate their positions. How? The Treaty of Rome makes no provision for the Commission to be responsible for negotiations, which would be the simplest scenario. Will the group of Six have a president, a sort of spokesperson and arbiter, who might be Paul-Henri Spaak? France, initially, at least, is against this. It is in favour of organised cooperation, but as an equal partner.

With whom will the Commission negotiate? Great Britain alone? With all the applicants together? With each country simultaneously or consecutively? Where will the negotiations take place? In Brussels? France is still against it.

The Treaty of Rome: a minimum

At the heart of the problem is that fact that, once the United Kingdom accedes, the position taken up by the Common Market executive body has been well known. It was set out last Tuesday in Strasbourg by its President, Walter Hallstein.

He confirmed that negotiators should first concentrate their efforts on the most difficult case, that of the United Kingdom. Since it wants to join a community which is already established, it must first specify the points that it wishes to be negotiated. We know the rough list of these points: agriculture, future common customs tariff, the issue of the Commonwealth, the status of the associated African territories, the finalising of the institutions, etc. Most of these problems were already resolved in the Treaty of Rome.

The rules of this Treaty and the power of the institutions which it created seem to Mr Hallstein to be 'minimal requirements which must be fulfilled if an economic institution capable of functioning effectively is to be established and maintained in working order.' This is 'the precondition and the necessary basis for

any political convergence of our nations.’

According to Mr Hallstein’s speech, Maurice Macmillan, the son of the Prime Minister, is not considered here to be committing the United Kingdom.

Drawing up an agreement on the British accession to the Economic Community may well be a long, confused, and very technical process. We cannot guarantee that it will be successful. Underlying it will be the tension of passionate debates concerning Europe and the world.

Jean Lecerf