

‘Maggie and her begging bowl’ from L'Express (15 March 1980)


Caption: On 15 March 1980, three months after the Dublin European Council, the French weekly magazine L'Express considers the position of Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister, regarding the method of determining the Member States' financial contributions to the Community budget.

Source: Les Cahiers de l'Express. 1957-1992 Europe. La longue marche. dir. de publ. Stricker, Willy. Janvier 1992, n° 13. Paris: Groupe Express SA. "Maggie et sa s  bile", auteur:de l'Ecotais, Yann , p. 68-70.

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Maggie and her begging bowl

The ‘Iron Lady’ is demanding nine billion in the name of ‘fair return’. Impending deal or collision course? The ghost of the General is abroad...

Either Maggie is bluffing to perfection, or Mrs Thatcher is deadly serious. In the first case, the Nine can expect, at the European Council meeting in Brussels on 31 March and 1 April, some memorable eyeball-to-eyeball sessions, leading however, as always in the history of the Community, to an ‘arrangement’. In the second case, there is no avoiding a head-on collision, which London will blame on Paris, Paris on London, Bonn on the other two capitals, the ‘small’ countries on their larger counterparts and so on.

‘They’ll take time coming round to my ideas, but come round they will.’ Speaking as a guest on Antenne 2’s ‘Cartes sur table’ talk show, on Monday 10 March, a powdered and lacquered Margaret Thatcher takes a last look in the mirror and then sets out her conception of Europe. It comes down to two points:

1. The European Community is above all a political construct, the second hub of the ‘free world’ along with the United States, bonded with America in the face of communism. It is also a vast free-trade area in which goods circulate unhindered, thus contributing to general prosperity. As for the rest, the Community has to be financially neutral. A Member State must ‘get back’ from the Nine a sum equal to its contribution: the ‘common policies’ are designed or modified in the light of that objective. In other words, the ‘fair return’ doctrine, which by definition conflicts with the Common Market and its invention of common policies to address common problems.

2. Under those conditions, it is totally ‘unfair’ — the word returns like a hammer-blow in the British discourse — to expect the United Kingdom to put nine thousand million francs into the European budget while France contributes only 700 million. Particularly as the United Kingdom does not figure among the wealthiest European countries. It follows that the European policies must be corrected to allow the partner countries to come up with the nine thousand million wrongly levied on British poverty.

Is the ‘iron lady’ seeking to politicise the debate in order to raise the stakes and go home with the largest possible pile of chips? That is what all her partners thought until the time of the Dublin Summit at the end of November 1979. And indeed it is only normal for the Europeans to make an effort when one of their own is in difficulty. That is what solidarity is all about. Thanks to some twisting of the legal texts and a bout of amnesia concerning North Sea oil, they felt able to announce a willingness to offer the United Kingdom a rebate worth two to three thousand million francs. On that basis, they felt, a compromise ought to be possible.

Today they are not so sure. Maggie has hardened her position, threatening not to pay part of the UK contribution if her demands are not met in full. One thing is clear: it is quite impossible to come up with nine thousand million francs without profoundly modifying the Community. ‘Let there be no mistake. Mrs Thatcher, blowing her enormous trumpet, is set on bringing down the walls of Jericho,’ to quote a diplomat in post in Brussels.

And so the long and bitter history of the relations between the United Kingdom and the Community rises once again to the surface. The 1950s, when London was determined to sink the emerging Community and created the modest free-trade area. The first negotiations, in the course of which Edward Heath was set — even at that stage — on securing changes to the agricultural policy. An outcome refused by de Gaulle in January 1963. The second negotiations, which succeeded this time round because Heath agreed to fit in with Europe as it already was. Moved by genuine European conviction, as some believe? Or, as others suggest accusingly, in the belief that once ‘inside the walls’ it will be easier to modify the way things are done? The first opportunity to negotiate from the inside, secured by Harold Wilson in 1975 with a view to ‘correcting’ the UK contribution if necessary. And today the head-on attack by Margaret Thatcher: ‘This is an entirely different game from the radical-socialist wheezes practised by Wilson and Callaghan,’ to quote one senior French civil servant. ‘With Maggie, the moment of truth has arrived.’

A strange swing of the pendulum: 'A lot of people are today saying that de Gaulle was right,' observes, in Strasbourg, a Dutch Christian-Democratic parliamentarian who can hardly be suspected of Gaullist sympathies. 'Great Britain for us meant dignity, the fight against Hitler,' he continues. 'Hence our commitment to UK accession. Today you won't find a single politician from any of our countries ready to argue in favour of the British attitude. It's a story about a deep love affair gone sour.'

Margaret Thatcher doesn't give a fig, and it may be she is wrong. What is the reason for such inflexibility, for such certainty?

Maggie is putting her country's books in order. At home and abroad. Whether she is up against trade unions or EEC Member States, there is no question of giving in. To date, the tactic has paid off. In Brussels as elsewhere: 'The British have a simple negotiating approach,' as a Director General at the European Commission explains. 'They say: it has to be like that because we're right. And they never return the compliment.'

Maggie launched her attack at the very moment the international crisis broke out. A brilliant move. Europe is not going to choose a moment when the West must close ranks to blow itself to smithereens. It has to remain united, which means coming up with a response to the UK's demands. The basic issues are political. As a sign of goodwill, London would be prepared to join the European Monetary System — a prospect which, it should be added, does not exactly thrill those countries which are already part of the system.

Certainly the political receptiveness is still there, in the Benelux countries, in Germany and in Italy. Even if they believe the 'European crisis', coming on top of the 'international crisis', is to be blamed more on the British than on the European mainlanders. No-one is looking to shut the door on the United Kingdom. And besides, Margaret Thatcher has herself said quite clearly: 'I'm here and I'm staying.'

The economic dialogue is proving rather more stilted. For one thing, if the United Kingdom 'pays' a lot to Brussels, it is because it imports heavily from countries outside the Common Market — and, besides, who knows how much goods are subject to customs duties or agricultural levies in London before the shipments are spread out among the other EEC countries? It is also, and regrettably, because it spends rather than invests and therefore bears a heavy VAT contribution.

A flagging economy? Rumbling inflation and grinding unemployment? Why not help Great Britain pull through, why not remove the 'injustice', if that's what it is? There could be a thousand ways of doing so. Always remembering that there are two limits. The first is that in Brussels people readily put their hand to their heart but are far less prompt in sliding it towards their wallets. 'The answer cannot be an instrument which favours the United Kingdom but works to the detriment of all the other countries,' to quote Charles Haughey, the Irish Prime Minister, speaking to L'Express. All the available generosity combined — in other words, that of Germany, France and, to a much lesser extent, Benelux — will barely go halfway to meeting the British demands. The second is not to destroy, while supposedly helping the UK in its hour of need, the very principles on which the Community rests: Community preference, financial solidarity.

And there, as usual, France will be out in front, whether it likes it or not. This is not to say it feels guilty: it is no longer a net recipient of EEC funds; and as for the much-discussed agricultural surpluses, the beneficiaries are above all Germany and the Netherlands; and in any case is it now a failing for a country to be a major agricultural exporter? It will be in the front line because two doctrines on how Europe should be built find themselves in open conflict. Somewhat absurdly, that conflict is symbolised by the sheep war. Long live the cheapest sheep in the world, say the British, no matter whether it comes from New Zealand! There can be no question of sacrificing our breeders, of throwing them on to the dole queues! comes the French reply.

France has always believed in European integration through the economy, in an organised Community. For the United Kingdom, Europe goes without saying, and though 'saying' may also have its advantages, regulating most certainly does not.

Two doctrines defended by two governments for which a decent European crisis would not be that unwelcome on the domestic front. The stormclouds are gathering over Brussels.

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