

'Six against one' from L'Express (25 December 1967)

Caption: On 25 December 1967, the French weekly magazine L'Express analyses reactions to France's opposition to British accession to the EEC, a position that it restated at the meeting of the Council held on 19 December.

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. "Six contre un", auteur:Ullmann, Marc , p. 19-21.

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Last updated: 01/03/2017

Six against one

De Gaulle sticks to his guns: the United Kingdom remains on Europe's doorstep. His partners are content to let him assume the consequences of his veto alone.

In the months-long game of 'winners and losers' between General de Gaulle and Harold Wilson, seven governments have won. But Europe has lost.

The General is jubilant: without a major crisis, he has prevented Britain from joining the Common Market and shown it that Paris holds the key to accession. Wilson is pleased: Britain has capitalised at little cost on the accumulated resentment of France's attitude and secured a political clientele in Brussels and Italy. Kurt Georg Kiesinger has no reason to be upset: London and Paris will be competing for Germany's favours. Only the Community has suffered: from now on, national selfishness is the rule. Each country will pursue its own interests.

In securing France's 'victory' in Brussels on Monday and Tuesday, Maurice Couve de Murville proved a model of smoothness, patience and courtesy. 'Couve at his suavest,' as a German delegate put it.

With regard to Britain, the French minister confined himself to lamenting its ill-health, noting that its economy was sick and could stand 'neither the free movement of goods, nor the free movement of capital, nor the financial burden of the agricultural policy.' Rather than embarking on pointless negotiations at this stage, he said, it was better 'to wait until the British economy has fully recovered.'

'How, and on what criteria, will you judge that recovery to be complete?' Josef Luns, the Dutch foreign minister asked him. 'We shall know when it is,' the French minister replied, unperturbed.

The Belgian minister, Pierre Harmel, disagreed: 'Nobody claims Britain is ready to join the Common Market without transitional arrangements,' he said. 'But it is absurd to prefer that its recovery take place in isolation rather than through dialogue.' Jean Rey, president of the Common Market Commission, put it more graphically. 'When a man in a bowler hat and a frock coat knocks on your door,' he said, 'you don't rush upstairs and pour a bucket of water on him.' Couve de Murville was happy to banter, declining 'to argue with the chairman about whether Britain was applying for membership in a frock coat or a mini-skirt.' On a more serious note, he proposed disingenuously that the meeting record 'the unanimous agreement of the Six' that Britain was not ready to join the Common Market at the present time.

And that unanimity was forthcoming: one after the other, the ministers intoned that if negotiations began immediately they would be lengthy, and that, before joining, Britain should show proof that it was well on the way to economic recovery.

Comment by a French delegate: 'They are a sanctimonious lot. All ready to help Britain when she no longer needs it. And, for the time being, concerned only to let the French Government take the blame for saying no.'

During the discussion nobody tried to change Couve de Murville's 'no, until' into a 'yes, when'. There were no threats. No banging on the table. No blackmailing talk of 'crisis'. The only threat to the French minister came from the powerful pipe-lighter wielded by his neighbour and close associate, Jean-Pierre Brunet. For the rest, all was politeness, fatalism and resignation.

'We've been running round in circles for months now,' said Luns. 'Let's get it over and done with!' The Dutch minister called for the clearest possible admission of disagreement. He asked the chairman of the meeting, Karl Schiller, the German economic affairs minister, not to include any view of the future of the Community in the final communiqué but to confine himself to summarising the discussion and recording that five of the six Member States were in favour of opening negotiations with Britain.

Couve de Murville raised no objection, since he knew General de Gaulle was prepared to 'take the sin upon

himself'. He even added a paragraph to the French position stating that British accession in any circumstances 'would profoundly change the nature and management of the Community.' His aim was to preserve the Gaullists' room for manoeuvre: once the British economy had recovered, the French Government could, if it wished, invoke the argument about the 'nature' of the Community — either to oppose British entry once again, or to put an end to the small measure of supranationalism still existing in the Common Market.

The General was quick to show his gratitude. At the meeting of the council of ministers at the Elysée on Wednesday morning, he praised Couve de Murville for the 'foresight, calm and firmness' he had shown in Brussels. Many of the ministers were amazed at the warmth and forcefulness of his words. Never, since the last elections, had Pompidou received such compliments. But the General had just succeeded in doing what he likes best: standing out alone against the natural course of events. He had not been in such fine fettle since his 'Québec libre' speech in Montreal.

As if to emphasise his esteem for his foreign minister, he used the exact words which Couve de Murville had added to the Brussels communiqué: 'The nature and management of the Community,' said the President, 'would have been changed for the worse by British accession.' He also reiterated Couve de Murville's argument that 'if negotiations had been opened, the Community would have been paralysed for their duration.'

The General has set the tone of Gaullist dialectics for the coming months. To those who complain that the French veto is holding Europe back, the faithful will reply, paraphrasing the head of state, that 'by acting as it did, France had above all preserved the Common Market's possibilities of further development.'

For the leaders of the Federation of the Left, this argument is simply a fraud. They have abandoned the idea of a motion of no confidence but are determined, though without any illusions, to provoke an extraordinary session of parliament and launch a campaign on 'the consequences of the government's decision for the French economy and the future of Europe.' Most of the deputies of the Democratic Centre share Jean Monnet's view that 'the French Government's veto stops the development of Europe ... it is a profound political error.' For two days the founder of the Communities has been constantly on the phone to Bonn, Rome, the Hague and Brussels. He knows the Italians and the Benelux countries — the latter are refusing for the time being to participate in the work of the Common Market — are about to declare a strike on European affairs.

'It won't last long,' Couve de Murville's staff respond philosophically. 'Holland has just as much need to sell tulips to France as France has to sell cars to Holland.' That just about sums it up: on the most optimistic view, the Common Market is heading for a phase of tit-for-tat. The French Government will have to pay a heavy price for the renewal of European aid to the African countries and for finalisation of the rules on the common agricultural policy.

The German foreign minister, Willy Brandt, who celebrated his 55th birthday on that gloomy Monday in Brussels, hopes to take advantage of the forthcoming period of bargaining to propose a compromise concerning Britain. Having a foot in both camps, he would like to persuade Wilson to accept something less than full membership and to convince General de Gaulle of the need to go beyond a simple association arrangement without political content. But neither party is prepared to give way to any extent.

General de Gaulle will not, because he is out to gain years, not months. He believes Britain's decline will get worse and hopes that, eventually, it will be 'a large small country', rather than a world power, that comes knocking on Europe's door.

And Wilson will not, because he takes exactly the opposite view. Not content with a visitor's seat in the Community, he prefers to wait for better days. Especially as he feels certain that the Belgian, Italian and Dutch Governments will consult him before taking any decisions at all within the Common Market.

Whether Britain succumbs to its difficulties or overcomes them, the problem is now posed in terms of

Franco–British rivalry for the leadership of Europe.

A joint effort to rejuvenate the Old World seems further off than ever. It is not that the ‘nature and management of the Community’ risk being changed in the future. They have already been changed, and changed profoundly.

Marc Ullmann