

Interview with Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb: Britain's accession to the EEC (Sanem, 9 July 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What were your personal experiences of January 1973, when Europe of the Six was enlarged to include Great Britain?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] The historical evidence that I can offer you refers to the period beforehand and thus portrays my feelings in 1973. Just as, as a student in the 1950s, I had begun to discuss issues like the EDC and regulation of Germany, during the 1960s, following the drama of the Congo and Spaak's return to foreign affairs, the subjects under discussion were enlargement, the Fouchet Plan and Gaullism. One has to understand the atmosphere at the time. Gaullism was something new. General de Gaulle's time was not yet up nor had its controversial aspects yet become clear. Gaullism was still verbal and uncompromising. Within the movements or study groups that I was part of, we discussed this and I recall a conference organised by Arthur Gilson, Minister for Home Affairs, and a member of our group – I think it was 'La Relève' that I belonged to – with Paul-Henri Spaak. Paul-Henri Spaak had come in order to explain his opposition to the Fouchet Plan, which was political cooperation organised Gaullist-fashion, and his frank hostility to it, and also to advocate, in the same spirit, Great Britain's accession, stating: 'We are threatened by authoritarian regimes in Europe. We must have on our side the great democracy that has always assured our security.' At that moment, as a student, I was swayed by two feelings co-existing within me. Firstly: 'If we want truly European integration, we cannot admit Great Britain because it will apply a brake on all four wheels. It would not be the same for them as it is for the defeated nations of the Second World War, who have well understood what needs to be done.' Secondly, I could not understand this hostility towards General de Gaulle. I could understand the Fouchet Plan; we could discuss the technical aspects, but this expression of concern: 'The Gaullist regime is a threat to democracy; we have to actively support [this] democracy' was something that I did not share. I understood the point Spaak was making on that occasion, when, referring to the pre-war period, he said: 'Our generation was not vigilant enough to counter the rise of Nazism, we have to be vigilant against every form of...so on and so forth', I found it...outmoded. But this does nothing to detract from the role played by Paul-Henri Spaak who was there in order to promote Great Britain's entry. There had been the first refusal by General de Gaulle and afterwards, quite naturally, that was that. My feeling in 1973 was this: 'It's done; it's acceptable. It is a bit sad for integration as I should like to see it, but so be it, there are other advantages including this as well as that of Britain's international influence.' These were the feelings that were much the same as those that I experienced at each of the various successive enlargements: 'Yes, it's a good thing to have Denmark. Yes, it's a good thing to have Sweden, but is it going to be an aid to integration?' One could expatiate at length on this subject. Perhaps these successive integrations have stopped the Six from going ahead too quickly and thus making some mistakes? Perhaps these integrations have stopped the Six from making the progress that might have been necessary? A historian could weigh up the pros and cons. Would it not have been better at the start for Europe to have gathered in all these participants and then started to develop? It is an open question and one which is still relevant today, beyond the enlargement towards the East, Turkey or even other Mediterranean countries, which I am working on at the moment. These are options that are either irrational or dependent on a political situation at a given time. So these were my feelings towards Great Britain in 1973.