

'France is seeking to deprive the Commission of political power' from Die Welt (18 January 1966)

Caption: On 18 January 1966, the German daily newspaper Die Welt comments on France's decision to boycott intergovernmental meetings of Community bodies in Brussels, thereby provoking the empty chair crisis.

Source: Die Welt. 18.01.1966. Essen. "Paris erstrebt die politische Entmachtung der Kommission".

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France is seeking to deprive the Commission of political power

The memorandum of foreign minister Couve de Murville

From our special correspondent

L.R. Hi./ch. Luxembourg, 17 January

The French ten-point memorandum on relations between the Commission and the EEC Council of Ministers, which foreign minister Couve de Murville presented in Luxembourg on Monday, is essentially aimed at binding the Commission more closely to the Council of Ministers and restricting its political initiative.

In Luxembourg France is taking part in an EEC Council of Ministers meeting for the first time since the crisis broke out six months ago. The Brussels Commission is not attending the meeting.

The German delegation expressed a certain willingness to compromise when it pointed out that an article of the Treaty of Rome laid down fairly precise provisions concerning relations between the Commission and the Council of Ministers and, consequently, left scope for a relevant agreement between the governments. However, on Monday, France's five EEC partners maintained their refusal to enter into arrangements which would adversely affect the Commission's powers and responsibilities under the Treaty or its independence from governments.

The ten-point memorandum relating to the conduct of the Commission essentially contained the following demands:

- In the case of politically important proposals, the Commission must consult the governments before submitting them to the Council of Ministers.
- Commission 'directives' to the national governments concerning the implementation of the Treaty and Commission proposals to the Council of Ministers must be worded in such general terms that they still leave the national executives scope to supplement them.
- The Commission may not make public statements without having first informed the governments of their substance.
- The Commission's information activities should be coordinated with those of the Council of Ministers. France wishes thereby to prevent members of the Commission, or the Commission as a whole, from continuing to express public criticism of Member States.
- The Council of Ministers should monitor the budget and the Commission's financial management more closely.
- The Council of Ministers should draw up its instructions to the Commission concerning the implementation of decisions in such precise terms that they do not allow for any discretionary decisions on the part of the Commission.

The Commission should exercise the EEC's right to accredit diplomatic missions only in conjunction with the Council of Ministers and should introduce a relevant protocol procedure which is more modest than that of sovereign States.

The Commission should keep the Council of Ministers fully informed at all times when it represents the EEC vis-à-vis other countries and negotiates trade agreements with non-member countries.

Following the first meeting, Netherlands foreign minister Luns told the press that the French position placed the five partners in an 'awkward situation'.

Federal Economic Affairs Minister Schmücker merely stated that ‘there is no question of the two sides moving closer together, things are progressing very slowly— but this was just the first round.’ Federal foreign minister Schröder added that ‘the meeting provided very useful clarification.’

As regards the French demands, German delegation circles stated that any absolute requirement would be rejected by France’s five partners. However, first there would have to be, first of all, further ‘tactical information-gathering’.

In the view of the German delegation, an entire catalogue of further questions arose for further meetings which were expressly not ruled out.

For example, it still remains open as to whether and when France will resume its seat in Brussels. The talks on financing the common agricultural policy must be continued, in particular in view of the Kennedy Round. The Commission is awaiting, as a matter of urgency, a new mandate for the negotiations in Geneva. Discussions on the Community budgets have been suspended.