

'Europe's leaders meet in Turin to tidy up the Maastricht Treaty and prepare to open the EU to the east' from Libération (29 March 1996)

Caption: On 29 March 1996, the French daily newspaper Libération considers the institutional implications of the Turin European Council which, that very day, officially opens the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) on the revision of the Treaty on European Union.

Source: Libération. 29.03.1996, n° 4621. Paris. "A Turin, l'Europe retoilette Maastricht et prépare l'ouverture aux pays de l'Est", auteur:Quatremer, Jean , p. 4.

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EU leaders launch intergovernmental conference

Europe's leaders meet in Turin to tidy up the Maastricht Treaty and prepare to open the EU to the east

The 15 EU heads of state and government meet today in Turin to convene an intergovernmental conference (IGC) planned to last over a year. Its task will be to reform institutions originally established for a Community of six. An initial interim report will be presented in June. The original agenda for the meeting was security and defence policy and the advisability of a common European social policy. 'Mad cow' disease has now been added, following the Brussels Commission's announcement two days ago of a total ban on imports of British beef.

From our special correspondent in Turin

The intergovernmental conference (IGC) to be formally convened in Turin today by the fifteen EU heads of state and government will seek to give a human face to the Maastricht infant and enable it to grow under the best possible conditions after Europe's enlargement to the east. But the task of creating a European Union with real powers of decision, especially in the field of foreign policy, is so formidable that, in all likelihood, they will have the greatest difficulty in reaching agreement on the means of avoiding its dilution. To create a political union worthy of the name, you have to be in agreement about the objectives. That is far from the case today where moving a comma has to be approved unanimously.

But the worst outcome is never certain. Anything is possible, and none of the leaders who will take their seats in Turin's Lingotto Conference Centre, a former Fiat factory, can predict what the Union will look like after the IGC has finished its work at least a year from now. Britain's Conservatives have announced that they will block any ambitious structural changes, so the negotiations are unlikely to be concluded before the UK elections, which are due to be held in spring 1997 at the latest.

The truth is that everyone could have done without this IGC. After all, the Maastricht Treaty has been in force only since 1 November 1993, and the Treaty of Rome has already been amended twice in six years (the Single Act in 1985 and Maastricht in 1991). Would it not have been more sensible to wait another year or two before embarking on such a task? Unfortunately, the Maastricht Treaty itself stipulated a review in 1996. Having failed to reach satisfactory agreement on important issues, the 1991 negotiators provided for several items — notably the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), police and judicial cooperation and an increase in the powers of the European Parliament — to be reviewed in five years' time, in the hope that attitudes would have changed sufficiently once Maastricht was operation. To some extent, the 1996 IGC is the price that we are paying for partial failure of the model adopted in 1991.

But the hurdles to ratification (a 'No' vote in the Danish referendum in 1992, the French referendum in September of that year, the delaying tactics used by the British House of Commons, etc.) pushed back the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty. As a result, the Fifteen now find themselves negotiating on the basis of only 29 months' experience of Maastricht. What is more, successive European Council meetings have encumbered the agenda for the IGC with 'democratisation' of the Union and reform of the European institutions so as to enable them to function with twenty or thirty Member States. Indeed, the prospect of enlargement to the east has gradually become the main reason for this IGC. Everyone, except the British, agrees on the need to adapt mechanisms that were originally designed to operate with six countries. The fifteen governments will, therefore, be trying to reach agreement on the extension of majority voting in the Council of Ministers (the EU's legislative body). All sectors are involved, including the common foreign and security policy and internal security, two areas paralysed by the unanimity rule, and the economy. The negotiators will also try to amend the number of votes allocated to each country in the Council of Ministers so as to increase the weight of the large countries; to change the system of the six-month rotating presidency (to ensure that the large countries do not exercise that function only once every fifteen years in a Europe with 30 Member States); and to reduce the number of commissioners and members of the European Parliament in order to avoid the creation of a new 'supreme soviet'. Under the heading 'democratisation', the main aim will be to increase the powers of the European Parliament and agree on a uniform method of

electing it other than proportional representation.

The institutional nuts and bolts, however unexciting, are so central to the forthcoming negotiations that assembling them will probably cause the most serious crises among the Fifteen. Indeed, several governments are already convinced that it will be impossible to find a compromise. Witness the fact that they are proposing, like the Franco-German partnership, that the future treaty include a general clause authorising the more ambitious countries to engage in 'enhanced cooperation'. In simple terms, this would mean setting up a variable-geometry Europe so as to avoid a deadlock that would spell the end of the EU. But, there again, everyone would have to agree to it. So the inclusion of a chapter on 'employment' in the future treaty, which is advocated by the Scandinavians in particular, is less of an issue than institutional reform. Should the Fifteen fail to reach agreement by the end of 1997, or make do with timid reform, another crucial deadline could shake them into action: early 1998 will see designation of the countries that qualify for participation in the single currency. The resulting hard core might then decide to take political integration further without waiting for their most reluctant partners.

Jean Quatremer