'The Commonwealth is more attractive' from the Deutsche Zeitung (31 July 1957)

Caption: On 31 July 1957, the German daily newspaper Deutsche Zeitung analyses the consequences for Europe in the throes of integration of the preferential relations between the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth.

Source: Deutsche Zeitung. mit Wirtschaftszeitung. 31.07.1957, n° 61; 18. Jg. Stuttgart: Curt E. Schwab GmbH. "Das Commonwealth liegt näher", p. 3.

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_commonwealth_is_more_attractive_from_the_deutsche_zeitung_31_july_1957-en-d916ba11-d90c-4582-97e8-2e83eae1e713.html

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The Commonwealth is more attractive

Britain’s cool affection for Europe

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A floating island is what Great Britain would really like to be. The huge radar antenna spinning night and day on the cliffs at Beachy Head is the number one look-out post. The continent is not, however, planning to go away, and today’s visitors from the mainland hear the Channel Tunnel cited time and again as proof of Britain’s new-found interest in Europe. At present, serious planning on the project is no longer being held up by official or public reservations. Across the water, everything would apparently stay the same, except that freight and tourists could then travel to or from Cologne or Paris in just a few hours, something which, admittedly, might disrupt the peaceful flow of traffic on both sides of the Channel, with drivers mixing up right and left and provoking a series of accidents. For to ask Britain to give up driving on the left to keep the continentals happy would be little less than asking the island-dwellers to go over to the decimal system or modify their well-meaning, puritanical licensing laws.

It would be a mistake to read too much into the fact that British foreign policy, and hence also Europe, failed to get a look-in in the keynote speech in which the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, addressing the party faithful in Bedford, a Conservative stronghold in the Midlands, stoutly defended his policies. The hecklers from the Empire League, who had earlier put both him and Churchill under pressure at a mass meeting in London on the subject of the unification of Europe, again took the opportunity in Bedford to accuse him of destroying the Empire, but they were silenced by the stewards.

A tribute to the Commonwealth

In British business circles, the free-trade zone is the subject of an intense, in-depth and generally positive debate, in sharp contrast with the Government’s discretion regarding what is, after all, its own plan. German reunification, which targets the elimination of the most serious source of unrest in Europe, is seen as very much in the British interest, even though neither this subject nor the Common Market greatly exercise the readers of Britain’s tabloid press.

A stand decked out in the national colours had been set up on a football field, with a gasworks and passing trains in the background. Opposite the public stand, behind the imposing but, like all statesmen today, anxious-looking Premier, sat Alan Lennox-Boyd, his Colonial Secretary, Christopher Soames, Secretary of State at the Admiralty, and his pretty wife Mary, née Churchill, along with other senior party grandees from the county. The audience of some two thousand were treated first to a tribute to Eden and praise for the Commonwealth, before Mr Macmillan got on to the wages and prices spiral, the poor deal received by pensioners in the welfare state, and the incorrigible Socialists. In a changing world, he argued, the Socialists always remained the same. On the platform, the good party ladies and not a few greying gentlemen in tweed jackets barely noticed that the principal virtue of the British Conservatives — not only since the Suez conflict — must now be their ability to keep up with the flow of events while keeping adjustments to the minimum and, when things go well, exercising maximum control.

Mr Macmillan was markedly upbeat. That is certainly the right attitude for a head of government whose party would, it is widely believed, lose its slender majority if elections were held tomorrow. The two years between now and when the next elections have to be called are therefore his party’s and his own best chance. He spoke with enthusiasm, or at least with as much enthusiasm as permeates the matter-of-fact sobriety so characteristic of this publisher turned diplomat and statesman, this Scotsman with an American mother, of Britain’s leadership role in the new Commonwealth to which its partners had subscribed of their own volition. The selfless efforts of the much-travelled Colonial Secretary — he was referring here to his work in Africa, Asia and the West Indies — would continue to bear fruit. No other nation in the world, he went on to say, invested a larger proportion of its national income outside its own borders than the British. The £300 million currency gap which Nehru is unable to bridge in the sterling area was apparently a

different issue and was not even mentioned.

Assuming the role of the world's banker

Britons and well-travelled continental Europeans share the prediction that this oddity of a Commonwealth can look forward to a long life, precisely because British gunships will never again east of Cyprus be able to obtain by force what cannot be brought about by the common ties of language, education, cricket and sterling. Another representative Conservative politician, one who places the seas and Commonwealth above all else, had his attention drawn, in conversation with an American, to Churchill's remark that he had not become British Prime Minister again in order to preside over the break-up of the British Empire. Liquidation, not break-up, was the word — replied the smiling British MP in his wisdom.

Politically, the preferential tariff scheme will be defended to the bitter end. Taking the example of Britain's outgoing trade with Australia, experts reckon that the benefit to England is now no more than about 3 %. What Britain as an industrial power is really seeking to achieve — and the price is heavy indeed — is to gain a lead in the free competition in world markets by vying with the United States to become the world's banker. This explains Mr Macmillan's proposal of last year for a free-trade zone and the strenuous efforts currently being made by Peter Thorneycroft, his successor as Chancellor of the Exchequer, to bring creeping inflation finally under control through a combination of economy measures, credit restrictions and a call to step up production while, at the same time, leaving the sterling exchange rate unchanged. The scope within the budget for savings is, admittedly, severely limited by the huge burden of the welfare state — to which the Conservatives would, if anything, like to add a little something — even if the switch to the atomic option really does bring defence costs down.

Within the Commonwealth, Britain prides itself, unlike other former colonial powers, on still being in command of the pace of developments, thanks to its timely 'retreat from power'. Its concern, having manifestly lost the race, to make up lost ground in the role of the good loser, can be seen from the new British policy in the Middle East. While Nehru, on his way back from the London Conference, was paying a, from a UK viewpoint, very welcome visit on Nasser, some particularly cruel unfinished business was being debated in both Houses of Parliament, namely the issue of compensation for those British subjects who had lost their homes, jobs and assets in Egypt. In the Upper House, the government representative was asked an uncompromising question by a Labour Lord: who was ultimately responsible for the injustice suffered by the nationals of a state which chose to launch an attack on the country in which they were guests? Lord Hailsham, speaking for the government, carefully took his feet off the table, stood up and assured the Lords that Egypt would not be asked to contribute more to reparations than it might perhaps, reasonably, be expected to find acceptable. That is not the language of weakness but rather the expression of a dispassionate determination not to concede that the irrevocable has happened. In a year's time, according to an expert on the Middle East, Britain will once again have an ambassador in Cairo. London can wait that long and longer still, a violent short-cut having failed to produce the desired results. There are Britons who are entitled, after a life's work in the region, to say what they think, who still regret as much as ever the decision by the Arab world to tear up the Baghdad Pact and who regard that decision as a military irrelevance and as offering virtually no political leverage. But they, too, agree with the government that America's presence in the Middle East is the decisive factor, although that presence is not meant to keep anyone in particular happy but simply to serve the United States' own oil interests.

The wisdom of the White Paper on the nuclear option has not gone unchallenged, whether for its military effectiveness or in terms of foreign policy. Admittedly, possession of the H-bomb is considered as self-evident as the wish and the determination are genuine never to have to use it. Respected former soldiers now working as experts in civilian life, see no likelihood of a major war in Europe but take the view that a war in the Middle East is always on the cards and that the use of British tactical nuclear weapons might help keep such a conflict local, in other words help keep the two superpowers out of it. For Europe, this approach is based on the conviction that, with the satellite armies now less of a trump card for the USSR than a drag on Soviet policy, there is virtually no prospect any longer of the 170 Russian divisions launching a mass onslaught on Western Europe.

Military considerations

The role of the German military, so this argument continues, is all the more important now that it is no longer expected to pull the tripwire – its mission is now, as a kind of firefighter, to prevent the westward spread of flames from any future troubles in East Germany and Eastern Europe, precisely in order to ensure that there is no possibility of a major war breaking out in Europe. To keep the risk of atomic chain reactions to a minimum, it would be better not to equip the German armed forces with tactical atomic weapons, which would, of course, raise serious questions about any plans to so equip NATO's mobile divisions. For the whole of Germany to stay in NATO was desirable but not absolutely essential for the preservation of the Western Alliance. What was indispensable was to lose no time in establishing, within the framework of the Western Alliance, a West German military capability sufficient to meet the country's own defence requirements in response to the very prospect of the Eastern Zone having to be demilitarised as the price for reunification. A state as prosperous as the Federal Republic could not go out into the world 'naked and defenceless'.

Work on the Channel Tunnel is not yet under way, and the gates of the free-trade zone between island and continent have not yet been thrown open. For the time being, therefore, Britain continues to view continental Europe with its customary detachment. The purge in Moscow has put paid to any chance of reviving the hopes for constructive coexistence that had been written off since Hungary. The significance of the German elections for the overall situation in Europe is clearly understood. It seems unlikely that even the Labour Party is wholeheartedly in favour of a change of government. If such a change were to come about, it would be welcomed as the Opposition's tardy accession to government responsibilities in accordance with the democratic rules of the game. A Labour politician well known in Germany has expressed the view that, since Germany, before achieving free and sovereign status, lived, in succession, under a dictatorship, under colonial occupation and lastly in a pre-fabricated dominium, neither Government nor Opposition has much foreign policy experience to speak of. The next Federal Government should take this comment for what it is — a clear, serious, but at the same time, well-meaning challenge.