

‘Copenhagen: no to a certain type of Europe’ from Le Figaro (4 June 1992)

Caption: On 4 June 1992, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro comments on the refusal by the Danish people to ratify the Maastricht Treaty.

Source: Le Figaro. 04.06.1992, n° 14 862. Paris. "Copenhague: un non à une certaine Europe", auteur:Gélie, Philippe , p. 3.

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The future of the Maastricht Treaty after Denmark's rejection

Copenhagen: no to a certain type of Europe

Despite rejecting the Treaty, Denmark still intends to continue economic cooperation with Europe, and the government has not given up on the idea of renegotiation.

Copenhagen: from our special correspondent
Philippe Gélie

The Vice-President of the European Commission, Henning Christopherson, does not conceal his disappointment. 'We have put ourselves in an extremely difficult situation and we must limit the damage but I don't see how. As a Danish citizen, I'm shattered,' he said yesterday. He is not the only one.

The narrow victory (50.7 %) for the 'no' vote in the referendum on the Maastricht Treaty has plunged Denmark into an atmosphere of crisis. The demonstrations of popular joy that carried on late into Tuesday night in front of Christiansborg Palace, the seat of the government and parliament, contrast with the embarrassment in political circles. 'I don't understand,' admits Mimi Jacobsen, leader of the Centre Democrats. 'It was our only opportunity to maintain our standing in Europe.'

Rejection of the European Union has provoked deep dismay coupled with surprise among Danish leaders, first because there had been unprecedented consensual support for ratification — both government and opposition parties, employers' representatives and trade unions had come together to support a 'yes' vote — and also because for a week all the polls had been claiming that public opinion was tending towards approval of the treaty.

The outcome proves the scale of the 'crisis of confidence' between the parties and their electoral base. Welcoming the result, Holger K. Nielsen, leader of the Socialist People's Party, one of the few political parties to have called for a 'no' vote, said that 'for the first time, this nation has taken a decision against the recommendations of its leaders. It has understood that each person must vote according to his conscience and not according to instructions or intimidation.' The active campaigning by some groups — such as Denmark 92 or the People's Movement against the EEC — doubtless played an important role despite the disparity in resources (7 million Danish kroner compared with 30 million for the 'yes' supporters). In the end the swing vote (estimated at between 6 % and 12 % on the eve of the vote) made the difference.

Damage limitation

In the country of 'grass-roots democracy' where each citizen believes he has a right to decide his future for himself, the Maastricht Treaty had hardly any redeeming features. Considered to be abstruse and vague, elitist and abstract, it symbolised that 'very French Europe, centralised and bureaucratic' that the Danes hate. In 1972, when they joined the Common Market, there was a 65 % 'yes' vote. In 1986, for ratification of the Single Act, this had gone down to 56 %. The disenchantment has now reached its pinnacle. According to Claes Kastholm Hansen, a European affairs specialist with *Politiken*, 'From the very start the EEC was "sold" to us as a flexible economic alliance not affecting our political independence. We want to stop there.'

Denmark has long developed close economic cooperation with its Scandinavian neighbours without ever feeling the need to take it further through political 'integration'. Even if the latter concept might seem quite natural to some, in Denmark the idea of having common defence or diplomacy with countries such as Portugal or Greece seems quite anachronistic.

Until the very last moment the country hovered between fear of losing its 'Community acquis' and fear of losing its soul. For twenty years now the economy has generally gained from European solidarity. But there was a risk of becoming a 'suburb of the United States of Europe', which Maastricht already foreshadows, according to the leaders of Denmark 92. Ultimately it was this fear that prevailed, albeit very slightly: 48 000 votes or about 1 % of the electorate.

‘This gap simply shows that the people were not ready and that they are deeply divided,’ stresses Prime Minister Poul Schlüter. ‘If it had been about leaving the EEC the result would have been quite different.’

On the basis of that theory, the government decided to do everything to ‘limit the damage’. ‘Clearly we are no longer in a position to ratify the treaty,’ admitted Poul Schlüter yesterday morning following an emergency cabinet meeting. But the government coalition (conservatives and liberals) is starting to envisage some tricks that could allow it to make up, at least in part, for the verdict at the ballot box.

Opening a crack

Starting yesterday afternoon, the first step in this ‘general mobilisation’ consisted in opening talks with all the political parties in the country in order to guarantee that the government had broad parliamentary support. ‘There is no question of resigning,’ reiterated Poul Schlüter and Uffe Ellemann-Jensen.

Today in Oslo, the second phase is to assess how much sympathy there is amongst European partners. ‘I am going to ask to renegotiate the agreements, at least on specific points,’ the Foreign Minister announced yesterday. Jacques Delors, François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl in particular have stated their opposition, but the Prime Minister believes that ‘a new situation could now arise, opening the way to a renegotiation.’ The crack opened by Denmark could be widened by other nations for whom Tuesday’s result could serve as an example to be followed.

‘Two million Danes might well be against the Union but 200 million Europeans intend to continue on their way,’ stated Mr Schlüter from the outset on Tuesday evening. So Denmark will not hide behind the letter of the treaty according to which opposition by just one of the Twelve would be enough to annul it. The aim is to negotiate on the basis that ‘we are still within the framework of the Treaty of Rome and of the Single Act.’ The country hopes to pursue its economic cooperation within the Community — from which it does not intend to be excluded — but without accepting the constraints of political union and a common currency.

The following stage, as Copenhagen sees it, would be to obtain some kind of ‘right of access’ into the circle established by the Maastricht agreements. Some elements of the Treaty in which Denmark’s influence had been brought to bear during the negotiations could allow new links to be established with the Eleven on a basis yet to be defined, particularly in the area of consumer or environmental protection — a delicate subject on which everyone admits that there is no point in working in isolation.

In view of this, the government is not excluding the possibility of another referendum, provided that there is something new to offer to the people. The Minister for Foreign Affairs recognised this yesterday, saying that ‘it would be totally disrespectful to go back to the voters with the same question.’

Ph.G.