

'Be fair to Mrs de Gaulle!' from Die Zeit (30 September 1988)

Caption: On 30 December 1988, the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit analyses the vision of Europe expressed by the British Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, ten days previously during her address to the College of Bruges.

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Be fair to Mrs de Gaulle!

Margaret Thatcher's view of Europe is quite a talking point

by Nina Grunenberg

Is Europe crumbling? Like the trumpeter at Jericho, Margaret Thatcher gave two speeches last week on the 'future of Europe' which gave the world the old familiar picture of disunity and weakness in Europe. The other eleven were left on the battlefield, as frustrated as if they had just emerged from a fruitless all-night session in Brussels, with a timid view of their own strengths and suspicious of each of their other partners.

The British Prime Minister's rejection of all 'Utopian goals' and 'abstract concepts' of European integration in her speeches to the College of Europe in Bruges and her contemptuous dismissal of any attempt 'to suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate' sounded as final as de Gaulle's once famously did. So does everything have to stay the way it has always been? Will Europe go on being just the sum of its national egoisms?

Barely three months after the triumph with the euro during the German Presidency, this was not an encouraging prospect. Even before Mrs Thatcher's dressing down, the first arguments about approximating national taxation and a European Central Bank had given the Community a hint of the obstacles looming before it on the path to the completion of the Single Market in 1992. However, the downturn in mood was also almost inevitable because the Twelve currently do not have a President who is capable of taking action. Greece's Andreas Papandreou, Helmut Kohl's successor in the EC President's chair, is in a London hospital suffering from a heart condition. His absence has made it clearer than many would have believed possible that, without its autocratic Prime Minister, Greece is just a blank space on the map. There is no point in expecting Athens to give the Community any sort of impetus. Mrs Thatcher will supply that instead.

Let us be fair to 'Mrs de Gaulle'. Perhaps the Community should even be grateful to her for her ruthless honesty. With the courage which the British have never lacked throughout their history and the unimaginative tenacity that is so typical of Margaret Thatcher, she has confronted her Continental partners with a problem that they have all been avoiding since the ratification of the Single European Act.

The weaker the statesmen feel, the more they, too, become taxed about the sovereignty issue. The transfer of decision-making power from national governments and parliaments to Brussels has been well under way for some time now in trade policy, customs, agriculture and competition law. The planned harmonisation of taxation, finance and monetary policy will also give countries much less room for manoeuvre. In the hope that the European Single Market might trigger an increase in growth on 1 January 1993 and release the sort of momentum that would steamroller all opposition, the Twelve have gone along with developments towards the political integration of Europe rather than really actively pursuing them. Jacques Delors' passing comment recently that, in ten years' time, '80 % of economic legislation, and perhaps also tax and social legislation' would be issued by Brussels rather than being the responsibility of the parliaments of the Twelve was, therefore, particularly disturbing.

Heading for the Single Market

Around Europe, the public, taken by surprise, have been asking themselves: Is this really what we want?

Margaret Thatcher's main complaint is that no-one has really thought through the political implications of the next step towards European integration. The fact that she herself was one of those who signed the reform of the Rome Treaties that led to this development does not make this accusation any less valid. The views of people in Europe will be divided over the issue of power that she has now raised. However, it does not look as if the EC Member States have been so won over by the promises of the Single Market that they are ready to sell their national pride for a handful of European beans.

'Certainly we want to see Europe more united and with a greater sense of common purpose,' said the British

Prime Minister in Bruges. 'But it must come about in a way which preserves the different traditions, parliamentary powers and sense of national pride in one's own country; for these have been the source of Europe's vitality through the centuries.'

Germany's Helmut Kohl may say 'amen' to this, too. But he is more concerned about the time pressure on Europe if it is to avoid being relegated from the league of global economic powers than by fears that whole areas of policy are being transferred to Brussels and painful losses of autonomy are to be expected. This was what finally persuaded him, at the dramatic summit in Brussels in February, to force through a long-awaited settlement on the Community budget and to ask German taxpayers to stump up around eight billion marks spread over five years to pay for it. He felt it was worth it for the returns that he is expecting to get out of the Single Market.

Seen in these terms, the Chancellor acted like a far-sighted businessman investing in the future with a view to an eventual increase in his profits. But his European convictions also make it clear how far the EC's political clout has fallen behind its economic importance. Its democratic deficit is gradually becoming more noticeable.

The most energetic advocates of European integration, initially launched by politicians and idealists like Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet, are now the economists. The idea of a Single Market first took off not among the general public but at the head offices of Europe's multinationals. Pressure from trade, which felt cramped and confined by Europe's borders, and technological development, which has become too expensive to operate at national level, have determined the pace of the integration process, and this has given the impression that the Common Market offers more opportunities for producers than consumers.

Is Europe crumbling?

This development has not just happened over the heads of the general public; politics as a whole has had only a minor role to play. Democratic scrutiny has not kept pace with developments, and even the European Parliament has not been able to make up the deficit. Its specially tailored democratic clothes are actually covering up its weaknesses. Jochen Vogel rightly compared it to the 'advisory bodies of the Vormärz era in the last century'. The European Community's legislative body is actually the Council. Its members, Ministers from the twelve Member States, meet in camera, which is exactly as if the Bundestag were to debate its laws behind closed doors.

Europe has no democratic legitimacy, and the fact that Margaret Thatcher has highlighted this shortcoming will also be welcomed by those who usually question her attitude towards Europe. For de Gaulle, the British were always America's Trojan horse in the European camp. Today, the British leader is behaving like the General's spiritual successor — only in a slightly more self-righteous way.

Is Europe crumbling? On the contrary: Jacques Delors, the President of the European Commission, whom admirers regard as the best EC President since Walter Hallstein and enemies regard as a presumptuous megalomaniac, may be generally pleased with the way in which the debate that he has launched is going. In urging the Twelve to start thinking about the idea of a European government, he has enraged the Iron Lady. Has his provocativeness achieved its purpose? At all events, it is forcing people to say what they think.

The campaign for a 'Europe without frontiers', launched by Delors, has made the magic date of 1992 almost an obsession in France, Spain, Italy and even in the UK. It is now starting to exercise German minds, too. We thought that being the strongest economic power in the European Community made us safe and capable of coping with anything, so for a long time we could not understand why our European neighbours were so agitated. Only now are we beginning to understand how the wind of competition will also blow through Fortress Germany once Europe's borders have come down. Measured against the European average, the Germans can afford so much that harmonising Europe's standard of living could mean a drop for them. They have the most to lose. But, first of all, they need to define what their bottom line is.

No-one in Europe will make sacrifices for the sake of supposed equality. But Europe is too old to force the pace of progress. It needs to let it grow. 'Look, my friend,' said the great European Jean Monnet to an

impatient journalist, ‘we are dealing with a process here, not negotiating wages. We are building a market for the whole of Europe. We are at the very start of the process, and the problem that you are talking about will be solved somewhere along the line, because that’s the way things have to be — the process is simply much bigger than your problem.’