

'A summit of transition in Florence' from La Libre Belgique (24 June 1996)

Caption: On 24 June 1996, commenting on the results of the Florence European Council held on 21 and 22 June, the daily newspaper La Libre Belgique criticises the European policy of John Major, British Prime Minister, in the context of the crisis caused by 'mad cow' disease.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 24.06.1996, n° 176. Bruxelles. "Un sommet de transition à Florence", auteur:Lamfalussy, Christophe , p. 6.

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A summit of transition in Florence

Mad cows reveal the other crisis

From one of our special correspondents in Florence

‘Nonsense.’ John Major’s answer rang through the room of the British delegation, leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind. The sanctions which, on Friday, Jean-Luc Dehaene had suggested should be enshrined in a future treaty to penalise those states which obstruct the course of European integration received a resounding rejection from the British at the Florence Summit on Saturday.

As long as the British Prime Minister remains in power, Britain will never allow its right of veto to be abolished. ‘No one can be forced to follow the rest of Europe if the national interest is at stake,’ said John Major to the press.

Dehaene explains

It was more conviction than tactics that had prompted Jean-Luc Dehaene in plenary sitting to raise the prospect of sanctions ahead of the resolution of the mad cow crisis. Questioned by the press at the end of the Summit, the Belgian Prime Minister clarified his thinking. ‘Any country which boycotts the European Union cannot benefit from its financial resources,’ he said, adding that the extension of qualified majority voting will be one of the means in future of averting a boycott such as the one that Britain has been imposing for a month.

In Florence, the Member States decided to convene a special summit at the end of October in order to expedite the work of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC), but several diplomats this weekend doubted whether the major issues could be signed and sealed so easily.

Some see the mad cow crisis as imparting a ‘powerful impetus to the Intergovernmental Conference,’ as Werner Hoyer, German representative in the negotiations on the reform of the Maastricht Treaty, put it. Others, however, doubt whether a precise text can be presented at the Dublin Summit next December.

Qualified majority voting is the key issue in the debate between the ‘small’ and ‘large’ countries in the EU, as it relates to the power which each will retain in a Union enlarged to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. According to the Italian Presidency, the negotiators seem willing to maintain the qualified majority threshold in the Council at 62 votes out of 87, but they cannot agree on the weighting of the votes. Several countries, including Germany and France, think that the population criterion should work in their favour.

Thus Jacques Chirac is ‘favourable’ towards more qualified majority decisions, but imposes two conditions. ‘The first’, he said in Florence, ‘is that, in one way or another, each country may oppose a decision when it feels that its interests are at stake. The second (...) presupposes a resolution of the weighting of votes issue. It is not right that one Luxembourger should have a vote which is worth as much as that of who knows how many Germans.’

Bitterness remains

Paradoxically, John Major ended up defending qualified majority voting in Florence by declaring it ‘intolerable’ that some Member States should have blocked the lifting of the embargo on gelatin for political reasons after the veterinary experts had decided by a qualified majority that it should be lifted. Despite its visceral attachment to the right of veto, ‘the United Kingdom is now a staunch defender of qualified majority voting and the Commission’s proposals,’ a high-ranking diplomat commented ironically.

The soured atmosphere between some Member States, who think that London must pay for its obstructionist policy, and the United Kingdom, for whom the boycott has been useful, continues to fester. Many in

Florence feared that the lifting of the embargo on British beef in stages and under strict conditions would stir up the same bitterness.

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