

Interview with Georges Berthoin: the OEEC, the Maudling Committee and EFTA (Paris, 22 July 2005)

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[**Étienne Deschamps**] Let us return to the subject of the British attitude towards the proposed plan for European integration. Since we are in Paris and not far from the château de la Muette, perhaps we could talk a little about an institution that has unfortunately been neglected by some historians specialising in European integration; I am of course referring to the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation. In 1957 or 1958, the British had a plan, a project that they put into practice by means of the Maudling Committee; could you remind what this was precisely?

[**Georges Berthoin**] It was about the creation of a free trade area. The original idea was Paul-Henri Spaak's; he proposed it to the British and then the British did not take a decision on this proposal. When, as I was telling you, they were surprised to find that the Treaty of Rome had been negotiated and ratified, they wanted to make... a metaphor commonly used is that of the common market as a sugar lump, a lump of sugar in a cup of British tea in the free trade area and which would stay there, dissolving little by little in that mixture. In this period they made use of the OECE as a negotiating table but, at the same time, they did all they could to ensure that it would fail, at first through negotiation, and this was where our delegation played an important role because – this is quite amusing – we never received, or rather, I never received any instructions from Brussels. But those of us who had been there from the start were in a special position: that is to say, we did not form part of the hierarchy and, besides, we were not particularly keen to integrate and we had made European concerns our own affair... We understood one another instinctively. So over and above my strictly defined responsibilities for managing the Council of Association and the Association Treaty for coal and steel, I found myself in the vanguard of those defending progress in Europe and foiling a whole series of manoeuvres, quite honest but manoeuvres nonetheless, which were part of a strategy that was quite different from that of the Six. The proposal of the Maudling Committee went quite a long way; it was a bid to tempt the Six to adopt a system that, in many ways, resembled the common market. It would have involved eliminating quotas, customs duties, and so forth. And at one point even the French were tempted, because the British made the point, and the British Embassy here in Paris was most active in this field: Why let ourselves in for complicated transfers of sovereignty and the involvement of an authority which is no longer strictly national, given that the proposed free trade zone will do practically the same, but without the institutional and bureaucratic constraints, and so on? I know that in Guy Mollet and Christian Pineau's time — Pineau was Minister for Foreign Affairs and Guy Mollet President of the Council — France almost took the bait. I can say, and this is a personal recollection, that the day before a Chequers meeting, I was obliged to warn them – because some of the British were convinced Europeans, not people to betray their country's interests, of course, but who gave exceptional importance to their European convictions – anyway, on further reflection, I understood that what would be proposed to Mollet and Pineau would have had negative implications for the common market. As a result they were warned and they did not fall into the... they did not go down that particular road. At first the Maudling Committee tried to destroy this project, then, when it had been carried out, to circumscribe it, and EFTA, the European Free Trade Association, looked like an alternative to the common market so they looked at which system was the most efficient and most attractive. In the end the Maudling Committee opted for this free trade association and, in a bid to tempt de Gaulle, the British even suggested that the seat of EFTA be the château de la Muette. De Gaulle refused, replying: 'Paris is not a hotel.' So they went to Geneva and located the seat there. He went even further – this is interesting – for they had adopted two

working languages: French and English, whereas we already worked in a system employing all these languages, and he said: 'This is very natural.' This was despite the fact that the only area in the Free Trade Association that spoke French was the canton of Vaud and the canton of Geneva, and that is all! This is just to show that they were very open-minded. Then the two systems entered into competition and over the years the common market system became stronger whereas the free trade area quietly disintegrated, and the first to abandon it were the British. So, there again, they realised that they had made a mistake and that we were the victors, after having undergone the test of time.