

Interview with Georges Berthoin: the United Kingdom's first application for accession to the European Communities (Paris, 22 July 2005)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In 1961, having observed the success attained by the European Economic Community, the British made their first application for accession. What were their aims? What were their ambitions at that time?

[Georges Berthoin] It was not an application for accession in the strict sense of the term. In July 1961, we were affected by two major events: firstly, Mr Khrushchev published an article saying that there were positive aspects to this European Community – in other words, the Soviet Union henceforth recognised our existence – and secondly, in the same month Mr Macmillan, the British Prime Minister, asked to open talks. I shall tell you precisely in what spirit he did so. Hence, for us, this meant that we were recognised: two countries that were as pragmatic and as important as these had recognised our existence. So these were signs of success for us. Well, Macmillan, in the beginning & Personally, Macmillan was a European. He had been marked by his wartime experiences, and he often said so. His generation & he had played an important role in the Second World War and he understood that it was vital to break the curse of history by stopping this vicious cycle. This meant that he was a European by personal conviction. He was a left-wing conservative and saw what we were up to so he was prejudiced in our favour, but, nonetheless, he was the British Prime Minister and thus experienced this ambivalence at first hand. Then, in 1961, he issued a statement, in late July, just before the parliamentary holiday so as not to awaken undue suspicion and concern. He proposed opening negotiations in order to find out whether it might be possible to agree on negotiations regarding the possible entry of Great Britain. There was a small, rather comical, incident that shed light on his real intentions. There were two things: first of all, there was the House of Commons debate and Prime Minister Macmillan had taken a great number of precautions then, at a given moment, Michael Foot, who was in the Labour opposition said: If I understand the Prime Minister correctly, the conditions he is setting resemble our saying we should like to join a football team on condition that it changes in such a way that it ends up as a cricket team. That was the image it had. Then there was another thing: one day I was dining out of town at some friends' house and next to me there sat a charming nineteen-year-old girl. I had no idea at all what to talk to her about, so I asked her: When you are dancing, do you prefer & I told this story in a BBC film and the BBC censored it when you are dancing, do you prefer your partner to talk or not? At that point, I might have deserved a whole series of comments, but she told me: Do you know who I was dancing with two days ago? With the Prime Minister. Ah, said I. Well, well. So does Mr Macmillan talk, or doesn't he? And she told me: At first I was very intimidated. But, like a lot of young girls who meet important men, she looks at the front page of the newspaper and sees the headlines, then she is able to use the headline, the man does not stop talking for an hour and she can relax. At the time, all the newspaper headlines were about the common market. So she said to him: Prime Minister, what is this common market? It's awful, what can we do about it? Then she said: He immediately hugged me tightly and said to me: "Don't worry, my dear, we shall embrace them destructively". The word destructively struck me, and she said: Don't you find that funny? I told her that I found it hysterically funny and I sent a letter to Hallstein and to Monnet – to their personal addresses because if you use bureaucratic channels you never know where things will end up. Later, I told the story some years ago to Professor Rieben, but having told it so many times, I wondered: Has my memory tricked me into making up something that did not happen? While we were talking, a secretary left us to look for the letter, and she showed me the letter I had sent to Monnet, in which was written the word: destructively. Michael Foot's remarks, like this word destructively, coloured in Hallstein and Monnet's view a whole series of perceptions that we had of the British approach. I quite understand that the English film should have cut that, but I am telling you the story for two reasons: firstly, because it is in the course of a conversation which seems quite innocuous that one learns something – you know, the missing piece of the puzzle – but that was the confirmation; and the other thing, and this was confirmed later on by the Macmillan's memoirs, which I have read: the British Government had hoped that the negotiations would lead to changing the structures of the European Economic

Community, much more than Euratom. As you are aware, Euratom was, at the time of Messina, the important element, but the common market and then the Beyen plan had become more important. Therefore they had not lost all hope of changing the rules of the game. The result was that the negotiations were complicated, ambiguous and frustrating, and de Gaulle I have a theory which is not, however, one shared by the historians de Gaulle, in my opinion, exploited the deficiencies of the negotiation process and its helplessness we can talk about that, if you wish in order to impose a veto that was harmless, because the negotiation had in fact failed. But he imposed this veto in order to send a very strong signal to London to say: The door to Europe is not in Brussels, it is in Paris.