

Interview with Georges Berthoin: the motives behind the United Kingdom's applications for accession in 1961 and 1967 (Paris, 22 July 2005)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Were the motives driving the British the same in 1961 and in 1967?

[Georges Berthoin] They were the same. Firstly, their motives. Their motives: to enter the system hoping they could change it — hence the ‘destructively’ anecdote — and at the same time... It is very difficult to explain the British policy in just a few words, but it has never ceased to exercise a determining influence on the way that the Community has developed. You have exactly the same situation today. All the countries, except for the Benelux countries... The Benelux countries until now have not been ambivalent towards the European idea. Germany, until Schroeder, was not ambivalent towards European integration, it was not even federal. Italy too. France and Great Britain were highly ambivalent. As a result, this double ambivalence has continually impeded European development and made us all waste an enormous amount of time. In the last instance it went against both the British and the French national interests. That is a fact. The British hopes lay in the system because they realised that European progress had become so important that the decisions taken within the European institutions would have an effect on their own economic development, yet they were not sitting at the table where the decisions were taken. So they said: ‘We shall suffer the consequences of decisions that we have not taken. We are subject to them, but we do not take them.’ The idea was: ‘Let us join the institutions in the hope of changing them. But even if we cannot change them, let us do so to be within the system and to participate in the decision-making.’ That was it. It was a tricky situation. They did not take — I am referring to the officials because there are British, as I just said, who were truly federalist; for, after all, the federalist movement was very strong in Great Britain —they did not take (it was the same for the French and it is still the case now) they did not take a clear position on the subject of European unity, a clear decision that had been taken in the past by Jean Monnet, by Adenauer, by Spaak, by Schuman, by Gasperi; there was no ambiguity there. It was later on that conflicts developed *pari passu* as progress was made. At the same time there was this sort of diabolical development where European matters were concerned. At every step forward, all the governments, including the British government, were confronted with the question whether, to ensure that this step had no unmanageable consequences, another step would have to be taken. Or, alternatively, decide to go back. The greater the progress made, the greater the cost of going back became. An example of this was monetary union during negotiations with the British, when the question of the status of the pound sterling and so on was discussed. To have a common market without monetary union and without a common currency meant risking dislocation of the common market by devaluations or competitive revaluations, so each case, each step committed you to another one or to a retreat. And, paradoxically, the national interest became more and more associated with European progress, even for the British. The difference is that Macmillan had, as I said earlier, a certain personal commitment to Europe. This was not the case for Wilson.

Wilson was a very complex man — and a man with complexes as well. We had meetings at number ten, Downing Street, and Wilson was an intelligent man, but he was not sure of himself so he wanted to demonstrate, to show you that he was intelligent; this made us waste a vast amount of time in discussions, and gave other people present the impression that he felt somewhat insecure. He did not have the charisma of someone who makes his presence felt. Macmillan, on the other hand, played on his awkwardness in order to pass himself off as the elderly, avuncular type, and the cartoonists had a field day with him, but he was clever — he was ‘shrewd’ as the English say. Wilson was not, I should say; he was an able politician but he was not a statesman. He wanted to take the matter up again and he wanted to oppose de Gaulle. That is, he issued statements, or he had Lord Chalfont, the man responsible for European affairs, issue statements that, at the rhetorical level, were almost federalist. I shall describe an incident that is most revealing: Mr Saragat was President of Italy and a Socialist. He was in London on an official visit and, as always on official visits, joint communiqués had been prepared in advance and, during the drafting, the Italians had asked the British to declare themselves in favour of the election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. So everything was ready. I had some very good friends in the Italian delegation and the joint communiqué was to be published on the Monday. Sunday was the famous Sunday when de Gaulle lost the referendum. And he announced his resignation. So President Saragat’s diplomatic adviser telephoned me, at ten o’clock at night, from the Ritz — no, not the Ritz, from Claridge’s — and he asked me: ‘Could you drop in, because there is a problem?’ and so forth. So I went along. The British were revising the joint communiqué. They did not

want the election of the European Parliament to be mentioned because de Gaulle was no longer there. So the entire strategy that consisted in... One day I put the question to Lord Chalfont and Chalfont replied to me: 'The important thing is that there should be so many columns in the continental newspapers devoted to our European statements. Occupy, occupy, occupy the terrain.' But putting it into practice: that was quite another thing. And then, suddenly, de Gaulle was out and there was this communiqué that had been prepared. Well, the communiqué was not published. What I said was: 'Keep trying; it has all been decided and everyone has agreed.' But, obviously, de Gaulle was no longer there, so there was no need to pursue that policy. Wilson manoeuvred where European issues were involved.

The one who possessed credibility when negotiating, something he had been able to build up during the first negotiations, was Edward Heath. He has been treated unkindly by the historians, Edward Heath. In the beginning he was a good negotiator. He did not have much latitude when negotiating since he was following instructions from his Government. He understood the Community very well; he was, without question, the British politician who best understood the Community and the communautaire spirit. He understood Jean Monnet's ideas and a strong personal rapport developed between the two. Neither was the backslapping type, that was just not their temperament, but they did understand each other. I can say so now because Heath died a few days ago: he was not given the recognition he deserved because the British in general or British public opinion has always been mainly anti-European. The establishment has always been clearly divided, but Heath was criticised firstly for having made too many concessions to the federal idea, and to French demands in Pompidou's time, later on. At the same time, the reason why he does not occupy the place that he deserves in British history, is that he took on the British trade unions in a trial of strength, a trial of strength that was taken up again later on by Mrs Thatcher with the British miners. We knew the British miners well. I went along to meetings, which was perfectly in order from a legal standpoint since they concerned coal and therefore did not constitute a problem. I went to miners' meetings in Wales and spoke to those people. The British miners' unions were the aristocracy of the British working class and, at the same time, masters of the Labour Party and quite sympathetic to the idea of the European Union, as I told you.

[Étienne Deschamps] So was there a clear distinction within the British political class between Conservatives and Labour in European affairs?

[Georges Berthoin] Yes, the political parties were... Through opportunism, Gaitskell, who was leader of the Labour Party was against; the Conservatives were partly for. Heath tried to unite... What happened was that the British economy was paralysed by a... People were continually on strike. I knew all the union chiefs personally; I was the only one to invite all the 36 members regularly, one by one or in small groups, of the TUC, the Trade Union Congress, which is the federation of all the Trade Unions. And, in a personal capacity, I was present at the legal proceedings, even the union ones, because at the start, as I told you, it was the British trade unions that helped me. They said: 'It cannot go on like this.' There were strikes for the least excuse. As a result the country was in a disastrous situation socially as well as a disastrous situation economically. It was the 'English disease' as it was called, 'the sick man of Europe', and so on. A reform was essential. The union leaders told us so in private, but they were not the ones to take control in that matter. Gaitskell was an intellectual; he was not from the working class at all, but Gaitskell played on the ambivalent feelings towards Europe and was against it, since the Conservatives, despite their mixed feelings, were becoming more and more pro-European under the influence of Macmillan or Heath. Heath wanted to link the opening up of the British economy and society, what might be described as the British economic resurrection, to European entry. It is a little like what de Gaulle did in 1959: the implementing of the constitution of the Fifth Republic took place on 1 January 1959, the very same date as the implementing, or the application, of the Rome Treaties. De Gaulle saw in the Treaty of Rome and the opening of the frontiers a means of reawakening the French economy and that was why he asked for the transition period to be speeded up. Heath was taking the same gamble, but he failed because he tackled it head on, picked a fight with the miners' union and lost. The country was paralysed and he lost the elections. So, since he was pro-European and yet he wanted this type of liberalisation, at least within certain limits, the Labour Party adopted an anti-European stance in order to win the elections and it defended the miners' union. But an interesting point is that Heath was very clever when he was presenting the European Treaties. He allowed a free vote. He imposed no party discipline on the Conservative group and he was perfectly aware that there

would be some defections, because the Conservatives were having none of it. Whereas, on the opposite side of the house, the Labour members had been given a 'three line whip', that is to say, strict discipline was enforced — but it was not respected. People like Roy Jenkins, Thompson, and so on, voted according to their consciences against the discipline enforced by the party, which meant that Heath succeeded in having the Treaty ratified under favourable, very favourable terms, despite the very small majority in the House of Commons. Later on there were other debates too. Then the majority dropped to eight; I recall that session, when it was really extremely close. However, they all judged this European issue, quite apart from the discipline or the free vote, according to their consciences. And the whole Labour Committee for Europe group that I knew very well and met all the time, and whose members I knew individually, was more pro-European than disciplined where party decisions were concerned. Wilson — I am going back a bit now — won — now here I may be a little mistaken in the dates — Wilson promised what had been demanded: a referendum. This referendum took place after Great Britain's entry and then, which is very funny and is some thing that was explained to me regarding the referendum on the European Constitution, the partisans of a 'yes' vote in the European campaign, played on the conservative instincts of the British, who detest change. 'We are in, so why wreck it all since we have survived?' So they said: 'We have been in for a year or two.' As a result the 'yes' vote won the referendum.