

## Interview with Georges Berthoin: the empty chair crisis as seen by the British (Paris, 22 July 2005)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What was the position taken by the British regarding this crisis, as seen from London? How was it followed, how was it perceived, and was the solution — in brackets: the compromise — finally arrived at in Luxembourg to play a role in the British decision to join the common market, or not?

[Georges Berthoin] When this crisis broke out, they saw in it a confirmation of the bet that they had made and never given up, believing that one day the French would not go beyond a certain limit. So, you see, the crisis came to a head just as a stage of implementing the Treaty was arrived at: one which presupposed use of the majority vote. By the way, I have always regarded this majority voting business as pure fantasy. I can tell you why if you wish, but there has been a lot of hypocrisy surrounding the majority voting issue. It was clearly most important since it was a symbol of a policy that could overcome intergovernmental deadlocks. They saw General de Gaulle was opposed to entering this stage and so they said: 'There you are, we're going to win our bet.' So they followed the proceedings very, very closely. That is when several very interesting things took place. I have not been able to check this historically, but I was able to do so at the time on the basis of the conversations that I had both with these countries' ambassadors, and with their political leaders. The majority — the other five countries — had begun to tire of the French attitude, and I was told — and it would be interesting to verify this — that several foreign ministries worked on a study of the end of the Community as it then existed, saying: 'From now on, let de Gaulle stick to his own ideas and we can all go home' and the conclusion of the study was that national interest dictated that they remain within the Community and that everything should be done to save it. Well, historians will have access to the relevant documents, but I was told that this study had taken place, it was discussed, it was an argument that I used when I had conversations on the subject with the British and that explains why — in London we worked a lot on the Luxembourg compromise, we did a lot in London, since a lot of things could be done in London much more discreetly than in Brussels — why the Five said in the end: 'All right, we shall accept a compromise solution because our national interest lies in saving this Community, even if it is in a sorry state.' The interesting thing is that this Luxembourg compromise has hardly ever been used. I think that the first country that wanted to use it — France had stated that if a country invoked a clause regarding a national interest, it would support it automatically — and I believe that the first case was brought up by Italy on the subject of oranges, if I recall it correctly, and France was somewhat annoyed to find itself having to support Italy when its own interest lay in not doing so. Very well, but it was not a very important matter, technically speaking, for one reason: for even during Monnet's time one made sure — because the voting took place by simple majority in the High Authority — Monnet always made sure not to have a majority and a minority. Why was this so? Within a political structure that has been in place for a long time, and in which one is used to it, then it is permissible to have a majority and a minority. But in this case, it was a process that was in its early stages. Europe is not built by having one group with primacy over another, dominating another; it is a matter of steering the maximum number of people towards cooperating in a common task. Thus a majority vote alienates the minority; that is why it has practically never been used. That is why this discussion on majority voting has been largely theoretical. So, in the last analysis, this Luxembourg compromise enabled everyone to save face. It is a compromise that has no legal existence. The result was that the crisis was over, France was able to come back to take its place at the table that it had left, and the Community could continue to grow. But this was followed very carefully, and the Luxembourg compromise disappointed London because it was thought there that the crisis would result in a break up.