

Interview with Rui Machete: the importance of the debate on Portugal's accession to the European Communities (Lisbon, 11 April 1985)

Source: Imagens do processo de adesão de Portugal à Comunidade Europeia / RUI MACHETE, Carlos Fino.- Lisboa: RTP [Prod.], 11.04.1985. Radiotelevisão Portuguesa, Serviço público de televisão SA, Lisboa. - VIDEO (04:10, Couleur, Son original).

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Carlos Fino] ‘Challenge, consensus of the main democratic parties, test, historic opportunity for our country’; these are all words from your speech, Deputy Prime Minister. So why, and why only now, this open debate today in the Assembly of the Republic?

[Rui Machete] As I said, there was a very important debate in 1977 at the start of the negotiation process. Now we are at the end of the negotiation process, so there are grounds for another overall political debate in the Assembly of the Republic. The debates mark the beginning and the end of a long process of negotiation, lasting eight years.

[Carlos Fino] The Government now plans to broaden this debate. The opposition regards this debate as more ‘for show’, if I may put it that way. And so it could be viewed more as a reaffirmation of a political victory by the Government than a genuine intention to open a grand national debate on these issues; since accession is practically a done deal, it is not going to be called into question.

[Rui Machete] Well actually, when we had the debate in 1977 — incidentally I took the opportunity to point out in my speech that there was a very broad consensus between the democratic parties on accession — the PS, PSD and CDS all voted for accession. And the various governments — the first political step towards accession took the form of a visit by Dr Sá Carneiro to Commissioner Ortoli, in 1974, and later, from 1977 onwards, when Dr Mário Soares proposed here to apply for EEC accession, the democratic parties supported it — and successive governments have always endeavoured to achieve accession.

So you can’t say that we are now trumpeting a victory for the Government. This is a victory for all the successive governments since 1977, and they all fought for it, including of course the governments of the Democratic Alliance. Simply, I think that in a matter of this kind — once the issue of accession is concluded with the end of the negotiations, but at this moment when a major challenge is arising — it is natural that it should be extremely important for the Government to open the whole dossier to the Portuguese in a clear and transparent way so that they are clearly aware of what is at stake. And especially to ensure that the project is one that genuinely motivates the nation. In this sense it is extremely important that the debate is not limited to the Assembly of the Republic, but that our trade unions, businesses and employers’ organisations can have an extremely wide-ranging and clear discussion of the issue.

[Carlos Fino] Indeed, the reference in your speech to the openness of this historic debate at last on Portugal’s membership of the European Economic Community, this reference of yours to the consensus between the main democratic parties and especially to the efforts of the PSD leadership, some interpret these references as a discourse of consensus that caters to some objections that arose within your own party.

[Rui Machete] I don’t think we should confuse matters of State with issues relating to occasional differences between supporters that from time to time highlight one or other aspect. The PSD has always given European accession a high priority. One can discuss one or other aspect of the negotiations, the best way of safeguarding certain interests. So I would say that my speech was not directed at the PSD; it was a speech on the fundamental issues facing the country on accession and, as I said, mainly looking to the future. It is in the future that we will win or lose this challenge, and it is essential that we win it. In this connection, the PSD has always held an unequivocal position in favour, because the alternative is a gloomy and narrow melancholy that we reject. The project for change must also include the issue of accession.

[Carlos Fino] Thank you very much, Deputy Prime Minister.