

'Beware the victory' from Le Monde (22 September 1992)

Caption: On 22 September 1992, two days after France has declared itself to be in favour of ratifying the Maastricht Treaty, the French daily newspaper Le Monde analyses the reaction of the nation's political community to the close result of the referendum.

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Beware the victory

by Jean-Marie Colombani

The French 'Yes' to Maastricht is neither a frank or massive vote of confidence, just a tentative 'Yes'. Nevertheless, it is a 'Yes', and that is what matters, even if it merely enables France to defy the gloomy prediction of the German historian, Rudolf von Thadden, who, before the vote, proclaimed regretfully: 'Great projects often borne by great men arise in this country, but the French are incapable of living up to their ideals.' This time, the French did just manage to live up to the utopian ideal of European integration, which deserved a referendum. Europe is on the move again, but, as Charles Pasqua and Philippe Séguin said: 'nothing will ever be the same again'.

Undoubtedly, those in charge of implementing the Treaty will be strengthened by the French ratification, sealed by a referendum, but they will also have to bear in mind the hesitations, fears and rejections that were expressed through the scale of the 'No' vote. The Europe that has developed over the last 40 years into a kind of enlightened 'despotism' is now history. Another Europe, controlled more extensively by its own citizens, will replace it, taking into account the concerns that were aired during the consultation and ratification process in the Member States. Flouting the most basic democratic notions, Mr Pasqua and Mr Séguin claimed, immediately after the vote, that the Treaty instituting the European Union was 'in shreds'. Quite the reverse, the 'Yes' is a genuine 'Yes' just as the Danish 'No', after a very close vote, was a genuine 'No'.

With this exception, the reactions of the main political leaders in the country enable us to assess the real significance of this vote, which was, in the true sense of the word, historic: it seals the fate of ten other countries and crowns the efforts of French diplomacy during two Republics and under four Presidents.

A miracle!

In a country with three million unemployed and governed by discredited politicians, it was a miracle, said Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in essence, that the 'Yes' vote won. The former President was absolutely correct to maintain that the Party that he leads, the UDF, 'saved' the outcome. François Mitterrand did not hesitate to praise the 'the strength of conviction and the intellectual courage' of those who, although in opposition, enabled the 'Yes' vote to carry the day. With regard to the sharing of responsibilities, praise must go to the Liberal and Centrist groups, who voted 60 % in favour of the European Union, while only 34 % of the RPR did so.

Jacques Toubon upped the stakes, claiming that all politicians were now facing 'an immense challenge'. They must all reflect on the divide that this vote has revealed. A sociological divide: the French who had expected the Socialists to improve their situation voted 'No'; those who had prospered voted 'Yes'; the French workers and employees, those who were attracted to François Mitterrand in 1981, voted 'No'; middle management, intellectuals and the upper classes voted 'Yes'. The geographical divide: the urban centres on one side, the country folk on the other; regions with long-standing Socialist views voted against (Languedoc-Roussillon and especially Nord Pas-de-Calais), the 'conservative' regions voted for change (Rhône-Alpes and, of course, the Ile de France); areas that have paid a heavy price in blood in the past favour the safety of the European net, to the extent of putting it to a referendum (Alsace and Lorraine); others, with shorter memories, were openly hostile.

Pierre Bérégovoy was no less accurate than Mr Toubon in calling for the Government to be 'more than ever responsive to the country'. This is a lesson that is valid for everyone, including the Opposition. No one can doubt the sincerity and determination of the Prime Minister, but he himself must doubt his ability to act. It is the Opposition, in spite of its divisions, that has been strengthened by this vote: dominating the 'No' vote, it played a crucial role in ensuring the success of the 'Yes' vote. Perhaps it is exaggerated to claim that a power that seeks support from the electorate, and obtains it, is also weakened by it. It is clear, however, that neither the President nor the Government have very much more room to manoeuvre in the immediate future.

A few days of stability

The breathing space so badly needed could come only from the establishment, even in rudimentary form, of a European majority, emanating from the split on the right that could have prolonged the 'Maastricht effect'. Unfortunately, this did not happen. The closeness of the vote, and the clumsiness of Laurent Fabius (who proclaimed victory for the President, while, at the same time, announcing a political realignment), led many leaders of the moderate right-wing to rule out such an outcome as early as Sunday evening. There was only Brice Lalonde, together with Michel Noir, to put forward the idea of a 'liberal, social and green' coalition. However, all the others had their eyes firmly fixed on the results of the exit polls on voting intentions in the next parliamentary elections: they show the possibility of a resounding victory for the RPR-UDF coalition.

This inevitably makes it unlikely that the Government will dissolve Parliament: it would lose the few days of political stability that the 'Yes' vote has guaranteed it, and it would signal the end of its term of office. On the other hand, it is likely that, in order to paper over the internal divisions, the Opposition will try to regroup, at least in the eyes of the public, at the first chance that it gets. To do this, there is nothing better than a good old-fashioned censure motion! By tabling this at the end of the debate on the 'revenue' side of the budget, the support of the Communist Members will be easy to obtain, since the Communist Party leaders are always willing to make a marriage of convenience with the Right on specific issues. It is highly likely, therefore, that Mr Chirac and Mr Balladur on one side, and Mr Pasqua and Mr Séguin on the other, will temporarily find common ground at the expense of the Government and will try, by tabling the censure motion, to force a general election.

An early presidential election?

In these circumstances, the Government should perhaps be prepared for an early presidential election. President Mitterrand won the referendum, but his hands remain tied. He will probably be able to extricate himself only by seeking, in the end, a dramatic solution. Such an idea is no doubt not in keeping with his image of a patient but persistent fighter; however, it will undoubtedly be the best solution for him and his Party. Whether the Socialists are forced to call a general election now, or whether the election will be held on the due date, nothing will change: political disaster is the inevitable outcome. Only if the timetable is altered and an early presidential election is called, can the political left wing salvage an opportunity, if not to carry on in power, then at least to regroup. While the legislative elections seem a foregone conclusion, the presidential campaign remains wide open.

Of course, it is possible to argue that the President is quite prepared to face a new period of cohabitation and to wait for the Right to weaken. However, at the rate things are going, he is likely to lose the parliamentary support that would enable him to continue to act effectively. In addition, both he and his Government are short of ideas: the European issue was seen as the central theme of his second term. It is now resolved; in a way, the game is over. The great work has been completed, mission accomplished. It is difficult, therefore, not to believe that President Mitterrand will cut short his term, allowing the country to judge his achievements and enabling him take his place in History.

Jean-Marie Colombani