

'The tale of a turbulent courtship between the United Kingdom and Europe' from Communauté européenne

Caption: In 1969, journalist, Roger Massip, tells the story of the turbulent courtship, through the 1960s, between the United Kingdom and the Europe of the Six.

Source: Communauté européenne. Bulletin mensuel d'information. dir. de publ. Fontaine, François ; Réd. Chef Chastenet, Antoine. Décembre 1969, n° 137. Paris: Service d'Information des Communautés Européennes. "Petite histoire des fiançailles mouvementées de l'Angleterre et de l'Europe ", auteur:Massip, Roger , p. 21.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[...]

1961–1963: the first round of negotiations and the French veto

Negotiations with the ‘Six’ began in October 1961, shortly after the Commons vote approving the Prime Minister’s decision. The Commission, at that time presided over by Mr Walter Hallstein, participated in the negotiations under the supervision of the Council of Ministers of the Community. The meetings were numerous and the discussions difficult, and the British public reacted with caution when faced with the prospect of heavy sacrifices brought to light by the endless debate. At the close of the negotiations, Mr Harold Macmillan had postponed consideration of the most contentious problems, in other words, those which could be resolved only if Britain made significant concessions, and so, as the painful decisions drew nearer, the British public was already unsympathetic, if not downright hostile. Therefore, at the crucial moment, the British negotiators had only limited room for manoeuvre. Failure was imminent.

It was at that point and under those conditions that General de Gaulle intervened by holding a sensational press conference on 14 January 1963. As justification for his use of the veto, the French President claimed that Great Britain was not prepared to accept the rules laid down by the Rome Treaties. It later came to light that he had interpreted the Nassau Agreement, signed in December 1962 by Great Britain and the United States, as proof of the British Government’s inability to escape American influence. As General de Gaulle saw it, the United Kingdom was decidedly more Atlantic than European, gazing across the ‘pond’ rather than towards the continent. That interpretation of the Nassau Agreement proved decisive.

The repercussions of the French veto were extremely serious. The growing public support in Britain for a commitment to Europe ground to a sudden and dramatic halt. The British, who had been banking on Europe, were forced to consider alternative solutions.

In London, there was talk of strengthening the Commonwealth, however this option went against the tide of developments which had distanced Australia and New Zealand from Britain in terms of trade, precisely because these two countries had themselves begun the task of restructuring, as they had been required to do by the United Kingdom’s application for membership of the Common Market.

The idea of strengthening the European Free Trade Association was also considered. In order to do this, however, it was necessary to create institutions modelled on those of the EEC and in so doing, undertake as a group of seven what they had hesitated to do as a group of six. It was clear, moreover, that the geographical distances between the EFTA countries was hardly conducive to a community-type organisation.

Finally, closer relations with the United States meant the loss, sooner or later, of British independence.

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