

'Hoping for the big crisis' from Der Spiegel (30 November 1987)

Caption: In its edition of 30 November 1987, the German weekly magazine Der Spiegel discusses what is at stake at the meeting of the European Council to be held on 4 and 5 December 1987 in Copenhagen and analyses the consequences of the budgetary crisis which is currently affecting the European Community.

Source: Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. AUGSTEIN, Rudolf ; Herausgeber BÖHME, Erich; FUNK, Werner. 30.11.1987, n° 49; 41. Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH. "Die Hoffnung auf die große Krise", auteur:Schreiber, Marion , p. 22.

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Hoping for the big crisis

By Marion Schreiber

Nobody has been allowed to speak of crises in Brussels for a long time now — the term is too anodyne, too innocuous for commentators seeking to describe the problems faced by Europeans. A ‘monumental fiasco’ is looming, a ‘collapse of EC finances’. Henning Christophersen, Budget Commissioner, even wants to declare a ‘state of emergency’.

The chance would be a fine thing. Europe would no longer be on the verge of a crisis which would then be averted at the last minute. Instead, Europe would be in the thick of it — we would finally know where we stood.

No more cover-ups, no more wheeling and dealing, no more suppressions. Instead of which, there would be an admission of defeat in the face of a mistake that had got out of hand; like an addict’s acknowledgement that only radical change could help him now. The crisis would be an opportunity.

At all events, the politicians in the Member States and the Members of the Commission would then have to change their approach. They would no longer be able to act like the reluctant helpers of an addict, who, time and time again, against their better judgement, always know how to prevent matters from finally going too far.

To date, European politicians have preferred to seek to avert crises within the Community by pumping in more money. As a result, the British were kept happy with generous rebates taken from EC coffers, and Greek consent to the enlargement to include Spain and Portugal was won on the back of a costly Mediterranean programme. The billions were always scraped together somehow.

However, since money is running out, there is nothing left to do but ignore the problem. Late last year, in London, Heads of State discussed AIDS and terrorism at length instead of considering the scheduled agricultural and financial reform. Nor was anybody prepared to scrutinise the reforms proposed by Jacques Delors, President of the Commission, at the most recent EC summit in Brussels.

The longer the politicians hesitate, the more hopeless the case of Europe becomes. There is a shortfall of 14 billion marks yawning in next year’s budget, although, according to the Treaty of Rome, the Community is not allowed to run a deficit.

Nevertheless, by slight of hand and jiggery-pokery, by dipping into next year’s budget, bankruptcy has, to date, been avoided. And, if this state of affairs persists, the EC will, in fact, be 100 billion marks in the red in 1992. But that is still five years away.

The behemoth of the Agricultural Fund is insatiable and long ago ruined the European family. Of the billions earmarked for agricultural surpluses, no more than 30 % is received by farmers. The real winners are the dealers: large-scale exporters, food groups, cooperatives and stores supervisors.

By the same token, the situation is most gratifying for the many thousands of extraordinarily well paid EC bureaucrats.

Withdrawal, as we know from addiction therapy, always hurts a great deal. And putting off that painful operation for as long as possible is the stated policy of Ignaz Kiechle, German Federal Minister for Agriculture, strongly supported in this by his colleagues from Belgium, Denmark, France and Ireland.

It may be that Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, will bring succour. By stubbornly refusing to pay any more money into the Community coffers in Brussels until there is a fundamental reform of agricultural policy, she might eventually push the Community into taking extreme action.

It may be that the Greeks and Spanish, too, will do their bit. They are blocking the budget for 1988 because they have had enough of doing without the urgently required money from the Regional and Structural Funds as a result of the escalation of agricultural expenditure.

Against this background, the hope for a spectacular European debacle in Copenhagen this weekend is mounting — is this the real crisis at last?