

'Luxembourg: hard bargaining before concluding the agreement that will pave the way for Great Britain's entry into the European Community' from Le Figaro (23 June 1971)

Caption: On 23 June 1971, French daily newspaper Le Figaro comments on the difficult negotiations between the United Kingdom and the Six on the issue of New Zealand dairy products.

Source: Le Figaro. 23.06.1971, n° 8 326; 145e année. Paris: Le Figaro. "Luxembourg: Durs affrontements pour aboutir à l'accord qui ouvrira à la Grande-Bretagne les portes de la Communauté européenne", auteur:Lecerf, Jean , p. 32.

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Luxembourg: hard bargaining before concluding the agreement that will pave the way for Great Britain's entry into the European Community

Luxembourg, 22 June. (From our special correspondent.)

The road to an agreement, expected tomorrow morning, opening the gates of the European Community to Great Britain, will have been hard, painful and fraught.

A working party of six, sometimes seven, began yesterday, continued until after 3 a.m., started again this morning and will probably go on again until late. At the time of writing, we hope, but are not sure, that a conclusion will be reached on Wednesday morning, but we may have to wait until a subsequent session.

The main issue that has been at the heart of the discussions last night and today is how to treat dairy products from New Zealand. On several occasions, it was thought that an impasse had been reached. It is interesting to note how, in this kind of debate, slight nuances in the text may have an enormous significance.

At around 1 a.m., the spokesman announced an agreement among the Six on a French proposal. After a transitional period of five years, 75 % of New Zealand butter exported to Great Britain would be admitted free of agricultural levies.

After that period, the enlarged Community would decide what to do next **'on the basis of a continuously decreasing scale'**.

Suddenly, Aldo Moro (Italy) declared that he could not accept this proposal **'for psychological reasons'**. Maurice Schumann replied that he had conceded as much as he could and withdrew the proposal.

There followed a lengthy process, during which no one had anything to propose. Then the President of the Commission, Franco Maria Malfatti, offered to replace the offending phrase with another: **'The Community proposes a derogation for dairy products from New Zealand during a transitional period.'** The Italians, in a spirit of conciliation, accepted this proposal.

How would such a system work? Current imports of dairy products from New Zealand to Great Britain would be progressively reduced between 1973 and 1977 by one quarter for butter and four fifths for cheese.

In 1977, the Community would review the situation, taking into account the effects on New Zealand of the reduction in sales, the state of the market for dairy products in the Community and efforts to promote a worldwide agreement. New Zealanders, for their part, hope that a permanent exception could then be made that would guarantee their unlimited access to British markets.

At the insistence of France, two precautionary measures were taken in order not to slide towards a complete break with the principles of the common agricultural policy. Firstly, it was stressed that we were talking about a transitional period, because, after 1978, there were to be no more duty-free cheese imports, and butter imports could be exempted only with the unanimous approval of the Council. France reserved its right of veto, and this was what brought matters to a head.

A surprising counter-proposal

In the afternoon, Geoffrey Rippon presented his counter-proposal. He looked forward to higher butter imports from New Zealand and said that they would benefit from a 'derogation'. As, since yesterday, the tussle had been over the precise wording, which had included the phrase **transitional and decreasing scale**, deleting these objectives would pave the way for a possible permanent exception. In addition, Mr Rippon wanted the rules for the financing of the Community to be reviewed in 1978 by the Council of Ministers, in which the British would, by then, have the right of veto. In other words, he questioned the definitive nature of the Financial Regulation.

After the session had been adjourned so that the text might be scrutinised, the ‘Six’ convened once more. Even the most pro-British could not accept Mr Rippon’s proposal. **‘There are many things that go against our principles’**, said Mr Joseph Luns, a veteran of European struggles and the keenest supporter of British entry, who was attending this last Council of Ministers. **‘There are notions here which are not in accordance with our philosophy’**, said Walter Scheel **‘even though the entry of Great Britain is one of the key aims of German foreign policy’**. The Italians thought likewise. As President of the Council, Mr Schumann declared that the British proposal could under no circumstance serve as a basis for discussions.

There was some embarrassment in the air after this sudden British volte-face, casting doubt on what everyone thought had been firmly established, even the very essence of the Community that they wished to enter. Perhaps the British were testing one last time the firmness of the rules that they had had to accept.

The European Commission tried to find an acceptable formula by putting forward another proposal. The derogation for New Zealand would last five years, and the enlarged Community would then decide on the future system of imports. A decreasing scale was no longer mentioned, but France retained its right of veto. There followed lengthy discussions. In the end, it was agreed that the proposal would be forwarded to Mr Rippon in the early evening.

Only the question of Community finance and taxation remained to be finalised.

There was no objection to the UK’s request to be kept informed of Community decisions during 1972. The question of the status of the Channel Islands was not discussed on this occasion. It will be grist for the legal experts’ mill to fight over 15th-century charters, oaths of allegiance to the Duke of Normandy, who was, incidentally, King of England, and the decisions of some obscure officer of government (seneschal).

The desire to reach a final conclusion at this session is undiminished. The difficulties are very real, since the issues involve vital areas of interest, but we hope that the Ministers will be able to announce an agreement before they leave, opening the way for Great Britain to join Europe.

Jean Lecerf