

'Labour against European unity' from the Corriere della Sera (6 September 1950)

Caption: In September 1950, the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera criticises the attitude of the British Labour Party which shows little enthusiasm for European integration.

Source: Corriere della Sera. 06.09.1950, n° 211; anno 75. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Il Laborismo contro l'unità dell'Europa", auteur:Guerriero, Augusto , p. 1.

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Labour against European unity

Once again one of Churchill's great ideas has been shelved thanks to the Labour Party. There will be no 'unified' European army for the time being, there will be no European Ministry for Defence and so, at least for the time being, nothing will be done. Nothing will be done because the British Labour Party is opposed to anything that in any way signifies a step towards European unity. It is so steadfastly and obstinately opposed that all these international meetings held to discuss closer collaboration between Western nations and to promote greater unity of aims and intentions among the respective governments have ended up by deepening rifts rather than by healing them. Recognising disagreement and attempting to resolve it, and then failing to do so, almost always exacerbates such disagreement.

Even the possibility of Britain's accession to the Schuman Plan has now been ruled out. The Conservative MP Harold Macmillan proposed in Strasbourg that a recommendation be made to the Governments to make a fresh attempt to allow Britain to join the pool. Voting for such a proposal entailed no commitment: the only issue was a 'recommendation' to the Governments. And what form was proposed for this 'recommendation' to the Governments? Nothing more than that they should hold discussions to see whether it might be possible for Britain ... and so on. Then, the head of the Labour delegation, Hugh Dalton, rose to his feet and declared that the Labour party was even opposed to any such 'recommendation'. This means, if I am correct, that the Labour Party is not only against Britain's accession to the pool — which has long been known — but is also against the Governments concerned making any attempt — by amending the statutes of the pool or the obligations of the Governments that join the pool or in some other way — to allow Britain to join. The former miner, William Blyton, has been even more explicit. He has accused Macmillan of trying to delay the implementation of the Schuman Plan. 'Let the European States that have decided to renounce their sovereignty in coal and steel matters come to an agreement. The British will then decide on the form that their relations with the States of the pool should take.' In other words, Britain has decided not to give up even such a minimal part of its sovereignty and will never join the Schuman Plan, and any attempt to make it join will be a waste of time for the European countries and a setback for Britain, which will be pushed even further into an anti-European stance.

The same arguments were advanced a few weeks ago in an editorial in the *Observer* not only in relation to the coal and steel question but also in general terms: since we cannot agree, let us go our separate ways. There is no doubt that the French, the Germans, the Italians, the Belgians and the Dutch want something different from the British and the Scandinavians. The latter intend to cooperate with their neighbours to the extent required by the demands of defence and the prosperity of Europe, but, according to the *Observer*, 'they do not want to lose their national identity and individuality'. They want to remain what they are: Britons, Danes, Norwegians, Swedes. Yet it is precisely this that the French, the Germans, the Italians and the peoples of the Benelux countries want and feel is urgently needed. So, what can be done? At present, in view of the difficult compromise that underpins the statute of the Council of Europe, Britain finds itself being constantly pushed in a direction in which it does not want to be pushed and being accused of 'dragging its feet'. France, Germany and Italy feel that their goals are being thwarted and are exasperated. They are like the fastest ships in a convoy that have to match their speed to that of the slowest. Would it not then be better to split up the convoy? Would it not be better, considering these differing needs and desires, for the British to allow its continental allies to form a federation as they wish — in fact to help them to do so — and to continue to cooperate on a neighbourly basis with this new Union?

Perhaps it would be better. Perhaps it is better for Britain to be completely outside rather than inside, sabotaging the plans. The reason why the British have thus far been opposed to any step, however modest, towards the European Union has not only been their desire 'not to lose their identity and their national individuality'. And who has ever dreamed of making them lose it? If they join the coal and steel pool, perhaps the British will cease to be British? Perhaps, if a unified European army is formed, and if a few British divisions are part of it, the British will cease to be British?

The truth lies elsewhere. The truth is that members of the British Labour Party are opposed to the European Union because they are British. It is true that Churchill is the most British person there is and that does not prevent him from being a great European. But Churchill is a political genius and Bevin is not. Churchill is

ten years ahead of his compatriots, whilst Ernest Bevin and the Foreign Office officials are the heirs of the old isolationist tradition and do not realise that times have changed so much that the tradition is now an absurdity. 'Fate is shared, the future is unseen,' said the Greek tragic poet. Churchill is convinced of this. But Bevin thinks that the fate is not shared and that, if Europe goes under, Britain, by breaking away from Europe in time, can still save itself.

Essentially, it is a foolish mistake to depict Britain as the good genie of Europe, as the protector of the small Nations, the tutelary deity of their independence and their liberty. It is an equally foolish mistake to depict it as the evil genie of Europe, as the sinister power which is always ready to stir up disagreement and conflict among the continental nations and always ready to reap the benefit. Britain is neither one thing nor the other. It is the same mistake in a slightly different form to claim that British policy, in a given moment of history, is wrong and unhealthy merely because it is detrimental to the interests of Europe. Britain is not Europe and British interests are not European interests. When it is claimed that Britain is making a political mistake, it is necessary to show that its policy does not serve British interests, not that it does not serve European interests.

What is Britain's supreme political interest? That a hegemonic power is not formed on the continent. This is the reason for the balance of power formula, which is essentially only the political expression of the instinct of self-preservation. Therefore, when a despot aims to subdue Europe and unify it under his rule, Britain is the natural ally of the nations resisting him and the natural protector of their liberty. For the same reason, if the European nations, laying down old enmities, seek to pool their strengths and to work towards the unity of the continent, Britain is driven to opposition. That is the case at present. But this is a mistake. Because there is now a powerful conqueror that threatens to unify Europe under its harsh rule. The very principle of the balance of power should therefore prompt Britain to throw itself wholeheartedly behind the Western countries and to further the cause of European unity. Instead, the Britain of the Labour party is only half-hearted in its support of the West and pays lip service to the cause of European unity. This is because Labour considers that, contrary to the words of the Greek tragic poet, fate may not be shared. This is a mistake. And it does a disservice not only to the supreme interest of Europe, but also to that of Britain.

Augusto Guerriero