

Interview with Roy Jenkins in Vision (September 1977)

Caption: Issues of Community concern in 1977, as seen by a President of the Commission. During an interview conducted by the magazine Vision, Roy Jenkins broaches different subjects, including foreign policy, the question of the enlargement of the Community, the CAP, and election to the European Parliament by universal suffrage.

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Vision: While things look rather messy on the domestic side, the EEC has scored some important points on the international scene: the Soviet Union has recognised it during the fisheries talks, the Nine agreed to common representation during the Paris conference on North-South problems, and they also adopted an independent position with regard to the Middle East and in particular the Palestinian question. Should and can this political influence be increased during the next years?

Jenkins: I think you sum up the achievements on the external side very well indeed. There are a few other aspects which one could add, for instance our position among the Lomé countries. The Community has a very strong position vis-à-vis America and also China. But what concerns me most is a certain imbalance between the external strength of the Community and its lack of internal cohesion. It would be a strange and damaging paradox if the countries outside the Community take us much more seriously than we ourselves do — and there is a possible danger of this.

Vision: How can a common external policy express itself? Can the EEC talk "with a single voice" to Washington about uranium, to Moscow about human rights? Can it make its influence felt in Africa? Will there ever be again such a total disarray in foreign policies as during the outbreak of the oil crisis? Or do you see more occasions coming where the Europeans say what they want through a common delegation as they did in Paris?

Jenkins: Our influence in Africa is already very strong. It is not a dominating or paternalistic influence, but undoubtedly the Lomé Convention works extremely well. It is a great achievement of the last Commission, and we in this Commission are reaping the benefits.

As far as talking to Washington goes, there is our common concern to avoid proliferation of nuclear weapons, about possible dangers in the plutonium cycle. But there is also no doubt the Community has made considerable advances about getting the Americans to understand our difficulties and our problems are different from theirs.

The Paris Conference on International Economic Cooperation (North-South dialogue) was a very good example for future common foreign policy within the Community. The conference went much better than was perhaps thought in the immediate aftermath. It avoided the dangers of a breakdown, of disaster, of confrontation. This in itself was a considerable achievement, and the fact was very strongly confirmed to me recently by the ambassador of an important Third World country. He said the achievement was largely due to the unified Community position and to the leading Community position within the group of eight industrialised countries.

I can give you another example in which I hope there will be, and think there must be, a common Community position, which is the extremely important development of the Tokyo Round. There is clear Community competence in this field of multilateral trade negotiations, and so the Community must operate as a whole.

Vision: There is the question of having three more south European countries enter the Community. Could this lengthy and difficult process not tend to weaken the international position of the EEC?

Jenkins: On the contrary, our Community would be internationally weakened, if it appeared to be unable to answer the hopes of those countries which are anxious to join it. However, the Community has in any case to face certain internal difficulties in the near future. So I'd turn the argument about the new candidacies the other way around: The process of enlargement will force us — or may even help us — to come to terms with our internal difficulties.

Vision: The agricultural lobby of the EEC, while not opposing the entry of those countries, is already busy trying to win even more advantages for itself. Talk about a total reform of the common agricultural policy seems to mean a different thing to everyone concerned. How can this dilemma be solved?

Jenkins: It is true that the Community's budget is already distorted on the agricultural side, but the CAP has also been too much directed towards the northern agricultures. Mediterranean agriculture has been neglected, and this is one of the problems which enlargement will force us to face. The CAP can be made tolerable for the southern part of the Community, and we can achieve this without repeating some of the mistakes of the past in this field of activities.

Vision: Does making tolerable involve a total reform of the CAP?

Jenkins: The CAP needs reform, but to achieve this: one must accept it as part of the basic cement of the Community. To reform the CAP, one must not try to destroy it, as is sometimes suggested for example in Britain. It would be too difficult to build another CAP. Unless you stick to what exists, you won't be able to correct past and present abuses.

Vision: The Netherlands have recently repeated the suggestion to include among the Community's rules the idea that it was meant for democracies only.

Jenkins: I see absolutely no problem in saying this out in the open. Unofficially it has been a rule so far anyway, that democracy is an essential prerequisite to membership. But I am sceptical about any kind of monitoring system which would try to decide whether a country is more or less democratic, by sort of taking its political temperature.

Vision: You have frequently called the Community's enlargement the one political task you would like to see achieved during your term in office — and by all means. Does that include premature resignation, if you should not succeed in the task of paving the way for additional members?

Jenkins: Well, I said the enlargement is a major task, I never said it is the only one. But I do say it is major, because it is one way to strengthen the Community. And strengthening it is really the top priority.

Vision: Coming back to internal matters, do you think the European Parliament will be elected on schedule?

Jenkins: Yes, I still hope it will be done in due time, that is during the late spring of 1978. In any event, I'm sure the elections will take place during next year.

Vision: Do you think a truly representative European Parliament, with prominent political personalities among its members, will positively influence the future composition of the Commission?

Jenkins: First of all, the Commission's members will continue to be named by governments of member states. And more generally speaking, nowhere in the world, with the exception of Australia I think, does a Parliament designate the executive or the government. What is possible for the EEC, as Tindemans has suggested in his well-known report, is that the Commission, once designated, would be endorsed by the European Parliament. That's good, and that is what happens in all parliamentary democracies.

What's more, I would say the Commission is already a politically motivated body. Maybe we are not all politicians in the ordinary meaning of the word — but then, neither were Walter Hallstein or Jean Monnet. But what they did was politically minded, doubtlessly.

Vision: Does the idea that such a Parliament might also decide to behave like the established national parliaments and decide to take action to force the Commission to step down strike you as normal or shock you?

Jenkins: No, it does not. Even the present Parliament has the power to do so. It is a right of all parliaments to refuse confidence, though of course I would not like it to happen to me.

Vision: If all goes well, would you be willing to serve for another term as the Commission's President?

Jenkins: Really, I think one can't look too far ahead. It is important to do your present job well rather than indulge in that kind of speculation.