

'The Dublin Summit will be different' from 30 jours d'Europe (March 1975)

Caption: On 10 March 1975, the day before the first Dublin European Council, Garret FitzGerald, Irish Foreign Minister and President-in-Office of the Council of Ministers of the European Communities, answers questions put by the journal 30 jours d'Europe on the issues to be addressed at the summit.

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Garret FitzGerald: 'The Dublin Summit will be different'

On the eve of the European Council meeting in Dublin, Dr Garret FitzGerald, Ireland's Foreign Minister and current President of the Council of Ministers of the Community, has kindly agreed to take questions from '30 Jours d'Europe'.

You have been chairing the Council of Ministers since the beginning of the year. What has that experience taught you?

It has been my good fortune to assume the Presidency on behalf of my country at a time when various things are happening in the Community thanks to the relatively encouraging outcome of last December's Paris Summit and to the noticeably improved climate that has prevailed in recent months.

When I assumed office, I found a whole series of issues on which good progress was being made; what I am trying to do is finish the job. I'll give you two examples. Firstly, relations between the Community and the associated African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (the ACP countries). A number of major issues still had to be settled before the agreement that has just been initialled in Lomé could be signed. I am extremely pleased to have achieved such a successful outcome. The fact that Ireland has the Presidency at this time has no doubt helped since, as a former British colony, we are particularly conscious of the problems facing the Third World.

From experience we know that a country that was previously dependent needs to establish links with countries other than the former 'motherland' in order to develop and to diversify its relations. As an Irishman, that is what I have tried to stress in order to smooth the way for an agreement.

Another issue that appears to me to be on the right track is energy. I am not referring to the Community's internal energy policy, which is hardly making the sort of progress that would be desirable, but to our relations with producer countries and other consumer countries particularly as we prepare for the conference later this year. Although France, while consulting closely with the other eight Community countries, is not a member of the OECD's International Energy Agency, we have managed to establish a satisfactory procedure for Europe's representation in negotiations between producer and consumer countries.

On these two issues, as on many others, experience has shown me that the President of the Council of Ministers has an important role to play. When, in the early hours, my colleagues and I were still facing major hurdles in our relations with the ACP countries, I came up with a compromise proposal (which is what the President is there for) turning on the level of our financial contribution and the way it was allocated between the countries concerned. Then I made the parties face up to their responsibilities, explaining that it was time for each of them to go the extra mile to ensure a positive outcome.

The President of the Commission, Xavier Ortoli, recently told the European Parliament that the periodic meetings of Heads of Government hold certain advantages, but there was also the danger of strengthening intergovernmental cooperation 'to the detriment of integration, the surest path for Europe.' What is your view?

I don't deny that the risk exists, but for the moment I don't see it materialising. During our meetings, including the recent session in Dublin on political cooperation, the Ministers have consistently agreed that, where issues are covered by the Treaty of Rome, they will intervene only in response to proposals from the Commission.. In the same way, on the issue of the British contribution to the Community budget, we base our position on proposals from the European Commission.

That will doubtless be one of the issues on the agenda of the 'Council of the Community' due to meet under Irish Presidency on 10-11 March in Dublin.

The British 'renegotiation' problem could well be settled before then. Our agenda has not yet been fixed but, besides possibly that issue, it will include an analysis of the economic situation, a review of our energy

policy both within the Community and in our relations with other consumer countries and with producer countries, Europe's stance at the East-West Conference in Geneva and the coordination of our positions at the UN.

The situation has improved somewhat on the first issue, which the three largest Community countries considered sufficiently urgent at the Paris Summit to justify convening a further meeting of Heads of Government in February 1975 to discuss the economic situation. To a certain extent, the anti-inflation policies of the Nine are now converging (whether in the right direction, I can't say) and that has allowed us to put off the Council meeting until March, since the need for it is now not quite so urgent.

Since the Dublin meeting will now be a 'routine' one, we will be innovating in relation to previous gatherings by not issuing a final communiqué. Last December, in Paris, the communiqué proved a nightmare and we wasted a lot of time on it.

Also, you can reach positive agreement on very important measures without being able to put together a communiqué that will strike a chord with the public, the convergence of economic policies being a case in point.

The Republic of Ireland is particularly interested in whether Britain stays in or leaves the Community. What do you think will happen? What will Dublin do if the UK decides to leave?

Our Government has not studied this eventuality because we have enough work to do without spending time on hypothetical problems. Of course, Ireland didn't join the Community just to pull out a few months later.

My purely personal prediction is that the referendum will see the British come out in favour of the Community. But politicians are not always best placed to predict the outcome of polls of this kind.

For a Minister of Foreign Affairs like yourself, does the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of the Community just mean extra work or is there real satisfaction to be gained from it?

I am delighted with this 'job', with its very exciting intellectual demands. For a long time I was a journalist before becoming a politician. This has left me with a tendency to observe my colleagues' behaviour. From this point of view, the Presidency of the Council offers a perfect viewing platform. But, at the same time, it is very stimulating to devise compromise solutions (which is the essence of politics) in order to secure agreement among colleagues.

A country born only recently such as mine (our independence dates from 1921) is always tempted to withdraw into itself, preoccupied as it is with its own problems. It is an excellent exercise to be forced to look at what is happening in the surrounding world and take an active part in it through our membership of the Community, and in a special way since we hold the Presidency for six months.