

'Great Britain, Europe and the Commonwealth' from Le Monde (24 December 1949)

Caption: On 24 December 1949, in the French daily newspaper Le Monde, Anthony Eden, former British Foreign Secretary, sets out the position that the United Kingdom intends to take within a united Europe, given the importance of the Commonwealth to the British people.

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Great Britain, Europe and the Commonwealth

by Anthony Eden

The French public – unanimously, except for the Communists – has proclaimed warmly, with enthusiasm even, that it is in favour of a closer European union. The first requirement of such a union – the French maintain – resides in an Allied agreement on the economic development of Germany. The second requirement, to my mind, is to define clearly everyone's position, as I doubt that the French have themselves determined in detail, for example with regard to the economy, the conditions that would make this union closer. The topic of European union is one of those subjects that can almost indefinitely be embellished with generalities. But hitherto – as far as I am aware – no one has even tried to set out, even in official French doctrine, an exact strategy for progress.

The plethora of organisations that are concerned in one way or another with plans for the European union poses a serious problem. Most of these organisations have powerful secretariats, and there is, consequently, much overlap between them. This creates numerous difficulties for officials in the Quai d'Orsay, as well as for those at the Foreign Office, who must negotiate with so many different authorities.

There is the Atlantic Pact and the Brussels Treaty; the European Assembly in Strasbourg and the Council of Ministers attached to it; the OEEC and the Economic Commission for Europe set up by the UN. The secretariats are without doubt doing a good job, but their organisations are too numerous, and they inevitably get in each other's way. If we want to make real progress, we must, I am convinced, proceed with a certain amount of discrimination and with a new allocation of tasks.

The French public is naturally troubled by the British attitude towards such problems. It is firmly believed that, if Europe must re-establish itself on solid foundations, Great Britain must be completely committed to the game. Not all French people share the opinion recently expressed by General de Gaulle that European unity must be built on an agreement directly negotiated between France and Germany. They feel that Great Britain's presence is essential, if only to ensure that no one single power occupies a dominant position in a reconstructed Europe. I think they are right.

But for most British people, and certainly for myself, there is a proviso to our cooperation in Europe, particularly in the economic sector. We cannot take any decision in Europe that might, in one way or another, weaken the bonds between Great Britain and the Commonwealth countries.

This proviso must always be at the forefront of our minds. I am convinced that the French understand our position. I am convinced that they also understand that, as the heart and centre of the Commonwealth and of the Empire, we can make a more effective contribution to Europe's recovery.

But they would like to see some tangible sign of our readiness to act in this way as soon as possible.

That is why I think that we have two immediate tasks at hand. The first is to discuss, and to come to an agreement about our standpoint, with our Commonwealth partners and to see how we can effectively contribute, both generally and specifically, to the strengthening of our economic and political ties with our European neighbours.

After reaching agreement on how to take proper account of that preliminary, but fundamental, proviso, we shall then be able to tackle the plan for European union on a more substantial basis. However, if we are to reach that point, our conversations with our Commonwealth partners will have to be totally frank and focus on the entire spectrum of our present and future trade relations. Otherwise, the only outcome will be confusion and failure.

France and Great Britain have a leading role to play in dealing with all these issues. The future of Europe depends on our joint determination and on our resoluteness.

Not one international agreement has been signed by Great Britain since the war to which France has not

subscribed. Our interests in Europe are one and the same. Overseas, we each have permanent obligations that we are determined to honour. The future well-being of one is indissolubly linked to the prosperity of the other. Together we can give to Europe the leadership that free men long for and to America the assurance that its generous policy is not in vain.

Anthony Eden

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