

Interview with Mário Soares from Le Monde (11 June 1985)

Caption: On 11 June 1985, Mário Soares, Portuguese Prime Minister, gives an interview to the French daily newspaper Le Monde in which he emphasises the historic significance of his country's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC).

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'Entry into Europe draws a line under Portugal's imperial past'

From our special correspondent

Lisbon. — How beautiful and youthful Europe looks from the office of Mr Soares! 'We were tucked away in our little corner, backward and out of touch,' he says. 'Forty years of Salazarism had cut us off from all the changes, from everything that was happening, from everything around us that was important. Now, once again, people are coming from all over to visit us — industrialists, trade unionists, farmers, businessmen, academics, artists. The Portuguese, you see, are people who enjoy human contact, and they have often demonstrated this throughout their history. It is also a nation that is never as great as when it is faced with a major challenge. Entry into Europe will stimulate its innate genius and represents a challenge that can whip up that dynamism that we began to rediscover with the April 1974 revolution and with the establishment of a pluralist democracy in 1976. Mark my word, everything is about to change!'

The Portuguese Prime Minister, who, besides his other qualifications, is a history graduate, does not hesitate, in his interview with *Le Monde*, to place 12 June in the context of the country's 850-year history. 'With our accession to the EEC, we are drawing a line under our imperial past. We are, don't forget, one of the oldest countries in Europe. It was we who opened up the Old Continent to the other worlds of Africa and Brazil. But the very burden of empire distracted our attention away from Europe and plunged us into decay from the 16th century onwards.

'This also applies to our neighbour, Spain. The re-integration into Europe of these two countries of the Iberian peninsula, with their 50 million inhabitants, can only be beneficial. For us, it brings the promise of cultural stimulus, scientific and technological recovery and also new capital investment. For you, it is a new market, almost as big as France, the FRG or Britain or Italy, and it is a new doorway to the 450 million or so people in Africa and America who speak Portuguese or Spanish.'

We asked Mr Soares if this last statement was not a cliché? Do the independent nations of the 20th century really need 'bridges' to access Europe? 'That is not the issue at all. But the wealth of knowledge, contacts and trust that we have built up in Africa and Latin America can be of benefit to all. Europe, of course, is not in need of bridges, but it is a fact that there is an air bridge between Lisbon, Madrid and many Latin American and African capitals and that many people come here while we go over there, and this proximity can benefit all of Europe.'

'Now is the time'

Brushing aside the idea that Portugal might contribute towards the fostering of a Mediterranean, Latin or southern 'axis' within the EEC, Mr Soares asserts that, on the contrary, he intends to work towards 'strengthening the unity, solidarity, and cohesion of the Community.' 'We are clearly in favour of the European defence effort,' he says, adding that, 'It is well known that we have excellent relations with the United States; along with others, we are members of the Atlantic Alliance, but we Europeans certainly have an autonomous role to play in the security field.'

Mr Soares also referred to this position at the meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers held in Lisbon on 5 June in a speech that he described as 'very balanced'.

Does not Mr Soares fear that, with Madrid and Lisbon joining the EEC at the same time, it will spark off an economic 'invasion' of Portugal by Spain which has four times as many inhabitants and is more industrialised?

'I met Mr Gonzalez at the end of May. We have settled our economic dispute concerning fisheries and trade. We reached a policy agreement that European aid should, as a priority, go to our border regions that are the most backward. Until now, our two countries have turned their backs on each other and ignored each

other, and it is a fact that many Portuguese have an inferiority complex towards their neighbour. I do not. For eight centuries, we have resisted the well-known Castillian tendency to centralise. That proves the strength of our cultural and national identity. This identity will be no more under threat in Europe in the future than it was diminished in the past when we stood alone or were intimately involved with our colonies.'

He went on to say: 'Don't forget that we have been preparing ourselves for eight years. Our statute books are ready. We have already undertaken far-reaching economic adjustments. As a result, our agriculture, which is backwards in so many respects, has already begun to export new products to Europe — vegetables and flowers, for example. We are also exporting textiles, garments, footwear, porcelain, window-panes. I sometimes say that the Communists are right in being afraid of EEC membership because they are infatuated with out-of-date production methods! No, if we did not want to miss out on the end-of-the-century technological revolution, we absolutely had to join Europe. Now is the time!'

Is such self-assurance fitting in a Prime Minister whose future is in doubt, because, since the collapse of the government coalition on 4 June, Portugal is in crisis? Mr Soares has no desire to comment on the subject. The most that his inner circle will say is that *'the logical course of events is that Parliament will be dissolved and that there will be early elections in early October.'* They are also saying that, on the eve of the elections, the situation is *'far from looking bad'* for the Socialist Party and its Secretary-General.

Mário Soares, who is clearly polishing his image as a statesman, certainly does not intend to mix base electoral considerations with the 'brilliant page' of history that he is writing. But are politics really not going to be invited to the party?

Jean-Pierre Clerc