

'Europe takes an oath' from Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (1 July 1985)

Caption: On 1 July 1985, the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung examines the impact of the decisions taken at the Milan European Council on the process of institutional reform.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. EICK, Jürgen; FACK, Fritz Ullrich; DESCHAMPS, Bruno; FEST, Joachim; REIßMÜLLER, Johann Georg. 01.07.1985, n° 148. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "In Europa kommt es zum Schwur", auteur:Stadlmann, Heinz , p. 1.

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Europe takes an oath

by Heinz Stadlmann

The European Community is still capable of surprises. Before the Conference of Heads of Government in Milan, it was generally agreed that no world-shattering decisions would be taken and, at best, the Foreign Ministers would be instructed to consider proposals for the future development of the Community. These predictions have proved to be well founded. However, one decision was taken which hardly anyone had expected: the convening of an Intergovernmental Conference to amend or implement the existing Treaties. Moreover, this decision was taken against the wishes of three countries that wanted to avoid it at all costs.

So, in Milan, the EC actually reached the moment of truth. This sentence came from Chancellor Helmut Kohl and was coined at the previous Summit held in the spring in Brussels. When it was occasionally quoted over the past few weeks, many people reacted with an ironic smile. No one believed any more that it would come to a pledge in Milan. In the preparations for the Summit, so much convergence on factual matters had taken place that a compromise emerged between the six original members of the Community and the new arrivals, Britain, Denmark, Ireland and Greece.

It was also not without reason that the impression had arisen that the German and French Governments — originally the chief instigators of plans for EC reform — might have lost interest. President François Mitterrand had made it known that an Intergovernmental Conference of interested countries on agreements for a new treaty was not an issue. The opinion was being circulated from Bonn that no one wanted to jeopardise the existing Community by setting out on a new, unknown enterprise. Neither Paris nor Bonn seemed prepared to threaten the British, who, together with the Danes and the Greeks, had declared from the outset that they were against any new treaties or amendments of the old ones.

Why everything should suddenly change in Milan still needs clarification. At the end of the Conference, there were several proposals on the table, but they were by no means incompatible. The one serious difference was the willingness to amend or supplement the Rome Treaties that established the Community. That was where opinions diverged.

It is true that the decision to convene an Intergovernmental Conference still does not give any indication of what the outcome will be nor whether the six original members, together with Spain and Portugal, will actually be able to agree on any new treaty arrangements. However, it has certainly pointed the way towards a completely new, functional and more attractive Community, but it could also spell the end of the current EC and the decline of the existing association.

The existing Community finds itself in a dilemma. It has hitherto functioned according to the convoy principle, where the slowest ship sets the speed. In practice, that means that its performance is pathetic. With the imminent prospect of 12 Member States, some fear total paralysis. The decision-making process has to change. For a long time, it has been a grotesque state of affairs where the most awkward members, such as Denmark and Greece, have up to now viewed the EC as a milch cow, but without feeling obliged to show any willpower to make concessions themselves.

Great Britain is a much more serious case. Whilst it is true that the British are also only lukewarm Europeans and have for years strained the tempers of the other Member States with their payments problems, they have, at the same time, endeavoured to cooperate constructively and made some useful suggestions in the latest talks. The thought that Great Britain might now be unceremoniously expelled because it might not be able to get the planned amendments through its Parliament must cause a great deal of anxiety.

There are still more imponderables. It is rather minimalist to talk of a European Union and for the time being simply base it on enhanced cooperation in foreign policy. In the last few days, Paris watered down the German proposals. Is not clear exactly what the French want. And what does a common foreign policy actually mean? Is it possible for the Federal Republic of Germany to give political support to French

military action in Chad or elsewhere in Africa?

Majority voting is another such dubious topic that German politicians have warmed to. It is true that the Community cannot continue as it is. However, given the Community's absurd financial system, in which one Member State bears the main burden while other wealthy countries cash in on it, the Federal Republic will always be getting into difficulties without some kind of emergency brake. All the other countries are, more often than not, quick to agree on new programmes. No one talks about how they are to be financed. This is exactly the case with the approved French research programme 'Eureka', which currently has no financial framework.

The next few months will be very interesting. Whilst it is true that the Conference could be convened by majority vote, its outcome must be accepted unanimously. What if that does not happen? Does the old EC then go into a decline, to be replaced by a reduced new Community, or will those who up to now have always said 'no' have second thoughts? The intention is to confront them with having to make a decision. The clarification process has begun: how it will turn out, no one knows.