

'Milan: the high-pressure summit which may get Europe back on track' from Le Soir (30 June 1985)

Caption: On 30 June 1985, the day after the Milan European Council, the Belgian newspaper Le Soir presents an overview of the results of the Milan talks and considers the sticking points which might delay a revision of the European Treaties.

Source: Le Soir. 30.06.1985, n° 151; 95e année. Bruxelles: S.A. Rossel. "Milan: le sommet des tensions qui pourraient relancer l'Europe", auteur:Waersegger, Serge de , p. 1; 2.

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Milan: the high-pressure summit which may get Europe back on track

From our correspondent

Milan, 30 June.

At the Summit which has just come to an end in Milan, the go-ahead was given to proceed with the revision of the European treaties, with a view to further political unification of the 12-member Community. The fact that the United Kingdom, Greece and Denmark had to be outvoted in the process does, however, herald a period of sharp tension.

The European Parliament part-session in the second week of July, the meeting of the EEC General Affairs Council on 18 and 19 July, the Intergovernmental Conference — attended, all the same, by the three outvoted countries — which is required to submit its findings on the revision of the treaties by 30 October, and, finally, the European Summit in Luxembourg on 2 and 3 December provide so many opportunities for minimalists and maximalists to trade arguments on the sort of Community they want by the year 2000.

Another decision — one strongly favoured by Belgium — on which action will be required in the months ahead is the creation of a European Technology Community, most likely incorporating Eureka, which would form, alongside the ECSC, Euratom and the EEC, the fourth European Community pillar.

The Summit, which came to a close on Saturday evening behind the austere medieval walls of Castello Sforzesco, was a tough, tense affair, rich in confrontations and surprises. Debate focused essentially on institutional issues: the decision-making process in the Council of Ministers — majority or unanimous voting, with or without recognition of the right of veto — the powers of the European Parliament, a greater role for the European Commission, extending the scope of the Community's activities by institutionalising the coordination of foreign affairs and by including the security and cultural issues.

The issues for discussion are daunting and, for the uninitiated, none too inspiring, but the implications are, at all events, considerable, especially for the small countries such as Belgium.

The Belgian Government is trying to strengthen the European institutions, seeing in them a guarantee that Belgium's interests will be free to develop unthreatened by the imperialist temptations of the major players. This is why, in the discussions in recent months on reform of the European Community, at the Fontainebleau Summit in particular, Brussels supported whatever measures would tend to bolster the power of the supranational institutions and weaken the existing blocking mechanisms, such as the increasingly improper use of the right of veto.

The basic document on the table at the Milan Summit — the 'Spaak II' report on reform of the institutions — had Belgium's full support. The proposal was to take further steps towards European (political) union by convening an intergovernmental conference to be responsible for revising the treaties or drawing up a new European super-treaty. The United Kingdom, traditionally hostile to any strengthening of continental political power and the extension of supranationalism, played on the radical Danish and Greek opposition to these plans. It put forward a 'pragmatic and realistic' compromise which deprived the Spaak II conclusions of any real substance.

The eve of the Summit was marked by another bombshell. It was now the French and Germans' turn to submit a proposal which, in the discussions on the Friday, took centre stage. The proposal was received with dismay by the Benelux countries in so far as it advocated a European Union based on two distinct pillars — the EEC and intergovernmental political cooperation — coordinated by a Secretary-General. This amounted, or so it seemed to them, to allowing the operation of the European institutions to be subject to arbitration by a third party (perhaps, as it was informally suggested, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, at present German Foreign Minister). This prompted the Benelux countries to regroup and, more particularly, to play the UK position

on political cooperation (no more than a secretariat dealing solely with technical coordination) against the Franco-German submission. As a result, both the Franco-German and the British texts were rejected.

For the rest, the Summit slipped deeper and deeper into the mire. The Danes and the Greeks wished to leave things exactly as they were; the British were looking for a number of specific changes that did not imply any revision of the treaties; for their part, Benelux, Ireland, Italy and the Commission wished to amend or develop the treaties, with particular regard to the decision-making mechanisms. Initially, France and Germany wavered between this position and that of the UK, eventually pulling nearer to the orthodox tendency.

Vote

Finally, on Saturday, the 'battle' came to be fought on one issue only, namely whether or not these two visions of Europe should be formally recorded and all the consequences drawn. In the end, Bettino Craxi, the Summit President, took the bull by the horns. The internal market could not, he concluded, be brought about without the revision of at least two articles of the Treaty of Rome. Since there was no prospect of securing a unanimous vote and, hence, of determining a mandate for an intergovernmental conference tasked with revising the treaties, he pored over his copy of the Treaty of Rome and hit upon Article 236, which deals with revision of the treaties. According to this article, the Council, having consulted the European Parliament, convenes by a simple majority vote an intergovernmental conference with the task of amending the treaty.

And, for the first time at a Community Summit, a vote was taken. The United Kingdom, Denmark and Greece were outvoted, and the President found that the majority required to apply Article 236 could be secured. It will now be for Luxembourg, which will be taking over the Council Presidency from Italy on Monday, to take the steps required to convene the conference. Its work will have to be completed by the end of October so as to enable the Luxembourg Summit to take a position ... by a unanimous vote, which sets the scene — as Margaret Thatcher has already forewarned — for a showdown between the United Kingdom and its partners.

The Benelux countries are delighted with this outcome and similarly pleased to note that both Portugal and Spain fully endorsed the positions taken (Felipe González and Mário Soares were present in Milan as observers, but this did not prevent them from commenting on the situation). 'This Summit ensures that the requisite institutional reforms are not once again put on the back burner,' observed Wilfried Martens on Saturday evening.

All the same, the weeks ahead will be crucial: the countries that were outvoted will be thinking long and hard and may well react. The majority secured at the Summit may start to crumble. The rationale subtending the agenda for reform of the treaties may be undermined by new proposals. This would be a major development, one which might, if it resulted in further blockage at the Luxembourg Summit in December, change the picture entirely. 'Countries wishing to move forward cannot be criticised for agreeing together on the measures required to do so,' to quote, in substance, François Mitterrand. The spectre of a two-speed political Europe is now hiding just around the corner.

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