

'The final round' from 30 jours d'Europe (June 1971)

Caption: In June 1971, the weekly publication 30 jours d'Europe summarises the main outcomes of the meeting, held in Paris one month earlier, between British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, and French President, Georges Pompidou.

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The final round

Trust, understanding and a desire for success

‘Twenty years ago, the six countries that currently make up the European Community took the first step towards the creation of a new Europe. From their belief and their wisdom was born the Community as we know it today. I am convinced that this is a historic moment, comparable to that time twenty years ago, since the decisions that we shall all be taking over the coming weeks will undoubtedly be crucial to the political future of Europe.’

This statement made by the British Prime Minister on his arrival in Paris on 19 May was echoed by Mr Pompidou on 21 May: ‘I think I can say that we were aware that this was an important moment in the history of our two nations and in the history of the countries of Western Europe.’

These comments clearly highlight the importance of this meeting, which was exceptional in every respect and was concluded — in an unprecedented manner — by a joint press conference, after more than eleven hours of face-to-face talks.

The ‘historic’ implications of the Anglo-French summit of 20 and 21 May will become clearer with time. Already, its outcome may be summarised by saying that it has restored trust between Paris and London, revealed a broad understanding on the subject of European integration and its future and affirmed a common desire to bring the current negotiations between the Community and the United Kingdom to a successful conclusion.

Trust

It is widely known that the enlargement of the Community was blocked for several years less by the severity of the problems faced than by the seriousness of the misunderstandings that had built up between the two capitals since 1963.

In this regard, a new page was turned with the meeting in May. In his press statement, Mr Pompidou was minded to put an end to all the mutual distrust once and for all: ‘Begun and pursued throughout with the greatest possible frankness, our talks ended in a spirit of trust ... Many people believed that Britain was not and did not want to become European and that it wished to join the Community only to destroy it or to divert it from its goals. Many also thought that France was ready to use any pretext to impose a new veto on Britain’s accession. And, this evening, you can see before you two men who are convinced of the contrary.’

Similarly, when speaking to the House of Commons on 24 May, Mr Heath said that he was certain ‘that the divisions and suspicions which have so hampered relations between Britain and France in recent years have now been removed.’

Understanding

Clearing up misunderstandings, restoring trust: this result was in itself important. However, the two statesmen went further.

The communiqué reported a ‘considerable convergence of positions on the subject of Europe’s role with a view to the enlargement of the European Economic Community’. In particular, Mr Heath and Mr Pompidou expressed their desire ‘to contribute ... to the development of *distinctively European* policies, in the first instance principally in economic matters and progressively in other fields,’ that is to say in political affairs and later, undoubtedly, in the field of defence. Mr Heath told the British Parliament that if, once the Community had been enlarged, Europe had to formulate its own defence policy, these questions would have to be discussed in due course. He also stressed ‘how close are the views of the French and British Governments on the development of Europe and its role in the world.’

As far as the functioning and the development of the Community are concerned, the communiqué is even more specific. It reported a ‘complete identity of views’ in this regard. In the words of Mr Pompidou, this agreement concerns the idea of ‘a Europe composed of nations concerned with maintaining their identity but having decided to work together to attain true unity.’

In his speech to the Commons, Mr Heath was more explicit: ‘We agreed in particular that the identity of national states should be maintained in the framework of the developing Community. This means, of course, that, although the European Commission has made and will continue to make a valuable contribution, the Council of Ministers should continue to be the forum in which important decisions are taken ... We were in agreement that the maintenance and strengthening of the fabric of cooperation in such a Community requires that decisions should in practice be taken by unanimous agreement when vital national interests of any one or more members are at stake.’

In short, Mr Heath endorses what is known as the ‘Luxembourg Compromise’, to which the French Government is very committed. It remains to be seen what will be the opinion of the other members of the Community on this important issue and how the ‘Ten’ will find ways to ensure the effective functioning of an enlarged Community which, as Mr Malfatti has stressed, will undoubtedly require the Community institutions to be strengthened.

The French welcomed in particular the acceptance by the British of the ‘Community preference’ in agriculture and their desire ‘to resolve the problems which will arise from the renewal of the Yaoundé Convention in a positive spirit and having regard to acquired rights.’

The desire for success

It goes without saying that these talks could not and were not intended to replace the negotiations that will be held between the Community and the United Kingdom. However, there has been a particularly firm and unequivocal assertion of the desire for and the possibility of success.

Particular note should be taken of this sentence in the final communiqué: ‘The President of the Republic and the British Prime Minister considered that it was desirable and possible to reach early agreement on the main outstanding issues in the negotiations for British entry.’ Mr Pompidou made this clearer: ‘All that I can say is that it would be unreasonable at the present time to think that an agreement between Britain and the Community will not be reached during the negotiations next June.’ This was echoed by Mr Heath.

This bodes well, but it does not mean that the negotiations have been concluded or that the meetings to be held in Luxembourg in June will be reduced to mere formalities. Possible compromises have certainly been mooted on the subject of New Zealand — a ‘sentimental’ political problem for which Mr Pompidou has expressed his understanding — and the British contribution to the financing of Community expenditure. They still have to be clarified and accepted by all sides.

Similarly, it was quite noteworthy that the fourth, unscheduled, discussion — which was extended — related to the problems of the pound with a view to economic and monetary union. As *Agence France-Presse* observed: ‘It was obviously not a question of defining precise solutions that can be found only in the long term and in an international context going beyond even an enlarged European Community, but of agreeing on the way in which solutions should be sought.’

The text of the communiqué does not indicate full agreement on this point, but it does give ground for hope: ‘The Prime Minister reaffirmed the readiness of Britain to participate fully and in a European spirit in this development’ (of the European Economic Community towards economic and monetary union). ‘These discussions produced a useful clarification of views which will provide a firm basis for the future.’

So we may say that the way is paved for the successful conclusion of the negotiations, even though there is still much to be done and many obstacles to be overcome. It would now appear highly unlikely that the negotiations will fail.

A new Battle of Britain

It is a remarkable paradox that the British leaders have never been driven by such strong European resolution. And never has British public opinion been so cautious. It may be said that 60 % of British people are opposed to accession at present. However, surveys also show that 75 % of them believe that their country will soon join the Community.

These hesitations perhaps indicate that the public is aware of the seriousness of this commitment. In his interview with the BBC, Mr Pompidou was encouraging. He spoke of a 'break' with the past: 'Do not be deceived, it is a major decision that the British Prime Minister and his government will be taking.' Referring to the famous quotation by Winston Churchill, 'each time I must choose between Europe and the open sea, I shall always choose the open sea,' he added, 'today, Britain must choose Europe. For my part, I greatly hope that this choice will be made, that it is made sincerely and profoundly, assessing the changes that it will bring to the life of the British, to their very way of life and their relations with others. But also, what strength will Europe have, what a future, if we agree, if we work together, and if we are resolved to make Europe a reality together!'

Now a new Battle of Britain is starting for Mr Heath. The debate, which opened in the Commons on 24 May, marks the beginning of this campaign, which will reach its peak in the autumn after, it is hoped, an agreement has been reached in Brussels just after the Labour and Conservative party conferences.

Edward Heath hopes that he can show that the terms secured in Brussels are fair and reasonable. He will be keen to stress the benefits that accession can bring to Britain. Above all, he will raise the prospects that this accession will open in terms of Europe. These prospects go far beyond the economy. They are political. They will ultimately be reflected in terms of civilisation.

Will the British people be willing to take this historic opportunity to participate fully in the creation of a united Europe? We shall soon know.

In any case, the affair will be played out in the British Parliament. And despite opposition from a minority of Conservatives and the misgivings of the majority of the Labour Party, Mr Heath seems convinced that he will be the winner in London, just as he hopes to 'win' a fair agreement in Brussels.

The Heath-Pompidou meeting does not, in itself, resolve anything. However, the political agreement that was affirmed on 21 May means that anything is possible for Europe.

Jacques Mallet