

'Stumbling block Denmark' from Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (16 February 1986)

Caption: On 16 February 1986, the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung commented on the Danish Government's decision not to sign the Single European Act the following day since it was waiting for the results of a national referendum on the full text.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. EICK, Jürgen; FACK, Fritz Ullrich; DESCHAMPS, Bruno; FEST, Joachim; REIßMÜLLER, Johann Georg. 17.02.1986, n° 40. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Dänemark als Stolperstein", auteur:Stadlmann, Heinz , p. 1.

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Stumbling block Denmark

By Heinz Stadlmann

The European Community (EC) Member States seem incapable of presenting the achievements of their cooperation in a favourable light. After years of endeavour, they have finally succeeded in placing their cooperation on a new foundation. For the first time in 28 years, the Rome Treaties, which established the European Community, will be adapted to the changed circumstances. It is a small step in the right direction. The new Treaty is to be signed in Luxembourg this Monday night by the EC Foreign Ministers without any ceremony and in a 'business-like manner'. Denmark and Italy, however, are refusing to sign, and Greece still seems undecided. What a meagre result after such lengthy negotiations.

The reason for this embarrassing situation lies in Denmark's domestic policy. The minority Government under Prime Minister Poul Schlüter, basically in favour of the Luxembourg Agreement, has been advocating its ratification in Parliament. Some Social-Democratic Opposition MPs, however, have used this as an opportunity to weaken the Government and force new elections, thereby using the widespread aversion to the EC in Denmark for party political purposes. For years, a parliamentary 'Market Committee', dominated by the Opposition, has been controlling the Government's room for manoeuvre in matters of European policy. Danish Ministers must seek a mandate from this Committee for negotiations in Brussels. The Opposition, keeping the Government on a tight rein in these issues, thus also determined the position of the Danish negotiators in the reform of the Community. The Danes were acting as a brake on progress. Other countries took advantage of this as a handy pretext.

The hopes of the Schlüter Administration are now directed towards 27 February, when a referendum is supposed to overcome the resistance of the majority in Parliament. With the leaking of 'secret documents', Danish Ministries are now trying to show the population what they will lose if they turn their backs on the EC. Denmark certainly belongs to those countries that gain considerable economic advantages from EC membership. The other EC Member States were faced by the question of how best to help the Schlüter Administration. Should they all sign the Luxembourg Agreement even before the Danish referendum, or would it be preferable, in order to avoid any impression of pressure, not to sign until afterwards? The vast majority wanted to make clear that they were determined to move forward regardless of Danish reservations. They did not want to raise any doubts about whether the reform process could still be obstructed. All this seems to have taken place with the tacit agreement of the Danish Government. Nobody had expected the Italians, disappointed by the shortcomings of the reform, to thwart these plans. The Greeks, on the other hand, were already known for their unpredictability. Athens has clearly seen another opportunity to defend the interests of the small nations and reaffirm the opportunities inherent in the right of veto.

Although a lot of evidence suggests that the majority of Danes want to remain in the EC, some almost proverbial conflicts might still lead to a different outcome. And nobody yet knows what would happen in that event. According to the Treaties in force, the entire reform package will become invalid if it is not ratified by all the national parliaments. What further complicates the issue is that the referendum only affects the revision of the Treaties and not Danish EC Membership in general. Even in the event of a rejection, Denmark could still insist on continuing to exercise its rights as a Community Member State. Various scenarios drawn up by EC lawyers even anticipate the hardly conceivable necessity for a re-establishment of the Community with the sole participation of the countries willing to reform. In the meantime, everyone is hoping that it will not come to this.

The situation in Denmark ought to prompt some reflections on the decision-making procedures in the European Community. On 27 February, 3.5 million Danish voters will decide whether 315 million Europeans may proceed along on a road to cooperation that was approved during lengthy negotiations or whether this policy will be brought to a halt for the time being. The problematic nature of the right of veto in the EC, deriving from the principle of unanimity, has been known for years, but it has never manifested itself in such a blatant manner. The Community is a Confederation of States founded on supranational elements and cooperation that can function only if national interests take second place to the interests of Europe as a whole.

The Danes are not the first, and will certainly not be the last, to place domestic affairs before European affairs. However, as a small country, Denmark also raises the question whether the powers in this Community are fairly distributed. Is it conceivable that countries determined to take the course of closer integration will, in the long run, have to accept the pace set by smaller Member States that only want to capitalise on economic advantages without being prepared to make political concessions? The Danish decision could make a significant contribution to the revival of the old question of whether separate developments might bring greater benefit. The concept of a 'two-speed Europe' is back.