

‘Meeting with her European partners in Dublin, Thatcher condemns Britain’s “iniquitous” situation in the EEC’ from Le Soir (30 November 1979)

Caption: On 30 November 1979, commenting on the progress of the work carried out at the Dublin European Council, the Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir describes the position taken by the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, regarding her country's contribution to the Community budget.

Source: Le Soir. 30.11.1979, n° 279; 93e année. Bruxelles. "A Dublin, face à ses partenaires européens, Mme Thatcher dénonce la situation «iniquite» de la Grande-Bretagne dans la C.E.E.", auteur:Colmant, Patricia M. , p. 3.

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Meeting with her European partners in Dublin, Thatcher condemns Britain's 'iniquitous' situation in the EEC

From our special correspondent

Dublin, 29 November

Ramrod straight and looking tense, clad in a rather sad mottled grey coat, Margaret Thatcher was the perfect image of the atmosphere that reigned on Thursday in Dublin at the opening of the European Council. The problem of Britain's contribution to the Community budget practically monopolised discussions among the nine European Heads of State or Government. For their part, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs exchanged views on the international situation, and especially the taking of American hostages in Iran, Rhodesia and the political and humanitarian problems in Cambodia.

Work began a half-hour late after a luncheon at Phoenix Park — the residence of the President of the Republic, Patrick Hillery — where the traditional smoked salmon was followed by a saddle of lamb with peas and mint sauce.

A rapid survey of the economic and social situation gave Wilfried Martens, Belgian Prime Minister, the opportunity to remind his partners that the agreement on the European Monetary System provided for the creation of a European Monetary Fund in March 1981.

Belgium would like the EEC Commission to draw up a report on this matter for the next meeting of the leaders of the 'Nine' in Brussels in March.

This brief discussion was followed by a lengthy exchange of views on energy. The EEC has a double problem on that subject: on the one hand, the repercussions of the repeated increases in oil prices and, on the other, Britain's obvious desire to guard jealously for itself the advantages that it gains from North Sea oil. London's partners are not asking for preferential treatment over the United Kingdom's other customers, but they do reproach it for aligning its prices with those of the two most demanding OPEC countries.

After this foray into the matter, the European Council attacked its 'main course' with a more open mind, the German Chancellor having taken care to give the British problem its proper proportion right from the start. Helmut Schmidt did actually stress the fact that the Community had to solve a multitude of problems, including the problem of energy. 'We need to overcome an anti-nuclear trend among the general public, and the Community must concentrate its efforts on the challenge of energy.'

Mrs Thatcher then took the floor to recall the new battle that her country had been waging against its European partners, this time concerning its contribution to the EEC budget. There will be a difference of over BEF 40 billion between what the United Kingdom pays into the Community and what it receives in return through the agricultural policy, and the regional, social and industrial policies. The British Prime Minister displayed exemplary firmness with regard to her partners and denounced the situation as 'iniquitous and unjust'. 'We are among the poorest countries of the Community, yet our contribution in 1980 will be the highest of the Nine,' was the gist of her statement.

A problem, not a 'British case'

There is, in fact, a British problem, the other Member States retorted, but there is not a British 'case'. The rules of the Community apply to everyone, and this issue must be solved on the basis of Community regulations. In this regard, the eight other countries and the European Commission stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the face of London's demands. Roy Jenkins, President of the Commission, presented the Council with a proposal to reduce the 'British deficit' by around BEF 20 billion.

Mrs Thatcher's reactions were not encouraging at the close of this summit meeting. However, a statement made by Lord Peter Carrington at the end of the day on Thursday left a flicker of hope of a settlement. 'We

do not want to create a crisis within Europe when there are so many problems in the world,' stressed the Head of the British Diplomatic Service.

After dinner at Iveagh House, the Nine continued their discussions on the British budget contribution, while their Foreign Ministers prepared a statement on the situation in Iran.

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