

'Benelux wants to know more about London's intentions' from Le Monde diplomatique

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Benelux wants to know more about London's intentions

By Pierre de Vos

Wilson's statement on British accession to the Common Market was warmly welcomed in the three Benelux capitals — especially in the Netherlands, where Mr Luns has been championing Britain for so many years. The Dutch have frequently been irritated by British passivity in recent months. They have compared Britain's Foreign Minister to one of those dignified old ladies who, over tea and cakes, arrange marriages that society approves of but the intended spouses hate. Up to now the Dutch have been more in favour of British entry than the British themselves.

As Albion's sponsors, the Dutch heaved a sigh of relief when Mr Wilson finally accepted baptism, at least in principle. But they also had more practical reasons to be pleased: they are counting on Britain to give their industry a new boost, and they expect a great deal from the technological cooperation to which the British Prime Minister referred. From the Benelux standpoint, technological cooperation is one of the main attractions of British accession. In the Hague and Brussels (and in Luxembourg too), they believe France probably fails to understand that this aspect is of prime importance to its northern neighbours.

Another attraction is Britain's political weight, which will protect the smaller countries against the French domination they still fear, and against growing German influence. For the three Benelux countries, especially Holland, British entry is a promise of greater balance.

Nevertheless, Dutch anti-Gaullism has become less fierce in recent months, since the great reconciliation in Luxembourg. In Belgium, too, opposition to France is less unequivocal. For one thing, the French Government is thought to be showing undoubted goodwill in many areas, and the departure of Mr Spaak — who has left politics for the business world — has reduced the potential for personal acrimony. That is not to say there has been a profound change in Belgian foreign policy since Mr Spaak left the scene. Pierre Harmel, has faithfully followed his predecessor's line. It is simply that the style seems to have changed, and this must have been apparent in Paris on 25 November, when General de Gaulle received Prime Minister Vanden Boeynants and the Belgian Foreign Minister. On that occasion the eventuality of Britain joining the Common Market was discussed in a tone that would perhaps have been impossible if Paul-Henri Spaak had been the French President's interlocutor.

That said, the Belgian Government's position remains tougher than that of the Netherlands. It is not prepared to accept British entry at the cost of impossible concessions. The treaty must be respected to the letter, and the institutional form of the Community must remain unchanged.

Another argument in favour of British entry to the Common Market is heard in the three Benelux capitals. While the age of European political balance is past, a balance between continents has become a necessity. British membership will give the European Community the economic weight needed to make that possible. But — the argument continues — this effort would be insufficient if it overshadowed another necessity — the need to create a political Europe. The smaller countries are probably now happier to commit themselves, and they may well do so in 1967.

The Belgians regard it as important for the harmonious development of the Western world that the Europeans should attain the status of equal partners with the Americans. And it is mainly up to the Europeans to create the conditions that will gradually make that possible. In that respect, British entry to the Community of the Six will be a decisive factor.