

Statement by Maurice Couve de Murville in the French National Assembly (20 October 1965)

Caption: In a statement to the National Assembly on 20 October 1965, the French Foreign Minister Maurice Couve de Murville explains the reasons that led France to boycott the intergovernmental meetings of the Community bodies in Brussels.

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[...]

Political Europe is still pending. Only with time, with the experience and information it always brings, shall we be able to tell whether it is merely delayed. In the meantime, there is a crisis in economic Europe which, in the main, is probably due to the fact that it was not followed up in the political field.

I repeat : because it was not followed up in the political field. If the political atmosphere among the Six of the Common Market had in fact been different, it would have been difficult to imagine how the discussion of the problems which had to be settled before 1st July 1965 could have ended in such general disagreement and in such circumstances that in fact at no time has it been possible to discuss the basic problem seriously.

What was it all about really ? It was something quite simple that had been agreed to a long time ago. As I explained in detail to the National Assembly in June, it was a question of completing the financial regulations for the common agricultural policy for the period 1st July 1965-1st January 1970. In other words, for the period in question, we had to establish a time-table for the progressive transfer of expenditure to the agricultural fund and the amount to be contributed by the States to that fund. Once again, it was a simple matter, but for France one of great importance for, without financial regulations, the common agricultural policy is meaningless since it is based on the fixing of European prices. It was in particular an unavoidable result of the decisions taken in December 1964 on cereal prices which (taking into account also the progressive abolition of the proportional system) were intended to stimulate France's production of wheat and barley, thus leading to increasing surpluses which would have to be sold outside at world prices.

Admittedly no-one had expected serious difficulties, as is shown by the fact that repeated and formal pledges to conclude in time had been taken without discussion, first in January 1962 at the start of the second stage of the Common Market, then in December 1964, when the agreements I have just mentioned were reached, and finally at the beginning of 1965, when the timetable of this year's work was fixed. After all the vicissitudes which had beset the working out of the agricultural policy, it occurred to no-one that, once the major obstacles had been overcome, we should fail in what is almost the last lap.

As usual, the Commission had to submit proposals in preparation of the decisions of the Council of Ministers. This was done on 30th March last. They had already come to our notice, not because, as would have been normal, the six governments were informed and warned beforehand with due discretion, but because the details of these proposals had been explained in public to the Assembly in Strasbourg on 24th March. From then on it was clear that, even if that was all, the crisis had started.

Far from restricting itself to the terms of reference we had conferred on it, and fortified by its right under the Rome Treaty to submit proposals extending even to the possibility of amending this text, a right which is unchallenged but which should one might think be used only after due consideration, the Commission in fact suggested a series of political measures intended to bring about radical changes in the character of the Community in a direction which has apparently always been its aim, i.e. by setting itself up as a real political authority, progressively less subject to the supervision of the responsible governments. That was the reason for allocating permanent funds going well beyond foreseeable costs. That was also the reason for granting powers seemingly to the Assembly, which, in reality, would give the Commission the rôle of arbitrator between this Assembly and the Council of Ministers.

From the very first discussion, it was perfectly clear that none of the governments agreed. They all refused the idea of allocating funds in excess of requirements. Some really intended to give the Assembly competence in budgetary matters, but no one agreed the proposed machinery since the competence went in fact only to the Commission.

At the same time, sight was lost of the very object of the discussion, i.e. the settlement of the financial regulations for the immediate future. From the moment the eternal debate on supranationality was opened

again and the procedures used led to every kind of political and parliamentary pressure being brought to bear on certain governments, Pandora's box was open : it was tempting to try to press only one's own claims, or give way to a higher bid.

The French Delegation tried steadfastly to bring the debate back to the real question. It had prepared the discussions through contacts and even, in one case, agreements with our partners. It submitted cost-sharing formulas which took the widest possible account of the legitimate concerns of its partners, and in particular of Italy, whose situation had changed immensely since 1962. Nothing came of this. Only the Belgian Delegation showed some understanding. But it was impossible to start a real discussion and when at the end of the day on 30th June, our Finance Minister made a final offer, the same offer as was taken up again on another occasion in conditions to which I shall refer later, we were met by the same general silence. And the Commission too remained obstinately silent thus giving the delegations a pretext for persisting in a purely negative approach.

Ladies and Gentlemen, these were the circumstances which led me, as Chairman of the Meeting, to conclude that agreement was impossible. There was no question of continuing a discussion which, once again, had not really begun, and for which there was no basis, since no-one agreed with the Commission's proposals and the French proposals were not even taken into consideration at that time. Circumstances were quite different from that other time, which was referred to frequently afterwards, that is to say 31st December 1961. We then went on for nearly two weeks after the time-limit, for the desire to succeed was general and obvious, in view of the need for a unanimous vote in order to move on to the second stage.

Thus, for the first time, a formal and repeated pledge by the six governments was not kept. No-one should have failed to understand - as did happen, however - the gravity of the situation thus created and the conclusions the French Government had to draw. The very next day, our Cabinet adopted a formal position in taking note of the rupture.

The first conclusion was obvious : we could but note that the normal functioning of the Community was interrupted. From the moment an essential measure such as the financing of the agricultural policy was not adopted, what chance was there of other developments in any other field ? The Government duly noted this, and indicated that until the crisis was settled, nothing could be done but to carry on current affairs on the basis of what had previously been agreed in the various fields. Any further discussion would be pointless and France would not take part. We had let it be understood before 1st July that we should take this course and we kept to it.

But, because of the crisis and the conditions in which it occurred, the whole picture was transformed. Until 1st July we asked for only one thing : the settlement of the financial regulations as arranged ; we had increased our efforts to this end ; if it had really been possible to start the discussion, if, to help our partners, the Commission had agreed to give up its passive attitude, if, finally, we had succeeded, we would not have asked for more. Now the situation was completely changed.

In similar circumstances previously, we managed to reach a conclusion, either because another goal (in this case the passage to the second stage) was involved at the same time and for this reason our partners wanted to reach a conclusion, or because we had first brought maximum political pressure to bear in order to give a measure of the consequences of failure. It had been proved that thinking and habits had not yet reached a stage at which it was possible to ensure the development of the Common Market in an appropriate way, i.e. without threats and crises.

How could we agree to continue in this way ? An overall revision was necessary so that normal conditions of co-operation among the Six could be defined, and for France, of course, having respect for its essential interests, and first of all its agricultural interests.

Obviously, what was involved was the functioning of the Brussels institutions themselves. What was at issue ? There was certainly no question of denying that, as in any international agreement, the Rome Treaty and subsequent arrangements for its application involved a limitation of France's sovereignty. Any commitment

is, in itself, a restriction on the right to reach decisions freely. But it is a restriction freely and consciously accepted. Supranationality, in European jargon, is a very different idea. Fundamentally, it means that decisions concerning a country can be taken by authorities other than those of the country in question.

This is the case when such a decision may be taken by an international organisation or by foreign governments. This is the case, in other words, as far as France is concerned, if one accepts the ruling of a commission in Brussels or of a majority of governments which does not include the French Government.

The serious question raised by the failure on 30th June is whether such an attitude is possible and compatible with the normal running of France's affairs. I would say straight away that we consider the only conclusion following our unfortunate experience recently, is that French interests have no other defender than the French Government, and that our agriculture in particular can no longer cherish the illusion that it will find somewhere else a knight-errant who can be entrusted with its future.

The Commission, in reality, was not empowered by the Rome Treaty to take decisions except for modest day-to-day executive measures.

Its statute is fundamentally and intentionally different from that of the High Authority of the ECSC. The latter, born in the romantic era, was a body theoretically independent of the governments. Practice has shown the fallacy of such a system. The fathers of the Common Market were careful not to try this experiment again. But this did not put a stop to human temptations, as we have just seen.

The Brussels Commission is responsible for making proposals to the six governments regarding the decisions they have to take. And commentators always underline the fundamental value of a system in which a supposedly independent body is required to present the European point of view as opposed to the narrow nationalistic views of each government - which, I would say in passing, is a definition our farmers would do well to think about !

We have never challenged the usefulness of an objective view of the problems and the way to solve them, but what is necessary above all - and this is in no way contradictory - for reaching a solution is to find general agreement, in other words to compromise. This is a particular field in which the Commission can and must use its talents. In other words, its main task is to seek ways of reconciling different points of view. Each time it has done this, we have had every reason to be satisfied and have been able to reach a conclusion. That has often been the case in the past. But it is not the Commission's task to try to impose its views, particularly in the political field and when it goes beyond its terms of reference. That is what it tried to do in its proposals of 30th March, and it has stubbornly continued since the rejection of these proposals.

The other essential institution of the Economic Community is the Council. Up to now, and except for limited measures regarding the running of the Community, the Six have had to decide by general agreement, that is to say, unanimously. This applies particularly to the acceptance or amendment of the Commission's proposals. As from 1st January 1966, this would have been different : unanimity would still have been required for amending these proposals, but they could be accepted by a majority vote. In view of the present relations between the Six and also of what has just happened, this hardly seems possible. To prove this, I scarcely need to remind you that if there is a beginning of an agricultural policy in the Common Market today, it is not entirely, but mainly, due to the action of the French Government.

The Assembly should remember what took place in Brussels during the night of 31st December 1961 to 1st January 1962. The question was whether the Council should decide - and this had to be done unanimously - to pass on to the second stage without agreement having been reached on the agricultural regulations, or on the financial regulations. The Commission, I would stress in passing, had proposed that no account be taken of these aspects and that an affirmative reply be given. The majority of our partners had agreed. If France, followed by the Netherlands, had not stood firm, we should have passed on to the second stage with no agreement on agriculture, and I do not think anyone can contradict me if I say that there would never have been an agricultural policy in the Common Market. If we succeeded a fortnight later, it was because of the unanimity rule.

I myself said, two years later and in this very place, that it would be very difficult to imagine the Council, in the future, deciding against one of the partners on an essential economic question such as cereal prices. At the time, this statement met with varying reactions. But the German Government took it up again in December 1964, when agreement had just been reached on prices, by asking that the results achieved should not be called in question by a majority vote in the future.

No-one has taken, or could take objection to that. Likewise, how could we agree to any decisions previously reached unanimously being questioned later under the majority rule, particularly in the agricultural field ?

Perhaps, Ladies and Gentlemen, the situation would have been different if, as France had proposed for the last five years, a start had been made on regular political co-operation between the Six. In that case the atmosphere would no doubt have been quite different. Frequent meetings, including meetings at the highest governmental levels, would have allowed everything to be discussed in confidence, a political basis could have been sought for reconciling different points of view, in short, differences could have been avoided, and agreements reached so that the clause making it possible to escape unanimity would have remained theoretical.

Unfortunately, it did not happen like that and we are now obliged to raise this question. I must add that, of the lessons France has learnt from this crisis, that conclusion raises the least opposition from our partners ; some even recognise that it is justified.

These are then two key points on which the Six must first of all reach agreement. After that, the agricultural question would still remain to be settled starting with the financial regulations.

Here our opponents - and even our partners - stop us and say ; since France is so interested in agriculture and the financing of it, why does it refuse to resume negotiations on the basis of the new proposals which the Commission presented on 22nd July and which follow precisely the same lines as the suggestions formerly made by France ?

That would be too easy, Ladies and Gentlemen. If only these proposals - and nothing stood in the way - had been made on 28th, 29th or 30th June, as we had thought, we would have been only too happy to discuss them with every chance of success. But circumstances were quite different. It is because, once the failure became an established fact, the French Government drew its conclusions, noted that the crisis was serious, refused to take part in further discussions and asked that essential political measures be taken to prevent a recurrence of this in the future, that the danger was felt and there was a rush to adopt the reasonable proposals we ourselves had made, in which, moreover we had made considerable concessions. It was then hoped that everything would continue again as though nothing had happened. This is not the way to deal with serious matters.

There was nothing to prevent questions other than the financial regulations arising on 1st July and requiring a solution, if only as a result of this event. One must be blind or very naive not to see this.

That, Ladies and Gentlemen, is how the crisis in the European Economic Community arose and developed. Those are the conclusions the government has drawn, the positions it has adopted and the manner in which it thought a solution might be found. In other words, a political stand must be adopted first. It is for the responsible governments, for all the governments and for them alone, to discuss it and harmonise their views. France has already made it known publicly that it would certainly not refuse any contacts which might be suggested. Nor would it refuse to take part in discussions, provided they are prepared carefully and held in the proper framework, at an appropriate time and place.

France believes political agreement is necessary before discussions on concrete and technical problems can be resumed. This is common sense and only a lack of goodwill can stand in the way. It is in everyone's interest to succeed. None denies that it is in the interest of France. But it is also to an equal extent in the interest of France's partners. It is perhaps also in the interest of all the other European countries, starting with

the nearest, judging by the growing attraction which the European Economic Community seems to have for them since it ran into serious difficulties.

In this great and difficult matter, the government's first concern is the policy and interests of the nation. It does not consider that they conflict in any way with the interests of Europe.

But the government is compelled to note that it is inevitably the only one to defend these interests, when it is a question of agriculture of course, and also in other fields. In view of everything that has been done so far for the implementation of the Common Market, it would be most unfair indeed to suggest that our conception of our duty to our country and our will to carry it out stand in the way of the agreements which are necessary, more in the future than in the past.