

'Mistakes and misgivings' from Le Monde (4 June 1992)

Caption: On 4 June 1992, the French newspaper Le Monde comments on the Danish 'no' vote recorded at the popular referendum on the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. The article outlines relations between Denmark and the Europe of the Twelve by detailing the blunders that occurred during the Danish information campaign on the Maastricht Treaty.

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Mistakes and misgivings

by Alain Debove

Some 46 000 of the roughly 3 200 000 votes cast swung the balance in favour of a 'No' vote. It is a thin margin, but the Danish anti-Europeans can savour what they see as a 'victory'. 'Democracy has worked!' proclaimed Mr Holger K. Nielsen, Leader of the Socialist People's Party, on Tuesday evening. His was one of the three political groupings with seats in the Copenhagen Parliament that (along with the far right) had campaigned against the Maastricht Treaty. It was an unexpected victory in which they no longer believed and for which they had been waiting for 20 years.

Back in 1972, they had campaigned against the Kingdom's accession to the EEC, but they were defeated by a majority of 'realists' who could not see how, in simple economic terms, Denmark could remain outside the Community, once Great Britain had joined. The next set-back came in 1986 when the Single Act was finally endorsed in a referendum. The arguing appeared to die down at last, but the 'Popular Movement Against the Common Market' never gave up. Prior to Maastricht, they did seem to be flagging and could mobilise only the old guard from 1968, and its half-hearted electoral campaign probably does not explain the Danes' 'No' vote.

More important is the fact that relations between Denmark and Europe have always been conflictual and heated: 'one foot in, one foot out'. While most Scandinavians recognise the real benefits of European cooperation for their agriculture, they have always moaned about the Brussels bureaucracy, the EEC of 'business and big money', the absence of any social dimension and the low priority given to environmental issues.

Many Danes fear that Maastricht will mean a loss of sovereignty and make it impossible for their parliament to take independent decisions without meddling from Brussels. There is also the threat of a 'loss of identity'. They feel closer to their Scandinavian neighbours, who speak practically the same language and share the same traditions, than to the Spanish, Greeks and Portuguese. It is also likely that German reunification played a part in the 2 June vote. Having been occupied by the Nazis during the war, some Danes make no bones about their misgivings at seeing the German 'economic giant' once again looming on their border.

Having said that, the political leaders in Copenhagen did not run a very smart campaign. Over recent weeks, the Conservative Prime Minister, Poul Schlüter, and his volatile Liberal Minister for Foreign Affairs, Uffe Elleman-Jensen, continually 'scared voters' by claiming that a 'No' vote would be nothing short of catastrophic and that Denmark would no longer have any influence over decisions taken by Brussels.

The decision taken at the outset of the campaign to print more than 300 000 copies of the Treaty on European Union and make them available free of charge to the public also had dreadful ramifications, since the Treaty is far from being a masterpiece of clarity.

This aggressive and threatening campaign backfired on the Government and also on the Social Democratic Opposition and their trade union allies who, for the first time, called for a 'Yes' vote. It appears that this amazing unanimity amongst the major parties (1) and the news media (with the single exception of the daily newspaper *Information*) alarmed the Danes, who suspected the politicians of dirty tricks and of not telling the whole truth about Maastricht. Had they not been told for years that Europe involved simply economic cooperation and that it would never ever lead to political union?

Under that heavyweight attack from the 'Yes' camp, opponents tried successfully to reassure voters with the slogan: 'A "No" vote does not spell disaster. Denmark rejects political union but remains in the EEC with all the advantages that that brings ...' It also pointed out that, with the collapse of Communism, Europe should not close the gates but, on the contrary, open up to the former people's democracies.

The supporters of a 'No' vote won by a very narrow margin, and they were the first to be taken by surprise. It is very likely that the Danish people, whether they supported or opposed Maastricht, woke up on

Wednesday morning thinking ‘Good heavens! What have we done?’

(1) On 12 May, the Danish Parliament had approved the Maastricht Treaty by 130 votes to 25, with 20 abstentions.