

'What kind of Europe will the British be joining?' from L'Europe en formation


Caption: In summer 1971, in an article published in the federalist journal L'Europe en formation, Jean Rey, former President of the Commission of the European Communities, considers the objectives and progress of the accession negotiations of the Six with the four applicant countries and calls for a strengthening of the Community institutions.

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What kind of Europe will the British be joining?

by Jean Rey

former President of the Commission of the European Communities

There is every indication that the negotiations for the accession of Great Britain to the Community have made significant progress over the past few weeks. According to one Head of State, there is no reason to believe that the outstanding problems cannot be resolved by common accord in the coming months.

First of all, let us express our delight. It is now 20 years since Robert Schuman offered the British a chance to join the new venture on which we were embarking. Later, in 1955, after the Messina Conference, the British Government was invited to take part in the activities that led to the conclusion of the Treaties of Rome on 25 March 1957. Subsequently, two attempts to join, one by the Macmillan Government, the other by the Wilson Government, came up against the French veto. Today, that veto no longer exists, and the Six are unanimously in favour of enlarging the Community and of the accession of Great Britain, Ireland, Denmark and Norway. This is a very welcome development, one which will enable the Community not only to enlarge but also to become stronger and to pursue, with greater impetus and authority, stronger economic growth, a more effective monetary policy and a better development aid policy, while also playing a more active part in world affairs.

A dubious procedure

However, we cannot help feeling some concern about the conditions under which the accession of the four applicant countries is taking place.

First of all, in terms of procedure: although the negotiations have to be conducted in Brussels, around a common table, bilateral talks have suddenly begun, at a very high level, between the British Government and one Member State of the Community.

What did the two statesmen say to one another? We know little about this. What arrangements did they make? What agreements did they reach? This concerns all the partners, yet none of them has the right to know. Some time ago, in February 1969, during the famous luncheon attended by General de Gaulle and Ambassador Soames, when the General proposed a similar procedure, the British Government and its partners in the Community reacted strongly. Does this mean that people were excessively touchy in the past, or are they being too high-handed today?

One of the first consequences of this historic conversation is the French Government's U-turn on monetary policy. Rightly, in my view, and in line with the Commission's proposals in its 1969 opinion, the French Government had called for the question of the future status of the pound sterling to be a matter for discussion with the British. Only a few weeks ago, this was still the official position in Paris. Now, however, to the surprise of all its partners, the French Government has confined itself to a rather vague declaration of intent vis-à-vis the British, so that pertinent and specific questions, together with the proposals put forward by Mr Raymond Barre on behalf of the Commission, remain unanswered.

The second is the statement made by the British Prime Minister to the House of Commons, which has not been denied to date, that it was agreed in Paris that decisions within the enlarged Community would be taken unanimously.

What can we say to this? Are the British prepared to accept all the provisions of the Treaty of Rome, including those relating to the institutional field, as was always said hitherto, or, on the contrary, can they derogate from the specific rules set out in the Treaties and go back to the agreements concluded in Luxembourg in January 1966?

This is a fundamental problem. Nearly two years ago, the 14-member Commission warned the Council of the risk of weakening the Community mechanisms in the enlarged Community and pointed out that the rules of the Treaty must be applied in full. Was Mr Heath actually promised otherwise, and, if so, in whose name?

This is extremely important, because it raises the question whether the British are fully aware of the nature of the organisation which they are being invited to join.

The vital need to strengthen the institutions

The Community is not just an intergovernmental organisation, like so many others, that brings together states that have decided to cooperate in a particular area. It is far more than that. As its name indicates, it pools the destinies of the European countries that have resolved to frame common policies and progressively to create a united continent governed by common rules and institutions.

We cannot overemphasise the importance of the institutions in this integration process. The reason why the Communities are the only European organisations that have managed to frame common policies is that they have had the institutional means to do so. Those same men who failed to create common policies in the framework of the OEEC or Benelux, for example, managed to do so within a Community framework because they had the necessary instruments. To weaken these instruments, to concentrate ever more authority in the hands of a Council that acts unanimously and still tends all too often to use conventional diplomatic methods, to the detriment of the Commission which has long since adopted the governmental style, would seriously jeopardise the chances of success and progress of the entire enterprise.

Even now, the simple fact of increasing its membership automatically makes the Community more cumbersome; this must be offset by strengthening the institutions. The situation would be even more serious if the Community became not only automatically more cumbersome but also politically weaker. We have to say it, and we have to say it now. The accession of the new applicant countries would be rough and ready, and tomorrow, when the Ten sit round the table and speak of the vital need to strengthen the Community mechanisms, our new partners could accuse us of having deceived them.

Jean Rey
(Brussels, 21 June 1971)