

'Customs unions' from Le Monde (31 January 1948)

Caption: On 31 January 1948, the French daily newspaper Le Monde considers the implications of the plan for a regional customs union addressed by France to Italy and to the Benelux countries.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 31.01.1948, n° 937; 5e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Unions douanières", p. 1.

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Customs unions

While the Ministers of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg are holding discussions in Luxembourg in order to finalise the Benelux customs agreement, Henri Bonnet, Ambassador of France, and Alberto Tarchiani, Ambassador of Italy, recently submitted to the Department of State a preliminary report on the possibilities of an economic union between France and Italy.

The issue of customs unions is thus being approached from two sides at once. For Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, it has moved beyond the preliminaries — it is almost resolved. The Ministers of these three countries are currently making the final preparations, while Italy and France are still at the research stage.

On 13 September 1947, Hervé Alphand, Head of the French Delegation at the Conference of the Sixteen, suggested that economic units larger than the existing European ones should be created. This idea was in line with the American point of view, according to which the Marshall Plan should be supported by closer cooperation among the economies of the beneficiary countries.

France declared itself ready to negotiate with all European countries that shared its views; Italy was the first to come forward. A joint Franco-Italian commission was thus formed with a remit to study the possibilities of a customs union, and it has recently completed its report: if, as there are grounds to believe, the report is favourable, a tentative decision will have to be made before the issue is studied in more depth.

According to some sources, the report considers seeking French and Italian national resources that might be deemed complementary, determining the areas in which the two countries do not compete, and finally the areas in which they can combine their exports. Joint development of certain industries, particularly high-production industries, and shifting surplus labour from Italy to France are already in the pipeline.

In short, for the time being, it is less about organising a customs union than it is about comparing the possible advantages and disadvantages. It is the logical development of such an undertaking. Before proceeding with a measure as serious as the union of two economies, it would be advisable to see what obstacles they face and what adjustments, what changes are the prerequisite. Once this mutual adaptation has been deemed necessary, it could conceivably stretch out over a period of several years before moves towards the customs union itself are made.

Soon, we shall discover the potential of a Franco-Italian agreement. But the French Government is already turning towards Benelux. A Franco-Dutch-Belgo-Luxembourg economic cooperation committee, chaired by Mr de La Baume, has existed since the Liberation, although its research — purely technical in nature — has remained incomplete. A procedure similar to the Franco-Italian deliberations would have to be put in hand: a proposal was recently made to this effect in The Hague, Brussels and Luxembourg.

Perhaps the difficulties will prove to be greater than with Italy. Belgium and the Netherlands had to make strenuous efforts to adapt two economies to each other that are not always complementary and had been affected unequally by the war. It is possible that these two countries, both with significant foreign trade, would like to test out the organisation that they are setting up before expanding their customs territory again. Joining the Benelux countries with France and Italy would combine over a hundred million inhabitants and vast industrial, agricultural and colonial resources. Economically speaking, this would already be the Western Europe to which Ernest Bevin was referring in a recent speech.

The British Minister was thinking more along the lines of a political and military union, which holds less of an interest. Western Europe can consolidate its position first and foremost on an economic basis. Although Clement Attlee, slightly less reticent than Mr Bevin, gave cautious approval to such projects, Great Britain has been the one with the most reservations until now. Are we to believe that Great Britain, bound to its Empire, would feel less European than the nations on the continent? The fact remains that these nations' cooperation could not ignore it or go against it. One might have thought that Germany's place in the Western economy would be the trickiest problem. But first we need to know what position Britain wishes to

take therein.