

Television interview with Georges Pompidou (24 June 1971)

Caption: On 24 June 1971, in reply to questions from journalists, the French President, Georges Pompidou, offers his vision of the future of Europe and speculates on the political implications of the United Kingdom's accession to the European Communities.

Source: Western European Union Assembly-General Affairs Committee: A retrospective view of the political year in Europe 1971. November 1972. Paris: Western European Union Assembly-General Affairs Committee. "Interview of Mr. Pompidou, President of the French Republic, on French radio and television (24 June 1971)", p. 207-209.

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Interview of Mr. Pompidou, President of the French Republic, on French radio and television

24th June 1971

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Question: European policy ranks foremost in the active column of your balance sheet. You said one day, or other people said, that this Europe was following two other Europes which died successively or disappeared, faded: that of Napoleon's or Hitler's conquest and that of institutions, that of Jean Monnet. I could almost add another: a Europe extending toward the East which, by dint of circumstances, can only be a dream or a memory now.

We see clearly what the Europe of today, the Europe you are building with Edward Heath, will not be, but we do not see what it will be.

What idea do you have of this new Europe that is being born?

Answer: I thought that you would mention Europe so I had a map brought in. Here in red you see what is called the Europe of the Six and you can see clearly what is Western Europe. Here the frontiers of Soviet influence stop, to all practical purposes. So here is Western Europe ... here, the Soviet world ... here, North America.

Just imagine, if you will, how fragile this Europe is, how small, a small, threatened peninsula, and yet it has more than 300 million inhabitants, it contains all the countries in which for 500 years the history of mankind has been made. It has a reservoir of capability which is unique in the world, and it has an economic strength which is superior to that of the whole Soviet world and which is not far from equalling that of North America.

So, either we give up being important in the face of these immense powers or we strive to regroup the nations of Western Europe and to bring together all their potentialities and possibilities.

This is the effort we have undertaken, and it is the effort I have undertaken.

When I arrived, Europe was really at an impasse. Our partners of the Six would no longer stand for Britain's remaining outside. Britain would no longer put up with the Europe of the Six which made it think somehow of Napoleon's empire and of the continental blockade. General de Gaulle had been aware of this for a long time. Already in 1958 he said ...

Question: 1958?

Answer: 1958. He said: "What bothers me about the Common Market is that it will impair our relations with Britain." And, as you know, in 1968 or 1969, in the last months of his presidency, he made a step toward Britain which failed because of the British Government at the time.

Also, I have observed that our partners no longer wished to progress, that there were very few opportunities to have the agricultural common market completed and established, if I may say, definitively. That is why at the conference of the Hague, I asked them to say yes or no quite clearly. I was able to have the agricultural market become definitive on one hand in exchange for the opening of negotiations with Britain on the other.

From the moment negotiations were opened, since I do not believe that foreign policy should be based on lies and hypocrisy, I felt that we must be true in this negotiation and consequently not seek out traps or devious means to bar the road to Britain. On the contrary, it was necessary to ask the questions frankly. That is what happened at what was obviously the most important moment when I had my long talks with the British Prime Minister.

So I asked the questions in the clearest possible manner. First, I said to him: Do you accept the basis of the agricultural common market, that is, Community preferences, meaning that members get their supplies firstly from within the Community? And the British Prime Minister confirmed in the clearest possible way what had moreover already been said publicly by the British Delegation in Brussels.

Second question: on the functioning of institutions and on the rule of unanimity to which, as you know, France is especially attached — meaning that when a country feels that an important question is at stake, the others do not have the right to impose the will of the majority on it. Unanimous agreement must be reached. The British Government agreed, and moreover confirmed this publicly.

Third question: monetary. At present the pound has special status; it is a reserve currency. It would be too complicated to explain here, but this means that it has privileges. It is obvious that in a community everyone should be on equal footing and that consequently British currency should be a currency like all the others. I obtained the commitment from the British Prime Minister that this was indeed his concept of things and that progressively — for there was no question of creating a monetary crisis in the sterling area — the pound would become a currency like all the others and would consequently have a role in what we are trying to do: create a European monetary union.

Fourth question, which is probably the most important: I asked the British Prime Minister what he thought of Europe, that is, whether Britain had truly decided to become European, whether this Britain which is an island had decided to come to anchor with the continent, whether it was prepared, consequently, to break away from the open sea toward which it has always turned, and I can say that the explanations and views Mr. Heath expressed to me are in accordance with France's concept of the future of Europe, and moreover in accordance with what Mr. Heath has said publicly for twenty years.

Of course, we have no illusions. The Europe of Nine or Ten will certainly be more difficult to steer than the Europe of Six and we will have crises ... We have already had some, even as Six ...

Question: Above all, it will be different.

Answer: ... It will be different in its components and it will also be different in an evolution which will present problems with the East, where we must affirm the closeness of our relations and our co-operation — if not, look at the map, we would be crushed — and with the United States which is our friend and ally, but — look at the map — which is not European. All that implies much effort, even more since there will be British traditions, administrative customs, ways of thinking, special commitments in certain areas, as that of defence. But, if you like, one must be able to build Europe.

France will have the duty of being vigilant and she will be, believe me. In addition, she has the advantage, due to her geographic location, of being at the centre and, consequently, of being indispensable.

But, with these two reservations, I have much hope. I have confidence in the Britain of Mr. Heath and I am convinced that, not with him alone but with all the others, including Germany — I say Germany because French-German reconciliation has also been one of the basic post-war accomplishments in the formation of Europe — all together we can make something great and we can return Europe to its place in the world.

We must believe in this and prepare for it, eyes open.

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Source: French Embassy, New York.