

'Luxembourg, Callaghan forces Europe up against the wall' from Combat (2 April 1974)

Caption: On 2 April 1974, the day after the meeting of the Council of Ministers in Luxembourg, the French daily newspaper Combat comments on the request made by James Callaghan, the British Foreign Minister, that the terms of the United Kingdom's accession to the European Common Market be renegotiated.

Source: Combat. 02.04.1974. [s.l.]. "À Luxembourg, Callaghan met l'Europe au pied du mur", auteur:F.D.

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Luxembourg, Callaghan forces Europe up against the wall

When James Callaghan moved into Whitehall, he said: 'We shall not give the Common Market an ultimatum.' That statement must now be considered a dead letter.

At the Council of the Nine in Luxembourg, the British Foreign Minister formally requested renegotiation of the terms secured by the previous Conservative Government. 'We shall renegotiate in good faith,' Mr Callaghan said. 'And, if we secure acceptable terms, we shall submit them to approval by our compatriots. But if we fail,' he added, 'we shall explain to them why we find the terms unacceptable, and we shall consult the British people on possible withdrawal from the Community.' In other words, the approval of the electorate will be sought in either case, and everyone knows that the majority are hardly in favour of Britain remaining in the Common Market.

So the British Minister has decided to take a stance much tougher than most observers predicted. At least, he has the merit of clarity. By opting for confrontation and putting his cards on the table, Mr Callaghan appears to rule out the possibility of manoeuvring within normal EEC rules while maintaining the fiction of European unity.

Callaghan is not opposed in principle to an 'amicable agreement'. He maintains that his country wants renegotiation to succeed but adds: 'Nobody can argue that it would be in the Community's interest for the United Kingdom to remain a member against its will.'

This raises a number of urgent questions in the short term. First of all, France's attitude. Michel Jobert was quick to react to Callaghan's speech and accused the British Government of ambivalence. France could not accept that Britain continue to take part in the activities of the EEC while reserving the right to leave the Community if it so wished. 'We agreed to pay a fair price for Britain's accession,' he added. 'We see no reason to pay an extra amount to keep it in.' So, for France, 'fundamental renegotiation' is out of the question. In other words, you do not go back on your word. This attitude is perfectly logical and in keeping with the Elysée's long-standing position.

Most European capitals, however, especially Bonn, are too keen to keep Britain in the Common Market for them not to try to come to terms and prevent it slamming the door. The prospect of Paris being isolated once again might induce Michel Jobert to be less intransigent.

Another key question is to what extent Harold Wilson's government has a free hand to negotiate possible withdrawal. Mr Callaghan's statements are likely to be variously received within the Labour Party itself and may throw Labour into serious crisis, especially as the Liberals, who can tip the scales of the parliamentary majority, have no intention of making things easy for them.

Unable to guarantee Britain's continued membership of the Community and equally unable to take it out, Mr Wilson may well find himself in a very uncomfortable position indeed.

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