

# 'Rift with France or a weaker Common Market' from the Corriere della Sera (20 January 1966)


**Caption:** On 20 January 1966, the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera leads with the difficult political negotiations taking place in Luxembourg designed to put an end to what is known as the 'empty chair' crisis that has divided the Six since 30 June 1965.

**Source:** Corriere della Sera. 20.01.1966, n° 16; anno 91. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Rottura con la Francia o un MEC indebolito", auteur:Bartoli, Domenico , p. 1.

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**Last updated:** 05/07/2016



## Rift with France or a weaker Common Market

### **Tough demands from the Gaullists: no majority voting and a reduction of the Economic Commission's powers — How will the other countries react?**

From our special correspondent

**Luxembourg** 19 January, evening.

France's return to discussions with the other members of the Common Market has been calm and polite in form and tough in substance. Its trumpeted respect of the Treaties has been combined with a very rigid interpretation of their texts and, in practice, a proposal for a substantial overhaul. Certainly, no shrewd French minister or civil servant will come and tell us that the Treaties are in tatters, as a ham-fisted German Chancellor did in 1914. A light touch is better. The Treaties can be moulded this way or that; their words can be coaxed gently, as an old master of French historiography might have suggested. Ultimatum? Certainly not. Only dates showing what could be achieved: a simple, modest and workable timetable. And so we go on.

#### **Sacred Treaties**

After two days in Luxembourg, the governments of the five Member States now have a clear-cut choice. They can opt for a rift with France, retreating into a Community of five, a lame union not much to the liking of those who would have to be part of it. Or they can decide on a Common Market whose formal framework remains the same ('the Treaties are sacrosanct') and still has six members, but that is internally weakened. What the governments will choose I do not know. But I think it probable that they will tend towards the second option, provided that France's demands are not too exaggerated. Better a Common Market whose geographical boundaries and legal foundations are intact than a Common Market of five. This is how the governments of the Five are likely to reason. We shall soon see in any case. The next meeting in Luxembourg is scheduled for 28 January.

What does France want? Why do I say that it will agree to return only to a substantially diminished Community? France has insisted on two demands, as the readers of these columns know. I shall not look in detail at the issue of majority voting. I shall simply say that this is more or less a legal fiction. The other day, Michel Debré, one of the more influential French ministers, perhaps the most influential, told a farming journal that 'the rule of unanimity must be retained' in voting in the Council of Ministers of the Community. He should have been better informed: voting has never been subject to a rule of unanimity. As a rule, the Treaty states the contrary, i.e. majority voting, and obviously makes this method even more common, with exceptions, or unanimity, rarer as integration progresses.

Although up to now the majority has been the rule in voting by the six ministers, how many times has it been used in practice to get a decision through? Only twice, and for secondary issues: once against France and once against Italy. In the Council there is not normally a vote, as is the case, moreover, with any government organ. Raising this problem signifies a wish to attack the founding principles of European economic union, and to affirm the opposing principles (the nation vested with divine status, the intangible, sacred and eternal nation).

More concrete has been the attempt to diminish the European Economic Commission, although the conflict with the letter of the Treaty is not so clear-cut in this case. The ministers of the five Member States are far less resentful of this attempt than of the attempt to alter the voting method, because they have their own complaints to make, albeit under their breath, against the Commissioners and fear their power. What further proof could there be of the objectivity that Walter Hallstein and his colleagues have brought to their tasks as arbiters between national interests and promoters of integration?

#### **A problem of men**

The purpose of the French demands is to reduce the Commissioners to little more than administrators, to bureaucrats. France fears even the shadow of a European government. It wants to force the Commission assiduously to consult governments and their civil servants before making any proposal, it wants to silence it, to control its spending, to reduce its power to intervene in the domestic affairs of every State and the influence it has rightly gained in dealings with third countries. If this happens, goodbye to the Europe of the technocrats. What will be left is a soulless bureaucracy. Especially as the French are not just demanding a subtle and thorough scaling-down of functions, but also want to get rid of the most eminent members of the Commission, the most energetic and intransigent in carrying out their mandate, starting with President Walter Hallstein and Vice-President Sicco Mansholt.

We shall obviously have to wait and see whether the other five accept France's demands. They will have to accept enough to change the face of the organisation that has existed up to now, alter its methods and bring its impetus to a halt. Why should they accept this? Because France has adopted an unequivocal and clear political line and is bold enough to take the organisation to the verge of collapse (on a par with the brinkmanship of John Foster Dulles) although, in all likelihood, France will not go all the way for reasons of economic interest and electoral considerations. The others seem to fear this collapse as the worst possibility and do not therefore want to reach the brink of catastrophe. They are right. Every effort is needed to try to prevent a rift which would be very difficult to repair in the future. This rightful concern to preserve at least part of what has been achieved up to now, this accurate assessment of the longer term, is imposing a strictly defensive policy, a lack of initiative and almost an inertia, which is leaving France very broad scope for action and manoeuvre.

Obviously, there are matters that not even the members most accommodating of France are willing to accept: for instance, an open violation of the Treaty. This is why the crisis was not resolved in Luxembourg yesterday and the outcome is still uncertain.

Domenico Bartoli