

'Brussels and the interests of France' from Le Monde (14 July 1965)


Caption: On 14 July 1965, the French daily newspaper Le Monde criticises General de Gaulle’s decision to boycott intergovernmental meetings of Community bodies in Brussels, thereby provoking the empty chair crisis.

Source: Le Monde. 14.07.1965. Paris. "Bruxelles et l'intérêt français", auteur:Uri, Pierre.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016



Brussels and the interests of France

by Pierre Uri

A few days after the failure of the Brussels negotiations, we may perhaps attempt an overall evaluation. The breaking point was the period of validity of the new financial regulations. (1) There was no time to discover whether a contribution scale could be agreed, or whether differences concerning political organisation would prevent agreement on technical arrangements.

The government is doing all it can to convince public opinion that the Common Market Commission was plotting against us and that our partners have defaulted on their commitments. It itself has helped to make those commitments ambiguous, since the agreement to move on to the second stage stipulated that a new text, to be signed by 30 June 1965, was to apply until the end of the transition period. The date envisaged at the time was probably 1970, but the fact is that the French Government has since proposed 1967 as the date for fixing agricultural prices and has accepted 1967 for the abolition of all customs duties on industrial goods. So where does that leave the end of the transition period? The concessions which we were prepared to make to Italy also show how unwise it is to commit oneself for too long a period. Despite the problems invoked by our partners and, no doubt, their wish to put a stop to pressure from France, it would not have been impossible to reach an agreement on the substantive issue — an agreement that did not limit the period of validity of the new regulations to 1967 but provided for them to be revised if circumstances changed or the transition period was shortened.

All that was needed was a few more hours or days. The reason why the French minister broke off negotiations was the obligation to conclude by midnight on 30 June. But that is the weakest kind of commitment: if you know what you want, you do it; if you don't know, how can you be sure of finding out in time?

So far the government has above all been concerned to appear to be forcing its partners' hands — even if previous agreements were in fact only achieved through convergence between our demands and the Commission's proposals; and even if formal success was secured at the cost of fairly heavy sacrifices. Today, our haste to break off negotiations shows that it was a move prepared well in advance: we were on the lookout for an incident that would enable us to try and put an end to the Commission's independence. The General has an *idée fixe*: he still thinks he can reverse the institutional forms of European integration, and he is prepared to sacrifice major interests to his war of religion.

The agricultural policy we demanded as a condition for moving on to the second stage is proving to be less advantageous than the terms of the Treaty of Rome, but it was necessary to convince our farmers that the Fifth Republic alone obtained their inclusion in the Common Market. (2) The fixing of cereal prices sowed the seeds of over-production in French agriculture and the seeds of inflation in our economy. For tactical reasons, the government is delaying organisation of the market in other products, which is the only thing that could restore balanced production and relaunch economic growth. Too little attention was paid to the fact that the Commission's recent proposals were cleverly designed to induce the Dutch not to keep for themselves customs duties levied in Rotterdam on goods that were also destined for other countries. By dismissing those proposals out of hand, we were acting against our own interests. The meetings we are now boycotting, such as the preparatory talks on the medium-term policy without which we cannot prepare our own plan, are often more necessary to us than to others.

In playing this game, the government has failed to notice that it is gradually losing all its trumps. Of all the Common Market countries, France is the one in which industrial production has grown least since 1958: by only a third, as in the United Kingdom, compared with a half in Belgium, two thirds in Germany and the Netherlands, and three quarters in Italy. Our 'revival' is hard to distinguish from the stagnation we attribute to Britain. On the other hand, France is well out in front when it comes to price increases. Yet it is France that has increased its exports to the other Member States the most and is therefore most dependent on the Common Market to provide support for its economy.

It is also France which, possessing half of the arable land, can rationally develop its agricultural production alone. But what can it do without the direct outlets, or the funding for external outlets, which our partners provide? So hurrray for the farmers: the government has too much need of their votes to put the whole blame for the breakdown of negotiations on them. But ordinary taxpayers and employees, school students, young families in furnished accommodation, will soon be counting the cost. Support for farm prices will rise from 700 to 1 100 billion old francs. The total is almost as much as we spend on education; the extra amount is the cost of a hundred thousand housing units.

Television is erecting new barriers, attempting to lull public opinion or stir it up according to the needs of the moment, but to no avail: economic stagnation, inadequate infrastructure and falling investment are becoming a national obsession. Given the political vacuum, the disenchantment and unease has not crystallised. Will widespread discontent suffice to prevent irreparable action?

Abstract discussion of supranationalism versus cooperation, or economic as opposed to political integration, is a waste of time. The issue is much simpler and much more serious. Europe makes no sense without continuity. And without permanent institutions, continuity will be constantly at risk. What a joke for the government to recall its representative, as if it considers itself outside the European Community, with which it maintains purely diplomatic relations. What kind of Europe is it that each government can block by refusing to attend meetings? If that it is the Europe of the Nations, it is a contradiction in terms.

But the greatest contradiction lies in the stubborn obsession with power that is weakening the country.

(1) We assume that the Commission's proposals, which provided for the general application of agricultural levies, accompanied by the payment of customs duties on industrial products to the Community and greater control of the common budget by Parliament, are well known.

(2) The Treaty of Rome ensured remunerative outlets for French agriculture by obliging our partners to enter into long-term contracts, providing for an increase in agricultural purchases at prices gradually approaching those they guarantee to their own producers. The levies that replace this system and close the gap between import prices and price levels in the Community reflect our partners' desire to continue buying outside the Common Market in order to clear the way for their industrial exports: when it comes to exporting its surpluses, it is France that is in the position of asking for something.