

'The crisis of confidence persists' from Le Figaro (20 January 1966)


Caption: On 20 January 1966, the day after the first extraordinary meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Six in Luxembourg, the French conservative daily newspaper Le Figaro comments on the responsibilities of each of them in the outbreak of the empty chair crisis on the night of 30 June 1965 and speculates as to whether there is any likelihood of a political compromise being reached which would save the Community spirit.

Source: Le Figaro. 20.01.1966. Paris. "La crise de confiance n'a pas été surmontée", auteur:Massip, Roger , p. 1; 3.

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The crisis of confidence persists

by Roger Massip

It is still difficult to reach an overall conclusion about what has just happened in Luxembourg.

The problems that were discussed for two days — although everyone knew from the outset that it would be impossible to do them justice in forty-eight hours — are too complex and interconnected or, if you prefer, too ‘fluid’ for it to be easy to gain an overall view.

One thing is sure: no one in Luxembourg wanted to bring matters to breaking point. Each of the ministers was too conscious of the extreme importance of what was at stake to be prepared to risk everything, at least at this stage.

The outcome of these two days is not wholly negative. There was a definite desire to take account of France’s views about the future role and style of the Common Market Commission, which was the first main item on the agenda. On this point, therefore, there still appears to be the possibility of agreement.

To no one’s surprise, the second main item — modification of the voting system in the Council of Ministers — gave rise to much greater difficulties. For how can France’s opposition to majority voting and its wish to retain the right of veto implied by the present unanimity rule be accommodated without amending the Treaty of Rome?

Mr Spaak did attempt to propose an ingenious arrangement whereby decisions submitted to the Council of Ministers would be given three successive readings that would provide ample opportunity for marginal discussions and thus facilitate unanimity. The vote would then be no more than a formality. This arrangement did not appeal to the French delegation, however, precisely because it would not prevent recourse to majority voting if disagreement persisted after the three readings, and the proposal is unlikely to remain on the table when the Six meet again in Luxembourg in ten days’ time.

This difficulty has been compounded by another, essentially psychological, problem, namely the timetable proposed by Mr Couve de Murville. Rightly or wrongly, our partners, especially the Germans, see submission of this document as yet another example of the tendency of the French, since 1962, to try to get their own way by imposing deadlines.

Mr Couve de Murville is not one to bother too much about formalities or bend over backwards to explain himself. His programme is logical. But perhaps it reveals too much haste to see the back of the present Common Market Commission and its president, Mr Hallstein, whom Paris is not prepared to forgive for their attitude last June.

It is probably the too openly vindictive nature of the French document that has put our partners’ backs up and sent one of them, Mr Schroeder, into a scarcely contained rage.

The view in circles close to the German delegation is that France had no compunction about leaving its seat empty in Brussels and paralysing the Common Market for what will soon be seven months. Now it is trying to force the issue and impose a faster programme by giving us to understand that if we resist, it will not resume its seat at the Brussels Council meetings.

This reaction confirms the view expressed in these columns a few days ago that the dramatic events of 30 June were caused by a crisis of confidence.

That crisis of confidence continues, and it explains the strained atmosphere in which the six foreign ministers parted company on Tuesday evening. We have always accepted that our partners were partly

responsible for the dramatic events of last summer. But France is just as much to blame. And we are paying now for taking too many liberties with what is known as Community spirit.

Yet without Community spirit, there can be no European Community. If this truth is ignored once again during the ten days' pause for thought which the six foreign ministers have given themselves, the next meeting on 28 and 29 January can only have more unpleasant surprises in store, to the greater detriment of European integration.