

'Europe misunderstood' from Le Soir (4 June 1992)

Caption: On 4 June 1992, in a report on the Danish rejection of the Treaty of Maastricht in a referendum, the Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir speculates as to why the Danes said 'No' and advocates further attempts to achieve European integration.

Source: Le Soir. 04.06.1992, n° 130; 106e année. Bruxelles. "L'Europe incomprise", auteur:Riche, André , p. 2.

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Europe misunderstood

A few weeks ago, Europe was shaken by an earthquake that struck the Maastricht region. On Tuesday evening, the shock wave that rocked the entire Community originated in Copenhagen. Those incredible Danes! They are teaching Europe a serious lesson in modesty.

This rejection was like a nightmare for European federalists. Despite the constant swings in the opinion polls over the last few weeks, no one dared imagine the worst. Now the 12 governments are faced with the reality that 50.7 % of Danish voters did not approve Maastricht or did not grasp its implications.

But is this any reason for vilifying these people who appear not to have understood what Europe is all about? No, it is not. If the Danish electorate did not understand, it was not for want of trying. The 500 000 copies of the Treaty made available to them by the Government found takers. We have nothing to teach them in terms of an active democracy and social welfare. If the ramifications were not grasped, it was because it is more and more difficult to make sense of Europe. Danish opponents of Maastricht tirelessly denounced the soulless technocracy that is gradually creeping into the everyday life of European citizens who do not really see the need for it. Although of little significance in itself, the case of the French camembert that the European Commission wanted to regulate last year was a marvellous illustration of the gap that sometimes exists between the Brussels bureaucracy and our grass-roots and national traditions.

But it is easier to cast aspersions on Brussels through grotesque exaggeration than it is to explain the Community and its intricate checks and balances. Europe's leaders and its driving forces will have to make a major effort to clarify and simplify the institutions so that their ultimate aims enjoy the active support of the public, including in Belgium. The Danish referendum also gives Europe-wide resonance to feelings voiced in several national elections: a fear of 'foreigners' with the coming dismantling of borders, suspicion of the political class and the emergence of new, environmentalist values. Environmentalists in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries are amongst the most vocal opponents of the Community, which they suspect of wanting to erode what has been achieved socially and environmentally.

But the Danish 'No' vote should not make us give up on Maastricht, nor should it lead us to renegotiate certain details at the risk of making it less ambitious. It is heartening to see that the Eleven, in the initial official reactions, seem determined to push forward in spite of everything. Maastricht, despite its extraordinary complexity, does nonetheless attempt to amend some shortcomings that the Danes have been criticising. For example, the Treaty tries to put some flesh on the vague notion of 'European citizenship', the right to vote, consumer protection, the right of petition, the Ombudsman, the Committee of the Regions, social dialogue, etc.

Furthermore, some less economic and technocratic policies on health, education, culture and consumer protection should see the light of day, once Maastricht enters into force in 1993. These are all issues that used to be called 'people' issues. But that will not be enough to erase the democratic 'flaw' in European integration that has been present from the start. The Community is still too abstract, and identification with Europe remains tenuous. It is democratic only as an institution, not in terms of its popular roots. That is why referendums can have disappointing results for the journeymen of European federalism.

But, despite its shortcomings, the pursuit of European integration, initially involving the Twelve and, later, the entire continent, is still the only credible alternative to the unleashing of nationalist feelings whose destructive force we can see on our own doorstep every day. Maastricht can certainly be improved, but it is still indispensable.

André Riche