

‘Britain versus Europe’ from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (24 June 1996)

Caption: On 24 June 1996, commenting on the outcome of the Florence European Council held on 21 and 22 June, the German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung harshly criticises Britain’s European policy and the attitude of the British Prime Minister, John Major.

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Britain versus Europe

By Peter Hort

The football madness currently engulfing Europe has lashed primitive nationalistic rhetoric to such extremes that many observers are nothing short of horror-stricken. With our on-field heroes busy scoring goals, our governments have nothing to gain from pure political pragmatism and their constant search for consensus and compromise. Can it be coincidence that the British, true to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of legal certainty, have chosen this very time to wage a limited war on the mainland Europeans? The game that kicked off on the island had nothing to do with partnership, mutual respect or even simple fair-play. It was the game played since time immemorial: Britain versus Europe.

Prime Minister Major laid siege to the Council of Ministers in Brussels for four weeks, trying to force the UK's partners to withdraw the export ban on British beef. But last weekend, at the meeting in Florence, he had to give up the game against the mainland forces. Eyeball to eyeball with the same partners he had fought for four long weeks, he had to throw in the towel. He had failed to meet his objectives and had gained nothing on the home front either. No binding timetable has been agreed for lifting the export ban; every step towards looser controls is left to the judgment of scientists, veterinary experts and the EU Commission. His partners didn't even allow him to export meat and livestock to South Africa, Australia or other third countries. For the time being, everything stays as it is.

This means that the beef war is not quite over yet. Admittedly, Major has promised to take part once again in the European Council of Ministers. He has, however, made it plain enough that he will resume hostilities if the others fail to do his bidding. He is still trying to turn the tables on his opponents. The political and economic consequences of the beef madness should be borne, so his argument goes, not by the British but by their partners on the continent. For they it is who have grossly exaggerated the health risk and refused with contempt to cooperate with the UK in the Euro-committees that deal with these matters — no mention, however, of the lavish offers of solidarity and financial assistance made by the EU Member States as soon as new information became available to the effect that the disease might be transmissible to humans. And has not the Community just agreed to spend a further 400 million DM on efforts to combat the epidemic?

The time has now come to learn some lessons from the war. What has it produced, other than a shaky peace? It has above all become clear that the distance is growing between a substantial proportion of the UK's politicians and their partners in the Community. For no other reason than to score points with the Euro-sceptics, Major and Rifkind were ready to go for a clash with their partners, not in the manner of gentlemen but with warlike cries. They have done so in full knowledge that their behaviour might rekindle old enmities in the British population, enmities which otherwise are only seen to flare up at the occasional football match. Some of the UK's partners will be slow to forget these visions of horror which they believed had disappeared for ever. The fact that it was above all Dutch politicians who came to the aid of their German counterparts — who bore the brunt of the onslaught by British newspapers — is surely a sign that the traditional lines of opposition are beginning to shift.

The possible consequences of the right of veto are now clear to everyone. In the hands of a dirty player it can so easily become a weapon that rules out any game played to reasonable rules. There is a growing realisation that at the Maastricht follow-on conference the Community will have to make majority voting the rule. All the more so as almost a dozen accession candidates, primarily from Central and Eastern Europe, are knocking on the door of the Community. The more the family grows, the less feasible it becomes to run it by the existing rules. If the emerging pan-European Community of in all probability more than two dozen members is not to collapse under its own weight, it has to have majority decision-making. But Major left it in no doubt in Florence that in the inter-government negotiations, he will continue to oppose any kind of team game.

What conclusions the partners choose to draw should become clear after the summer break, if not earlier. For that is when the serious talking has to start if the Heads of State or Government are to consider, as they wish, an initial draft Treaty at the next regular summit, to be held in December in Dublin. If the United

Kingdom prefers to remain offside, its partners will be ever more reluctant to be held up by London. France and Germany will be increasingly determined to act on the concept of variable geometry: if a core group of pro-integration countries wish to move ahead more quickly than others are willing or able to do, the latter should not be allowed to stand in their way. And this wouldn't even be anything new since this rule already lies at the heart of the economic and monetary union.

What the British need to understand is that they can in this way continue peacefully as a member of the Community without having to play a full part in its activities. Nobody wants to force the British to do what they don't want to do. They should not on the other hand prevent their partners from working together more closely. If the United Kingdom is unwilling to accept this freedom, it will have to decide where it wants to be in the future: inside the Community, or outside it.