

‘The crisis’ from Nieuw Europa (July–August 1965)

Caption: In its July–August 1965 edition, the Dutch magazine Nieuw Europa focuses on the direct and indirect causes of the empty chair crisis and outlines the implications of the financial and agricultural proposals put forward by the Commission of the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: Nieuwe Europa. Maandblad van de Europese Beweging in Nederland. Juli/Augustus 1965, n° 7/8. Den Haag. "De crisis", p. 139.

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_crisis_from_nieuw_europa_july_august_1965-en-b62ae74c-76fb-47ba-8580-09b1de75e364.html

Last updated: 05/07/2016



The crisis

THE crisis began back in January 1963. Since the French veto on British accession — not a Treaty infringement but still an attack on one of the basic principles of the Community, openness — the customary means of moving forward have been package deals, synchronisation, links, despite the undermining of confidence. In early 1965, we were back to the situation where agricultural policy had to provide the impetus for progress in a number of areas. National parliaments in Bonn and The Hague and the European Parliament in Strasbourg demanded a minimum of democratic scrutiny with regard to the millions spent on agriculture. The European Commission, making use of the powers vested in it under the Treaty, took a political step in drawing conclusions from the technical decisions under discussion: the Commission proposed accelerated introduction of a common agricultural market after a transitional arrangement for the next two years, making both agricultural levies and customs duties at external borders the Community's own resources and, linked to these resources, a moderate increase in the powers of the European Parliament. This three-part proposal was on the Council of Ministers' table in good time before the agreed date of 1 April.

FRANCE, chairing the European Council of Ministers, was in no hurry to deal with this extended set of often complex regulations. Another 'marathon session' loomed. The initial discussions brought support for the Commission proposals couched in general terms from Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, hesitant backing from Belgium and Luxembourg and opposition — except for the transitional arrangement for agriculture — from France. Detailed discussions revealed, however, that there was also a lack of enthusiasm among the other five for the proposed speeding-up of agricultural policy and even less enthusiasm for the collection of all agricultural levies and customs duties by the Community. France only allowed real discussion of the arrangements for agricultural policy in the transitional period, and when it became clear in the early hours of 1 July that there was not even a consensus on this complex multi-million matter, the French delegation left Brussels, and Paris recalled its Ambassador to the Community. The clock was not allowed to be stopped for a few days or hours, as on previous occasions. No positive result was allowed to emerge. The time limit that the Council had set for its own work had been exceeded. France would draw the appropriate conclusions from this, Treaty or no Treaty. And the boycott began, on the eve of the summer recess.

NO panic ensued. As arranged, Italy assumed the (rotating) presidency on 1 July, and the Councils of Ministers of the Communities held their scheduled meetings, despite the absence of the French. No unnecessary blunders were made by the five countries represented, and the decisions were submitted to all six governments for approval after the meeting. A few signatures also arrived in the meantime from Paris, which in the interim had been sending representatives to a few less significant meetings at which routine matters were addressed.

THE Commission again fulfilled the task assigned to it under the Treaty and submitted supplementary proposals. The aim was clear: to show that it would not be up to the Commission to find a solution to the substantive issues. There was also a threat of excessive zeal in certain quarters in finding a resolution, outside the Community framework. Foreign Minister Spaak in particular had to be restrained.

THE Commission proposals represent a backward step. In part this was unavoidable, as there had not been sufficient support anywhere for speeding up agricultural policy and shortening the transitional period to mid-1967. The only option was to return to the Treaty date of 1 January 1970. The Council of Ministers as a whole found little to commend in relinquishing a significant portion of national budgets to the Community while it remained unclear what would be done with them. That was the price that had to be paid for the lack of a clear vision in the Commission proposal. If the suggestion made by the French former President of the High Authority, René Mayer, had been followed, the establishment of a European fund for scientific research and industrial and regional

development would have been proposed as the destination for the millions which were not needed for agricultural policy itself and to run the Community. This made criticism all too easy: why collect money which was not needed? This probably explains the U-turn performed by the Commission, which is now basing itself on the costs of the Community schemes and wants to introduce own resources only for these. We shall, however, come to regret this step.

THIS is even more true of the third consequence of the new Commission proposals: the linking of the original three parts — agriculture in the transitional period and after that its own resources and wider parliamentary powers — is in danger of becoming bogged down, even though nothing has formally changed in the proposal on parliamentary powers.

SO after the summer recess it will carry on. The crisis continues, with much more at stake than agricultural levies and deadlines. What can still be achieved from the great step forward that acceptance of the Commission proposal would have meant? Much will depend on the interaction between France's partners, and since January 1963 something has been missing from this interaction. Effective Dutch policy should therefore be principally aimed at this coming-together, obviously without losing sight of the possibility that the Netherlands will perhaps eventually itself, in principle, have to determine its own attitude.

THERE are reports from Paris that the Community faces dangers which go beyond agricultural issues and a modest degree of democratisation. France is said to be in favour of limiting the role of the Commission, not to be willing to accept majority decisions from 1 January 1966 and not to be willing to re-appoint Hallstein and Mansholt in the merged Commission. This may be a war of nerves, with the aim of being able to ask more questions at the more modest level of what has been under discussion to date. On the other hand, it may be deadly serious; in that event, no quarter may be given. This would bring the prospect of an end to the Community of the Six, with all the unimaginable consequences that this would have, consequences which are unimaginable but can no longer be discounted in the calculations of ministries and politicians. Can the Five continue to exist as a community without France, and if so, how? Another alternative unfortunately cannot be expected in the short term from the current British Government.

AFTER the summer recess it will continue. Without any panic, with careful exploration of possible ways of healing the breach created on 1 June and without gambling away the future. And with complete rejection of everything that going back would mean for the signing of the Treaties of Rome and Paris. That would turn the European crisis into a European disaster.