

Interview with Tony Blair on the outcome of the Brussels European Council (13 December 2003)

Caption: On 13 December 2003, Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, holds a press conference during which he explains to British journalists the reasons why the Brussels European Council has been unable to reach an agreement on a future Constitution for Europe.

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Press conference given by the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, on the outcome of the European Council of 12 and 13 December 2003 (13 December 2003)

Prime Minister

Good Afternoon, and welcome to the press conference. First of all I would like to pay tribute to the Italian Presidency, and to Silvio Berlusconi in particular, and to the Foreign Minister, who I think have done an extremely difficult job quite heroically, and although it has not been possible to reach agreement in the way that we all wanted, nonetheless I think it would be quite wrong not to comment on the intelligence, and flair, and judgment that they have brought to these things over the past few weeks, and that we have made as much progress as we have and I will indicate that in a moment I think is very much down to them.

Secondly, in relation to progress that has been made, it is important to recall that we have an agreement now on defence, European defence, something people thought frankly was impossible some time ago. As Prime Minister Berlusconi was saying, there was something like 80-90 different points of disagreement on the actual text that have effectively been resolved over the past couple of days, and although of course nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, nonetheless, as I will say in a moment, there have been some important and good developments there, but it has not been possible to reach agreement on all points. In particular, as I think you know, there are certain institutional questions that have held us up, and I think it is important to realise why I think it was right to break now. Those of us who went through the experience of Nice came out afterwards, and I think I actually said at the time, that that was not an experience to repeat.

Because in the end, no doubt you can go throughout the night, throughout two nights, throughout three nights, and reach some sort of agreement, but I think in relation to this it is actually better to give it some time, countries are going to need some time to find a point of common accord. And that is particularly so, because it is extremely important to realise we have the Nice Treaty, it is in my view necessary to make change, the type of changes envisaged by the Convention and envisaged also then by this Intergovernmental Conference, it is necessary to make those changes in my view to make Europe effective, but the fact is we have a constitutional basis to supersede through Nice, and it is important to realise as well that on any basis none of these additional changes would effectively come into place for, in some cases, several years. So we have the time to reach an agreement and I personally think the Presidency made the right decision, which is to say look we have come a certain way, but there is no point in having deliberations going through the night and then reaching a poor agreement at the end of it. It is better to wait and get the right agreement.

I would also say that one important aspect of this is that many of the things, so far as the British national interests are concerned; I think we have a sound basis now for going forward. I think it is essential, as the Convention itself indicated, and as the Presidency text also would have made clear, that we have a full time Chair or President of the European Council. I think that is a very, very important step forward, that there is a role for national parliaments. Even before today we had agreement for example on issues to do with energy, which was a concern of some of the oil companies, issues in relation to foreign affairs, in relation to the so-called Pasarel (phon) Clause, where we have made it clear we had to have the involvement of national parliaments, and in his summing up today, Prime Minister Berlusconi made it clear that there is a broad consensus in favour of unanimity remaining on tax, on social security, on the financial framework and on criminal justice where there are different systems, between the positive law system and the common law system.

So in conclusion, it is true we are going to have to do more work in order to find an agreement I think that will take some time to do but as ever in this situation, I think it is right that Britain plays its full part, and we have been doing that in the past few days, we will carry on doing that, we will work with our other European partners to try and make sure we get the best deal for Europe, and of course that means the best deal for Britain as well. And I genuinely believe that the British national interest can be protected through these negotiations, indeed it already has been, but I repeat once again, as I say I think at each one of these Councils, I believe passionately that Britain's place is at the centre of Europe, playing a leading role in Europe, not at the margins, and this negotiation, even though it has not resulted in a successful conclusion, has only reinforced that view.

Question and Answer Session

Question

Is it possible for you to as it were bag all those aspects, which you have just listed and say that those will not be subject to any further negotiation? Who do you blame for what has happened here? Is it France, is it Germany, is it Poland? And finally, over what sort of timescale are you suggesting this would be resolved?

Prime Minister

On the first point, of course until there is an agreement on the Intergovernmental Conference, nothing is agreed, but I think it is pretty clear there is a gathering consensus, and I don't think the Presidency would have mentioned that otherwise. I am even more confident than I was that the British red lines as it were can be secured, whilst making sure that we can use qualified majority voting in the areas where I think it is important that we do use it. Secondly, I don't think there is any point in blaming anyone; we have just got to try and work now at coming to an agreement. What is the timescale? I don't think we can be sure of that. I think it will take some time frankly for countries to come together and make the right arrangements with each other and find a way through the difficulties, and I do emphasise that we have already in the Nice Treaty, which hasn't yet come into effect, found a basis for operating. So this is not constitutionally necessary in order for enlargement to take place. It will in my view, however, be necessary at some point to find an agreement in order to make Europe at 25, 27, 28, possibly more, work effectively.

Question

As you know, Prime Minister, there will be people who will be happy in Britain because Europe hasn't got a constitution. What would you say to them about that? And do you think it is bad for Britain that there isn't a constitution?

Prime Minister

I think what is bad for Britain is to be in the position where some of these anti-Europeans want us, which is always on the margins, up in the crowd, shouting abuse at everyone else, not out on the pitch. And what the last few days has taught me, yet again, is the importance of Britain being there, playing a role, making sure not just that our own national interest is secured in a narrow sense of defending positions, but also making sure that we play a constructive central role in shaping the Europe of the future.

Because we are going to have a Europe of 25 and it is going to be the largest economic market in the world and it is going to make an enormous difference to British security and British prosperity, so we have got to be there. So there will be people who rejoice in the fact we have not come to an agreement. I am not in that position. What I am saying is we shouldn't get any agreement other than a good one. There is no point in just going through the night and getting any old agreement, and actually we already have the basis upon which we can work at the moment. So it is in my view entirely sensible that we take the time to get it right.

Question

Are you telling us that you are absolutely sure that in the end there will be a constitutional treaty? And secondly, there are clear signs from the French and the Germans and nobody would deny this is a mess and in the meantime the French and the Germans are talking about a two speed Europe in which an inner core may well devise plans to push ahead in certain areas, whether it be justice, certain other areas of economic harmonisation, while this constitutional treaty is still discussed. What would your reaction to that be?

Prime Minister

I think it is important to recognise that there are areas already, European defence is an area, in which people will work together, certain groups of countries, but it is important that we do that, whilst preserving the essential unity of Europe, and that is what we want to see happen. And as you know, we have worked closely with France and Germany over many of these issues, I think there is going to be an opportunity for us to meet again in the near future. But am I certain that there is going to be European agreement eventually, well my belief is that there will be, yes, but that depends on people coming together and making sure that that happens. Because the one thing I know is that Europe at 25 will need new rules eventually to work effectively. I don't think in the near term it is going to be a dramatic problem, but I think as time goes on, unless Europe has a really effective way of working, and I think that means that you need a full time coordinator of these Council meetings, you know you can see with what has happened today and in the past few days, I mean the Italian Presidency has performed heroics, but it is difficult for them, each successor country to take that on, so I think there are areas there where in time it will be extremely important, for Europe to operate effectively, that we have this new agreement. But I repeat the fact that it is only worth having an agreement on the right terms.

Question

You have said you don't want to play the blame game, but others are less restrained than you. We hear it on reasonably good authority that the German Chancellor said that you and Mr Straw had both been a bit too even-handed in understanding Polish intransigence on the voting issue, and that the French President said perhaps the British came with too many red lines, which impeded progress on the same issue. I wonder if you could comment on that. And second, there seems to be growing pressure at home from within the Labour Party for a referendum on this constitution, when we get one, as you are sure we will. Do you have anything new to say to the people who are making this point more forcefully it seems, and from within your own party?

Prime Minister

I would simply say let's wait and see what we get as the European Constitution, before we decide whether it is something that is of sufficient fundamental importance that you need a referendum on it. If indeed it is the case that tax, and social security, and foreign affairs, and defence, all rest with the nation state, then I think it a bizarre thing to say it has fundamentally altered the relationship between the member state and the European Union. On your first point, well I don't recognise any of that from the conversations, and I have had several of them in the last 24 hours with both the German Chancellor and the French President. And in respect of Poland, look this is why this thing needs some more time to work out. It is important that people realise that out of the Nice arrangements, Poland got a particular settlement, it then took that settlement as a major part of the referendum campaign on accession, because there was a referendum in Poland about whether to be part of the European Union, and obviously I think you don't need to do a PhD in politics to realise that that presents certain difficulties for Poland, and I think it is important to recognise the difficulties that all countries have. And the best way of making this move forward from here, is not actually to cast about for blame, but to try and bank what we have agreed, which as I say is very substantial, and then give it some time in order to get the last pieces in place.

Question

Just going back to the point about a two-speed Europe, surely isn't the message of this that there is now a substantial group of countries who want to put the brake on European integration, and that that is the message of this breakdown of the talks. And I wasn't still quite sure from what you said earlier as to whether you actually thought it was a good idea to have a two-speed Europe and let the French and the Germans go off, whether or not we would go with them or not?

Prime Minister

In relation to the latter point, as I was trying to say earlier, it really depends what issues we are talking about, and as I say in relation to European defence we have got a particular set of arrangements in which I suspect

Britain will play obviously a very central part. In respect of the first part, I don't think it is that at all. Look, the essential problem we came to in the end was about the voting system. The problem wasn't to do with whether Europe should move forward together or not; it was what is the right voting system. Now I am not saying there aren't issues of principle that arise there, but let's not be foolish about this, it arose because in Nice 3 years ago we came to an arrangement, and had an agreement, and now for perfectly understandable reasons, because we need to make further changes in Europe, there was then a convention process and then you have got a negotiation in the Intergovernmental Conference. I think to look at this in sort of apocalyptic terms is rather misguided. I actually think in the end it is a perfectly understandable disagreement that has arisen because we have had one basis of working, we are now trying to move to another, and there are going to be disagreements that arise and have to be resolved, and I think that they will be resolved ultimately, but it is hard to resolve them today. And in respect of the voting position, remember the voting position at Nice operates, I think, until 2009 in any event, so even if there was an agreement, and I don't think people fully understand this incidentally, even if we had reached an agreement on a different system of voting here this weekend, that system could not have come into effect for six years.

Question

But you are trying to say that it was a perfectly understandable, almost mechanistic breakdown. Do you not see a political message in this?

Prime Minister

Yes, I don't mean to say it is purely mechanistic, but what I am saying is the political problem arose for reasons I think you can understand. There was a Nice negotiation, certain countries believed they had a position out of that, and then obviously they want to keep it; whereas there is a debate that has arisen as a result of what has happened in the convention as to whether you have a different system. Now I am not saying there aren't political implications of that, but I think the political impasse is not incomprehensible. You can understand it. And the point that I am making is that we have in any event a significant period of time, because even had we reached agreement today on a new system of voting, it would not have taken the place of the arrangements agreed at Nice until after 2009, which after all is quite a long way away.

Question

You say we have got to give it time, but what is it, do you think, that is going to change, in however much time, that will make these countries who don't want to agree at the moment, change their position? Because it seems at the moment that really very little compromise has been found, so what is it that is going to change their minds so radically?

Prime Minister

I think there are all sorts of different ways you can find a path through this. There is no point in going over all the negotiating points in the last 48 hours, but if you take it from me, there were certain propositions that were put forward and bandied about, and my best judgment is that it is not an impossible mountain to climb. But I can't be sure, and in any event I think the decision that was taken in the end is not that it would have been impossible to reach agreement this weekend, I think probably had we gone through night, after night, after night, for another 3 nights something would have happened, but I think the decision that was taken, rightly in my view, was that rather than do this, because the sense of urgency isn't there, for all the reasons I have described, let's come back and deal with this in a more deliberative way. And as I say, for us I think, for Britain I think the important thing is to maintain our position the whole time at the centre of these events, and shaping them, which we did.

Question

You seem very understanding of everybody's position, but presumably during the course of all these discussions you were actually asked, well where do you stand, are you in favour of double majority? Are

you in favour of double majority?

Prime Minister

We set it out in the White Paper, which is that we can live with either system.

Foreign Secretary

Page 33.

Prime Minister

Jack has actually very kindly agreed to stay behind and do a very detailed briefing for any of you that desire it. And let me just tell you that Jack's expertise on this subject is immense, it is absolutely immense, and I am sure you would profit by ...

Foreign Secretary

Being bored to death.

Prime Minister

Yes. But what we have made clear in this is that, you know you say that I was understanding of everyone's position. I am. Look, you have got two systems of voting, to which particular countries are very attached. For us it worked out pretty much even either way. Now I happen to think you can find a way through in this, but there is no point in me at this stage, it doesn't help anyone to find agreement, you know banging the table one way or another. And I think there was a general sense around the table at the end of this that there is no point in people sort of going out and saying this is terrible, the European Union is in crisis and everything. It is not. The fact is we have got to find a way through, we have got the time to do it, and in the meantime enlargement goes ahead.

Question

Forgive me if this question was asked earlier, I only got here late, but what process do you favour for sorting out the question now, and how quickly would you like to see it start? Do you want to see efforts under the Irish Presidency, or are you one of those who would want to see it wait until the euro elections have been held, and start in the second half of 2004?

Prime Minister

There are two issues here. The first is, it is important that we don't start with a blank page, but that we bank what has been substantially agreed. And what has been substantially agreed out of the Convention and the changes mentioned today, which incidentally protect the British positions on tax, and social security, and defence, and foreign policy and all the rest of it, I think it is important that, although there is no formal agreement, we effectively bank the progress that has been made under the Italian Presidency. I think secondly, the Irish Presidency will obviously take soundings and consult people, and probably report back at the March Council, but I don't think there is any point in rushing this unless it is clear that there is the basis for an agreement. And to be honest, I can't be any more specific than that and I don't think we need to be. The final point I would make to you is that I think there is a point here that I think in fairness to the European Union has got to be made, and I made it when we were summing up our discussion a little bit earlier. This undertaking of enlarging Europe to 25 countries, and then 27, and when Turkey comes in, 28, possibly more, it is a huge undertaking, it is of enormous importance, not just to Europe but particularly to a country like Britain. And what is happening is that the future of Europe is being shaped, not just in terms of its constitution and its rules, but in terms of its attitudes too, about its attitude towards the American alliance, towards economic reform, towards a Europe of nation states, not a federal superstate, and we have got to

remain absolutely at the centre of those events.

And I would simply remind you that six and a half years ago, when I had my first one of these negotiations at the Amsterdam Treaty, Britain was absolutely nowhere in that negotiation, and we had to protect our red lines, which we did at the time, but we were nowhere in it. And however much people tell me that I should take Britain to the margins of Europe, this point, when Europe is enlarging to 25, when the future of Europe is being decided, this is the point at which it would be the most supreme denial of our true national interest to retreat back to the margins. So however difficult it is, and however many conferences we have to go through, I will keep Britain at the centre of these negotiations, because we need our American alliance intact, and we have shown how we do that, and we need our European Union alliance intact, and we have got both and we should keep both.