

Interview with Georges Berthoin: the British perception of European integration (Paris, 22 July 2005)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Generally speaking, how did the British, in your view, both as a country and as a nation, perceive and analyse the efforts that the Six made on the continent of Europe but also — on occasions and to a lesser extent — bilaterally, to create something in Europe? Some attempts succeeded, others did not, but how did the British, from their island standpoint, perceive these various efforts?

[Georges Berthoin] They were against the creation of a federal or a supranational system. They supported an intergovernmental system, that of the Council of Europe. Every time that we conceived a new plan to make further progress in the field of European integration, they were convinced that the moment would come when the transfer of sovereignty would need to be so considerable that the reaction, especially in France, would be hostile. That is where they were wrong. For, following the failure of the EDC and of the political Community... the failure of the EDC, it should be noted, was due in part to the fact that Mendès France, President of the French Council, was not at all comfortable within a system that was fairly rigid, especially on the military side, without a British presence. At the time they were reassured by this French reluctance and by this failure. In France the failure of the EDC and of the European Political Community, given that these had been ratified elsewhere — in particular, as you are aware, by Belgium — somewhat allayed their worries; they were not unduly anxious, at once proposing the Eden plan and the establishment of the WEU, which contained two features that went against the spirit of the European Community: it was firstly, intergovernmental and secondly, discriminatory against Germany. The founding principle of the Schuman Plan's Community was that there would be no discrimination against Germany; it might be described as a reaction against the spirit of the Versailles Treaty: 'Germany was an enemy; it was defeated; we will not keep it in this state of inferiority because if so, one day it will deliver another Hitler. So from the very beginning common disciplines will be enforced, but France, just like the other countries, will be subject to exactly the same disciplines as those that have been proposed, in particular, to Germany.' In the WEU, Germany was discriminated against since the Treaty guaranteed that it would never have access to nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Therefore it was absolutely the opposite. Straight after the failure of the EDC, the Eden plan turned up to take the place of what had just been rejected. That was the start of what was to be a kind of strategy that would become apparent and would last for decades, that is to say: 'We do not think that the Six will be prepared to go so far and when they fail, we have a plan ready, available, the free trade area, etc.' that we spoke about just now. So that is when it all started. But at the same time they realised that there was a hope for European integration, and that there was a whole European phraseology. So they made use of this phraseology, on condition that any progress would be limited to phrases and, if you like, to gestures of goodwill. What they did not quite understand, is that the United States wanted a United States of Europe and that is where the 'special relationship' between Great Britain and the United States of America, which was very real during the war, came up against certain difficulties. Several British prime ministers went to Washington and they realised that Washington was keen to establish special relationships, no longer quite so much with London as with the new Community that was evolving. That is what first opened the eyes of the British.

Then there was another crucial event, one that coincided with the beginning of our work in London, and it was the Suez Crisis. The Suez Crisis! That is when — it was at a banquet — I saw the British weeping real tears of emotion. Because the Suez Crisis was the public manifestation of what was effectively a coalition between Moscow and Washington against Paris and London. That was when the British Government understood that it could not rely on any 'special relationships' before getting involved in some operation or other. Faced with this double threat, American and Soviet, the English and French troops had to retreat from the Suez canal. For the British empire the Suez canal was more than just a canal; it was truly a major artery leading to India and so on. It was at that moment, just after we had arrived, that I heard certain political leaders say: 'Well, under these circumstances, we have to go for the European option.' But a dilemma also remained in the European option: intergovernmental or supranational? At the time the ECSC had obtained enough tangible results, sufficiently convincing for the trade unionists and a section of British trade unionism. The first to help me were the British trade unions, the unionists, not the unions, the British trade unionists, because in it they saw a step forward, solidarity, the International, and so forth. The British saw that the ECSC had survived failure of the EDC and the political Community — it was in place, there were the

institutions that it had created in the two industries which, at the time, even for the British, were key industries, coal and steel, and which after all had been the foundation of British power at one time – and they said: ‘These people will have to be taken seriously.’ When the time came for the revival, in Messina, they hesitated. They were invited very much in the spirit of Mendès, and others: ‘The British have to join us.’ So they sent someone, a person that I got to know well and who became a friend whose name was Bretherton, a civil servant from the Board of Trade, not a person who would stand out unduly. Their reactions to the proposals made at Messina, the Spaak Committee created as a consequence of Messina, the energetic fashion in which Spaak dealt with matters, their reaction was: ‘The Spaak Report goes too far; it will fail by itself. Why should we give it a helping hand?’ — so they withdrew Bretherton – ‘Let us leave it up to the Six to kill off this plan, which goes much too far, by themselves, so that we do not look like its executioners.’ But surprise, surprise! It worked! I witnessed this surprise: they could not believe it. They wanted a form of Europe, something resembling the Council of Europe, because Suez had opened their eyes, but not this, none of this supranationalism, this federalism. Then the Treaty of Rome was negotiated. Again they were sure that it would not be ratified — just like the European constitution venture that we have just witnessed. Then it was ratified. Afterwards, General de Gaulle came to power and they said: ‘All well and good, General de Gaulle was against it, the Gaullists have voted against it, so we can rest easy.’ What a surprise! The private meeting at Colombey les Deux Églises between Adenauer and de Gaulle went off remarkably well; mind you, we were better informed by the Germans than by the French side. The British said to themselves: ‘Yet another missed opportunity’ and they saw that General de Gaulle, who was a statesman, had grasped all the positive aspects that it contained for his French policy: the opening up of frontiers, etc., the speeding up of transitional periods, whatever, and the British wager was lost. So they said: ‘We cannot beat them, so we shall have to join them.’