

'Agreement among the Six will depend on their determination to succeed' from La Libre Belgique (20 January 1966)

Caption: On 20 January 1966, commenting on the first meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Six, held in Luxembourg on 17 and 18 January, and with a view to their decisive meeting to be held on 28 and 29 January, the Catholic daily newspaper La Libre Belgique outlines the Ministers' respective positions and considers the possible means of reaching a political compromise to resolve the empty chair crisis.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 20.01.1966. Bruxelles. "La possibilité d'un accord entre les Six dépendra de leur volonté d'aboutir", p. 1; 5.

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The Common Market must continue

‘Obviously, the negotiations will not be easy,’ said the French State Secretary for Information at the end of Wednesday morning’s meeting of the Council of Ministers at the Élysée, to which Mr Couve de Murville had reported on the meeting of the Six held in Luxembourg. ‘It is impossible to predict what the meeting on 28 and 29 January will be like, or even what its basic premisses will be,’ Yvon Bourges added. As we can see, he confined himself strictly to a few conventional phrases.

And so, more or less, did all who attended the meeting of the Six. The proceedings were kept relatively confidential, since no one wished to endanger negotiations that were full of potential pitfalls. It is thus difficult to assess the outcome, and comments on Luxembourg I range from one extreme to the other. Witness the sharp contradiction between a comment in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and Mr Colombo’s statement on his return to Rome. The German newspaper writes: ‘No one expected France’s return to the European negotiating table in Luxembourg to clear all the fog and bring the sun out right away. But we were not prepared for such an icy temperature as the French brought with them.’ For his part, the Italian minister declared: ‘I have to say that it would probably be hard to find such a cordial and constructive atmosphere at any past meeting of the Council of Ministers.’ Even allowing for diplomatic caution, Mr Colombo seems to us closer to the truth than the Federal Republic’s government-supporting daily.

Differences gradually being overcome

The fact is that, in spite of the initial pessimism of the German and Dutch delegations, a number of differences between France and the Five are being overcome. This has been made possible by careful use of words on the part of Mr Couve de Murville, who repeated several times that his memorandum on the Commission and his proposed timetable should not be considered as imperative demands but as a basis for discussion, and by the moderate and conciliatory approach of Mr Spaak, who continually took centre stage in Luxembourg in front of the two hundred or so journalists in attendance. At the meeting itself, it seems that Mr Luns had least to say for himself.

The German delegation — furious with France for referring in its proposed timetable to the problem of the agricultural policy financial regulation — does indeed seem to have inspired the black mood of the German press. But the latter has gone so far that a spokesman for the Foreign Minister in Bonn has had to deny that France informed its partners that it would change its trade relations with countries that were not members of the Common Market unless its demands were met by 1 May. He also felt obliged to state that the Foreign Ministry knew nothing of an alleged threat by France to withdraw from the Common Market. People are inclined to let their imaginations run loose when they have an axe to grind.

Relations between the Council and the Commission

Overall, the broadest agreement was reached on the French memorandum concerning the role and style of the single Commission of the European Communities, to be set up after parliamentary ratification of the Merger Treaty signed in April 1965. Given the swift progress on this subject, some observers had the impression that the Five were abandoning the Commission. But the progress should probably be attributed mainly to the fact that the French position on the matter was, in the words of Agence Europe, ‘clever and reasonable, i.e. clever because it was reasonable.’ Agence Europe argues nonetheless that the French ‘ten commandments’ are ‘fraught with danger’.

That might perhaps be true if the ten points in the memorandum were to be conceded to France as they stand. But there is no question of that.

By and large, what is being proposed is a revision of the relations between the Council and the Commission, something which is quite natural now that the Common Market institutions have been functioning for eight years and before a single Commission is established. The essential point, which must be constantly borne in

mind, is that the Commission should remain a driving force and continue to represent the ‘common interest’ vis-à-vis the national governments, and it must retain the means to establish a flexible and efficient dialogue with the Council of Ministers.

Tactlessness

If the price to be paid for this is to tone down the Commission’s supranational ‘style’, then why not? Point 5 of the memorandum, for example, reads as follows: ‘In 1959 the Council laid down the rules which, provisionally, were to govern the recognition of diplomatic missions accredited to the Community. These rules amount to a sharing of prerogatives between the Council and the Commission. In particular, credentials are presented to the President of the Commission, who has instituted for these occasions a ceremony modelled on that used between states, although the Treaty of Rome lays down that the Council alone may commit the Community vis-à-vis non-member countries.

‘Present practices must therefore be discontinued and all the prerogatives of the Council restored.’ This implies a move to a two-headed system and a ceremony in which credentials are presented both to the President of the Commission and to the President of the Council.

Other French proposals might, at first sight, seem vexatious for the Commission. But they originate in undeniable instances of tactlessness that have angered Paris, even if tact has not always been the hallmark of General de Gaulle’s treatment of the Common Market. (Do we need to recall that he broke off negotiations with Britain simply by announcing it at a press conference?)

In a speech last July, Mr Hallstein appeared to make an ill-advised comparison between de Gaulle and Hitler.

And it is surprising, to say the least, that the Hague office of the Community’s information service should have permitted itself to print caricatures of General de Gaulle in an official publication, of which 28 % of the costs are covered by France. No wonder, in the circumstances, that Mr Couve de Murville should request that ‘members of the Commission must in their public statements be required to maintain a fitting neutrality with regard to the policy pursued by the governments of the Member States’, and that ‘the Council should exercise effective, and not only budgetary, control over the Joint Information Service of the Communities.’

De Gaulle should not dig his heels in

Qualified majority voting is a more difficult issue. France is seeking ‘guarantees’ against any risk of being put in a minority, just like our passionate defenders of linguistic rights in Belgium, whereas the Five are concerned to arm themselves against any abuse of the right of veto. They also argue that the issue raised by France applies to each of the six countries. What government or minister wants to be put in a minority? It seems to us, however, that an agreement is possible on the basis of Mr Spaak’s proposal, provided General de Gaulle does not persist in an unbending attitude that is the very antithesis of the Community spirit. By 28 and 29 January, the Permanent Representatives will have to come up with a text that provides each side with sufficient guarantees, while remaining true to the Treaty of Rome.

Of course, there are other major difficulties still to be resolved, not least the composition of the future single Commission. Good faith all round will be needed in order to overcome them. But good faith alone will not suffice. Sheer determination on the part of each of the Six is needed if the Common Market is really to be revived. It is in the interests of all parties — above all France — that the European integration process should continue. Ministers and experts will now be making preparations for Luxembourg II, which Mr Spaak has not hesitated to describe as decisive for Europe.