

Interview with Georges Berthoin: the initiatives of the British Council of the European Movement (Paris, 22 July 2005)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Mr Berthoin, could you tell us how the British Council of the European Movement attempted to influence the debate during the negotiations that took place in the 1960s?

[Georges Berthoin] The European Movement's origins lie in the Hague Congress of 1948. The Hague Congress was organised by Winston Churchill, who was very closely assisted in this by his son-in-law, Duncan Sandys. Regarding the European Movement, let me put it this way... Two entities emerged from the congress: the Council of Europe and the European Movement. At the time, the British Council was very active. Then, one day I looked at the statute of the British Council of the European Movement and I noticed something. I let them know and I suggested that it might not be a bad idea to change their statute. The statute said: 'The British Council of the European Movement is responsible for explaining the European aspect of British policy.' And I said no, that isn't it. But that was it, in the beginning. As you will be aware, it is a federation of movements, so within the European Movement, there were people who were Europeans and then there were the federalists who were very powerful, well organised both intellectually and in their networks, very influential, honest in their political approach and well respected. They wielded a great deal of influence over the European Federalist Movement generally. So it was the moving flank of the European Movement, both at national and at international level; rather like what the British would call a 'ginger group'. The movement was extremely active in the various European and British campaigns and, within this movement, the federalist component was very influential. Then they changed the statute. Their leader was Sir Edward Beddington Behrens, a great personal friend of Harold Macmillan, and a man of great influence, a European. I always regarded him as what they call a convinced European. Then there were the different campaigns and there were sometimes the ad hoc groups, such as the Britain and Europe Group, the Labour Committee for Europe, the Conservatives for Europe, and so on, who attached themselves more or less clearly, more or less vaguely, to the European Movement. So, the European and the British 'information machine', the movement and its associates were always very active. For instance, during the referendum campaign, when Harold Wilson was prime minister, they received large sums of money in order to support... because obviously the Government did not want to be defeated in the referendum. Therefore theirs was a constructive action, and within the movement's activities, the influence wielded by the federalists was undeniable. The honorary president at one time was John Pinder. Now he was an extremely strong European. What is interesting is that there were some British officials who were strongly committed, and one in particular, who was not well treated by his administration, was John Robinson, a deputy of Sir Con O'Neill, the great negotiator. Con O'Neill was a quite remarkable man, one of those civil servants known as the British mandarins. Con O'Neill came from an austere Northern Ireland family, but he was a man of powerful intellect, who resigned from the Foreign Office on several occasions because he did not agree with its policies, who wrote leaders for *The Times*, then returned, and so on. In his team there was John Robinson. He was a 'committed European'; he followed the instructions he was given loyally, of course, but he went very, very far in the performance of what the instructions demanded that he should do. Afterwards he was not very well treated because the Foreign Office was rather unforthcoming immediately following Great Britain's entry. And another one who was not well treated was Michael Palliser, the son-in-law of Paul Henri Spaak, as you know — he was diplomatic advisor to Harold Wilson — nor by Mrs Thatcher either, because normally, given the posts that he held, he should have gone into the House of Lords, like many of his colleagues. He is Sir Michael, but he is not Lord Palliser. But there you are: old generals are not always rewarded.