

'Summit in doubt' from 30 Jours d'Europe (July–August 1972)

Caption: Published in summer 1972 in the monthly journal 30 Jours d'Europe, this article speculates on the likelihood of the forthcoming European Summit Conference taking place as planned on 19 October in Paris in the same spirit of renewed cooperation as the Hague Summit of December 1969.

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Summit in doubt

The European Summit Conference due to take place in Paris on 19 October is still in doubt. By the time this article appears, it may even have been cancelled. However, the ten governments are continuing to foster the myth of ‘preparations for the Summit’.

Nonetheless, when President Pompidou first put forward the idea of the Heads of State and Government meeting in a conference similar to the one in The Hague in December 1969, the suggestion was enthusiastically received.

That was in August 1971. At the time, Europe was suddenly faced with the uncoupling of the dollar and a monetary crisis. The idea of a Summit that would enable the enlarged Community of the ‘Ten’ to assert itself, state its objectives for the next ten years and draw together to maintain its position in a troubled world was an attractive prospect. People had good memories of the Summit in The Hague, which had marked France’s real return to the Community.

Preparations

For two years, the move towards European unity had been continuing its slow progress; enlargement had become a reality. The Paris Summit was intended to be a fresh start for Europe, a historic step as impressive as the Messina Conference.

So, in the last few months of 1971, the Summit was a welcome prospect. Then, early in 1972, with everyone agreed on the need to make serious plans for such an important meeting, the ten governments moved on to the actual preparation stage. Three meetings of the ten Foreign Ministers were held in May and June 1972 during the Luxembourg Presidency, each devoted to one of the major topics that were to be discussed at the Summit: economic and monetary union, relations between the Community and the rest of the world and the impact the new prospects opening up to the Community were inevitably having on its institutions.

Serious pitfalls

They talked. There was no debate as such at these three meetings; instead, each of the parties made statements expressing their reservations.

This very quickly brought to light the serious pitfalls: firstly, the limits of Europe’s independence from Washington, then the old doctrinal dispute, which re-emerged with a virulence that it had been thought was a thing of the past — the conflict between the Community concept and the concept of a ‘Europe of the nations’. This latter sensitive issue centred around the bickering on the political secretariat, which became increasingly acrimonious. The French Government acknowledged the need for a body to be provided for the Council of Ministers to facilitate political cooperation (an idea suggested by Chancellor Brandt). But it wanted the secretariat to be based in Paris, not at the Council in Brussels.

The French Government’s justification was its fear that the political secretariat would be overshadowed by NATO headquarters, that the European Commission would take control of the secretariat; in short, it was determined that political cooperation should be on an intergovernmental and not a Community basis, without any risk of a subtle transition from one to the other.

It was on that occasion that, somewhat curiously, the defunct ‘Fouchet Plan’ was mentioned. After the hopes raised by the spirit of The Hague, this had slightly disturbing echoes for some people.

Matters come to a head

Matters came to a head when Belgian Ministers Gaston Eyskens and Pierre Harmel visited Paris on 2 June this year. That day, President Pompidou stated, ‘quite out of the blue’, that personally he would prefer not to issue any invitations to the October Summit, rather than see the conference end up in *vague statements of*

intent, agreements on minor issues or, worse still, poorly camouflaged disagreements.

That stand brought back memories of an era that was thought to be over. Once the upset it caused had died down, France's partners reacted. First of all the three Benelux countries, which, one by one (Mr Harmel on 7 June, Mr Thorn on 2 June and Mr Schmelyer when Queen Juliana was on a visit to Paris), replied, essentially, 'Go ahead, then. It would be better to adjourn the Summit than to have a bad one. Those who want to take responsibility for postponing it should put their hands up.'

Now that calm has been restored, it is clear that the Summit is no longer a burning issue. Will it take place? Will it not be held until spring 1973? No one wants to stick their neck out and confirm or cancel the 19 October arrangement.

The person most anxious to keep to the original plan seems to be Chancellor Brandt, who would very much like the German elections to take place against a background of compensatory and flattering diplomacy (the Hague Conference was a great triumph for him personally). The four new members and the British Government are initially being politely tactful: 'We are new ... do whatever you want'. The Italians have other concerns. The three Benelux countries now have very little faith in the possibility of the really dynamic revival of Europe that they would have liked to see.

Another missed opportunity?

However, they still think that it would be useful to hold a Summit in the autumn just on economic and monetary union and relations with the third world. The French are the most reluctant, but they give the impression that they are not keen to take responsibility for the postponement.

The floating of the pound sterling has introduced a new element into the picture. It has relegated the institutional debate and the question of the political secretariat to second place (no one is talking about that any more at the moment) and focused attention entirely on European monetary solidarity.

The French are asking, with some justification, whether it is sensible to go on talking about economic and monetary union when we are not even able to take up a common stance against international speculation in the light of the confusion about the dollar.

The European ministers, meeting in Luxembourg on 26 June, had no very convincing answer to this. They certainly stated that they would fulfil their commitments. But they avoided the basic question, the joint action we need to take to defend ourselves against the effects of floating currencies.

The Pompidou–Brandt meeting on 3 July might provide some useful ideas, although the days when the future of the Community could be decided between two member governments are over.

The Ministers for Foreign Affairs have agreed to consider the matter before 18 July.

Should the European Summit be held on 19 October?

Should the European Summit be postponed?

One might almost be inclined to answer: does it really matter? Now that the damage has been done, it would just be one missed opportunity for Europe. It will not be the first, or the last.

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