Focus

Britain's "Mr Europe" ?

In happier times, *Commission en Direct* interviewed David Davis MP, the British Minister for Europe. In the current political climate his answers make interesting reading, and perhaps reveal that — beneath the anti-European rhetoric of recent months — British attitudes to Europe are not as negative as you might think.

Why is Britain widely regarded as having a semi-detached attitude to the European Union ?

I should emphasise that the perception is false. Britain is fully committed to its EU membership. Successive Governments have seen the EU as an essential means of safeguarding stability, spreading prosperity, and healing historic divisions in Europe.

There are several reasons why a false perception may have developed. One has to do with Britain's late accession, and the subsequent renegotiation of our terms of entry. Another has to do with our history. The United Kingdom is an old, established democracy, confident of its traditions and comfortable with its past. This can make us awkward

Yet I believe we bring a useful perspective to the European enterprise, and that our contribution serves the common interest.

Another reason for our reputation may relate to the United Kingdom's island status. This enables us to maintain greater security than is possible for Member States with permeable land borders. It is why we shall maintain necessary controls at our internal frontiers. For an island, such controls offer the best and least intrusive way of preventing illegal immigration.

But the most interesting reason for our reputation is perhaps this : Britain does not accept that Europe is on a long march to full political integration and the gradual suppression of separate nations. At one time this was taken for granted by some other members. This may have made Britain appear to be "semi-detached". My impression, however, is that it is Britain which has been closer to the true heart of Europe than some others who were running ahead of public opinion, proposing a form of Union which was neither sustainable nor desirable. Events have shown that Britain has been in the vanguard, not semi-detached, in its championing of the single market; of an open external trade policy; and of a strong continuing role for the separate Member States in Europe's institutional

Commission en Direct

Rédacteur en chef
David BEARFIELD, tél. : 91712
Secrétaire de rédaction
Bernard LANGNICKEL, tél. : 99258
Rédaction
Denis Mc GOWAN, tél. : 99314
Alain PATERNOTTE, tél. : 99261
Mise en page
Christiane GAVA, tél. : 99256
Michèle LEQUEUX, tél. : 99265
Loisirs
Ed van HOOYDONK, tél. : 99264
Loisirs et photos
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Secrétariat
Inger LØVSCHALL, tél. : 55211
Stagiaires
Cordelia HARWOOD, tél. : 61854
Caroline CHICKEL, tél. : 99336
Informapone
Pour faire connaître des événements : (29)99336
Pour l'écouter : *761 ou 296 27 61 — conférences, etc;
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T120 8/39 tél. : 99309
Adresse
CE - DG X - T120 8/36
Unité Information du personnel,
200 rue de la Loi, B-1049 Bruxelles
Télécopieur (fax) : (29)99285
Courrier électronique (E-MAIL)
DG10 CD (Rédaction, Loisirs ou Petites Annonces)

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architecture.

What do you hope, for Britain and for Europe, from the forthcoming IGC ?

The forthcoming IGC must be seen in the context of other challenges facing the EU over the next few years including EMU, enlargement, the need to regain Europe's international competitiveness, and the desperate need to create new jobs. The IGC must contribute to these major tasks, not distract from them. It must also make the EU more relevant to ordinary people who are concerned that the present Union is wasteful and over-intrusive.

On this basis the UK will have positive proposals to make at the IGC to improve the operation of the Union, including the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Justice and Home Affairs Pillar. We are particularly concerned to achieve further entrenchment of the principle of subsidiarity, a strengthened role for National Parliaments and a fairer voting system in the Council.

Is the Maastricht timetable for EMU realistic, and could you envisage Britain's participation in a single currency in the event that it meets the convergence criteria ?

It is too soon to say whether Britain would apply to join a single currency if others chose to proceed. The Prime Minister secured at Maastrich the right for Britain to take this decision at a later stage. It will be decided by a future Parliament in the light of all the circumstances at that time.

As for the Maastricht timetable, let us see how events unfold. British Ministers have made no secret of their doubts about the number of countries likely to meet the convergence criteria soon enough to launch a single currency in 1999, or about the potentially divisive political and economic consequences of a single currency launched in the wrong circumstances or by only a small group of Member States. The worst possible outcome would be the premature launch of a currency which failed, which disrupted the single market, or which divided the Union. That would be immense damage to the whole European venture. I think, frankly, that the timetable is a secondary question.

David Davis : "Britain is fully committed to its EU membership". (Photo Leslie Bryce)

Is current British economic policy driven by a determination to meet the convergence criteria ?

As we have frequently said, and as Jacques Santer has echoed, the targets represented by the convergence criteria make good economic sense whether of not Member States seek to join the single currency. Price stability and sound Government finances were objectives to which Britain subscribed well before Maastricht, and for which we will continue to work. That will not change, whatever Britain may decide on Stage III of EMU.

In 1975 the Labour Government held a referendum on Europe to reconcile policy differences within its own party and in the country as a whole. Can you envisage circumstances in which Britain would hold a referendum on modifications to the Maastricht Treaty ?

The 1975 Referendum settled the question of Britain's EU membership for good. A referendum on the IGC outcome would only become an issue if the Conference resulted in significant changes to the UK's constitutional position. The Prime Minister has made clear that he does not expect such changes. So while one cannot rule out the possibility I do not think a referendum on the IGC outcome is likely.

Many in Britain have argued that there should be a referendum if Britain ever applied to join a single currency. This would be a decision of enormous economic, political and even constitutional consequence. The Prime Minister has said that he would not rule out a referendum in these circumstances.

How can the European Commission best play its role ?

I am generally encouraged by the start which has been made by the new Commission, and especially by M Santer's determination that the Commission should "do less, but do it better". This seems to me an excellent philosophy.

It is important that the Commission does not concentrate too hard on its legislative role at the expense of its executive functions, and its responsibilities as guardian of the Treaties. The Commission must oversee the even enforcement of directives, careful management of the Community budget, and effective action against waste and fraud. I very much welcome the efforts being made by M Santer and by Budget Commissioner Liikanen to improve financial management within the Commission.

As far as its legislative role is concerned the Commission must try to ensure that it secures full consent for its proposals from the individuals and economic operators who will be affected by them. Consultation by means of White and Green Papers should be the rule for all major legislation.