

Grosser, Günter

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New Chances of a 'Wider European Economic Community'?

In the past few years the protagonists of a wider European union had few grounds for optimism. But things seem to have changed in recent weeks. First, there were French hints which seemed to indicate that France was now more favourably disposed towards Britain's entry into the Common Market. They were quickly echoed by the British Deputy Prime Minister who emphasized that there exists in the Labour Government the political will to join the EEC. Moreover, the meeting of the Consultative Council of EFTA also gave the impression of improved prospects for a rapprochement between Western Europe's two economic blocs.

Compared with the friction within the EEC itself this trend presents an apparent contrast. Even though France has ceased to boycott co-operation with the other Common Market countries, negotiations about consolidating and expanding the EEC are making only laborious progress. The whole concept is, of course, full of difficulties. But the crucial factor is the absence of a joint will for unconditional and total economic integration—with political union as a final goal; and when it comes to making decisions, this will is again being replaced by national egoism. Thus co-operation has now become purely a matter of each partner calculating his own advantage. The fact that all members continue to adhere to the idea of setting up a common market merely proves that they are all convinced of the great economic benefits of an international division of labour.

If in these circumstances the EEC cannot fulfil the far-flung ambitions of its founders and is unlikely to develop significantly beyond a common agricultural market and a customs union for industrial products, this does not yet mean that it is turning into a free trade area like EFTA. However, the extent to which national sovereignty has to be limited in favour of international integration is so much smaller that the EEC is becoming more acceptable also to the EFTA countries which are more conscious of their sovereignty.

A paradoxical situation has now developed within the EEC. France, which only three years ago vetoed Britain's entry into the Common Market, could today decisively strengthen the national against the supra-national elements within the EEC and this precisely by admitting Britain and other EFTA countries. On the other hand, the five EEC countries which have always emphatically supported Britain's moves to join may now have to fear a further watering-down of their own policies of integration.

Only sober thinking will help convinced "Europeans" to get out of this dilemma. As long as there was a chance of fashioning the EEC within a foreseeable period into a complete economic union as a stepping stone to political integration, it would have been an arguable achievement to admit new partners at the cost of renouncing the supra-national aspect of the scheme. But if the near future fully confirms that integration even among the six Common Market countries has got stuck half-way then it would be logical to get as many West European countries as possible to come in on this lower level of economic co-operation. At all events, such progress as has already been made towards integration must be resolutely defended to prevent the ultimate triumph of economic neo-nationalism.

Günter Grosser