2 The Main Obstacle: de Gaulle

It soon became apparent that de Gaulle was the major obstacle to a successful British bid to enter the European Communities.¹

2.1 BRITISH APPROACHES AND FRENCH AMBIGUITIES

This was not surprising after the 1958 Free Trade Area discussions, which de Gaulle ended after only five months in office, thus destroying British hopes of redirecting the course of European integration. Furthermore, de Gaulle’s unilateral action had no effect for himself, France, or the implementation of the EEC. There was no fierce or lasting resistance to French action by the other five EEC members, who rather appeared to see the affair as a test of loyalty to the Treaty of Rome. But the particularly unmovable stand of the French in the bilateral soundings – which followed the decision in England in the spring of 1960 – gave rise to increasing worries and speculations on the British side. During these talks the French appeared extremely positive towards a possible British entry, which should necessarily include complete acceptance of the Treaty of Rome. They fully exploited the British government’s difficulties with home opinion, the Commonwealth, EFTA and domestic agricultural hobbies. A key event was the visit by a high powered team of British experts led by Edward Heath (the newly appointed minister at the Foreign Office in charge of European affairs) to Paris. Couve, initially soft as butter, congratulated Heath ‘on a good transition to European problems’,² but was hard as steel when it came to Heath’s appeal that ‘No British government or political party could, in the foreseeable future, take the decision to go in the Common Market [in its present form]’.³ Counteracting British attempts to discuss and outline possible solutions to individual problems (like ‘Associated Oversea Territories’ status, tropical food products, common external tariff), Couve de Murville repeated his
invitation to join the Treaty of Rome. For long-serving diplomats like Christopher Steel, ambassador to Bonn, this was tantamount to an insult:

They obstinately refuse [he wrote back to the Foreign Office] even to talk about the essential question of our relations to Europe, or talk about it only in such insulting terms as Couve’s advice to join the Common Market as it stands. He knows this to be out of the question from both sides.⁴

Very much the same tactic was also followed by de Gaulle in his talks with the Prime Minister at Rambouillet in late January 1961. Dismissing Macmillan’s ‘precious little’⁵ offers of a deal, he interwove the Test Ban Treaty, the force de frappe, Europe and the United Kingdom, economics and politics, in a most intransigent way, just to ‘advise’ the rebuffed Prime Minister at the end that the United Kingdom should ‘take its time and move little by little’.⁶

This rhetorically positive, direct approach to the British was hedged by more repressive tactics vis à vis the Germans, who were already heavily involved with the British in the search for a ‘long term solution’.⁷ Thus the Germans received a number of scarcely disguised warnings to be careful not to stick their neck out too far:

The German initiative is understandable because Germany needs the support of the English for the political goals of the German Government (defence against Eastern aggression, fight for Berlin), but the adapted role of a mediator was not easy and not at all unproblematic. It would contain the danger of disappointment of the British side, because it would be very difficult to find a long-term solution.⁸

But behind this ambiguous tactic and confusing usage of terminology lay more than just the protection of French predominance on the continent. The – somewhat overstretched – image of a cock on the dung hill, who will not share his hens with a second cock, even if his harem would thus be enlarged,⁹ is intriguing, but perhaps misleading. Behind the politics of the day lay de Gaulle’s ‘certaine idée’ of France and Europe’s role in the world and the according organisation of their resources.