

European  
Elections

24th May 1979

LABOUR EURO CAMPAIGN PRESS CONFERENCE

Present

Mr. Callaghan, Mrs. Castle, Mr. Benn, Mr. Heffer,  
Mr. Ron Hayward (in the Chair).

General Atmosphere

A disagreeable and rather spartan loft at the back of a Salvation Army Hostel. Well attended (around 70 press and television men and 4 television cameras). Callaghan was low-key, and made an extraordinary gaffe, in the context of "no more wars between European States", of saying 1919 when he meant 1939, and irritatingly tried to silence Julian Haviland in a sequence that was televised on the ITN lunchtime news.

Mr. Benn was also rather low-key, trying hard not to cause embarrassment, and only Mrs. Castle showed any spirit.

Course of the Conference

Callaghan opened with a long and largely innocuous statement on what the elections were about. He emphasised the need to reform the CAP, suggesting that other countries, in particular Mediterranean countries, were more inclined to support us; also the need for preserving fishing rights and securing budgetary reform. He suggested that there was a favourable set of circumstances at present which should enable these reforms to be achieved, and if they were not achieved in the course of the lifetime of the Assembly and the present British Parliament, it would be "a most extraordinary situation".

He then waxed lyrical about the need to work out, in cooperation with other Socialist parties, policies to meet the employment problems as a result of the world recession and technological change. He referred to reducing working hours, providing more re-training for workers displaced by new technology, more support for industries affected by the new technology and giving assistance to the regions.

While opposing any attempt to turn Europe into a Federal State, he wanted us to be constructive but critical. He did not want the Assembly to spend all its time on economic matters: its value lay in giving the European peoples more understanding of each other.

Mrs. Castle stated that the Labour Party was entering the campaign in a fighting mood despite the difficulties; the

publicity campaign had not made much impact. "We do not want Thatcher policies to triumph in Europe any more than they should at home." She repeated the smear that the majority of Conservative candidates were working farmers, and condemned the failure of the EEC to investigate the growing power of the multi-nationals and the growing surpluses of foodstuffs. These elections provided an opportunity to examine what has happened since the referendum of 1975, and how much of what the Community promised then has been carried out (she did not refer to the fact that a Labour Government has been in power since 1975; it was of course under her Rt. Hon. friend Mr. Callaghan, who sacked her).

Mr. Benn emphasised the widespread support for Labour's Manifesto, and their desire to work towards the creation of a wider, much looser group of European States.

Mr. Heffer emphasised Labour's support for internationalism: it was not anti-European and not Little-Englander. He deplored the tendency to use the expression "Europe" to describe the Community (presumably because the Community excludes his friends in Eastern Europe).

### Questions

Callaghan was asked about the threat in the Manifesto to leave the Community if reforms were not achieved. He replied that this would not arise in the lifetime of the current Assembly because there was a Conservative Government, and repeated "it doesn't arise".

He said he was going to Paris to meet with the leaders of the various European Socialist parties, and was going to discuss with Willy Brandt whether any of them should come here.

He was asked whether he supported the Manifesto, and stated that he gave it general support but was not on the drafting party.

Mr. Benn was asked about North Sea Oil, and said that if BNOG were transferred to private ownership as the new Canadian Prime Minister was proposing to transfer its Canadian equivalent, we would be disadvantaged in supplying our EEC partners.

There was an exchange over reconciling the threat to leave the Community with Callaghan's support for membership of the Community, and he and Hayward became petulant. Mr. Heffer said all the Euro candidates supported the Manifesto. Callaghan quoted a sentence in support of staying in the Community from Labour's programme in 1976 (a very rare occasion on which he has quoted that discredited Labour document), and Julian Haviland asked him about the sentence in Labour's programme "with the result of the 1975 Referendum, the debate on Britain's membership is now over." Callaghan testily refused to be drawn (this was shown on television).

There was a question about the commitment in the Manifesto not to devalue the green pound "by any more than the devaluation of the pound sterling". The platform looked dumb-founded by this question, and eventually Mr. Benn confessed that he did not know much about agriculture. Finally Mrs. Castle said it simply meant that we would refuse to back the devaluation of the green pound in isolation from the reform of the CAP.

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