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Danger ahead for the EEC

THE EUROPEAN Community's summit in Milan has ended in the worst possible way. Its task was to work out ways of easing and speeding decision-making in the future, by emphasising or expanding the role of majority voting, and by reducing or restraining the right of national veto. Instead, it wound up as a contest of wills, with nothing decided, and with the Six and Ireland lined up against Britain, Greece and Denmark.

It is hard to conceive, on this kind of issue, a mode of action less appropriate than a contest of wills. The common presupposition before the event was that all member states were, in different degrees, ready to submit to more majority voting, as the necessary counterpart to more rapid progress in decisions. Such a move is at least welcome to Greece and Denmark, who have long been the Community's foot-draggers. The obvious first priority therefore, have been to build on such consensus as could be worked out.

The deadlock between the foot-draggers and those who claim the greatest readiness to move towards a more politically integrated Europe is particularly damaging for Mrs Thatcher. Her Government had made considerable efforts, in the run-up to the summit, to present a position which was pragmatic, constructive and pro-European, but without conceding much to the quasi-federalist rhetoric of some of the original Six; she may have believed that hers was a position that could reasonably become the basis of compromise. The result showed that Britain had once again made too little allowance for the integrationist aspirations of the Six, and had under-estimated their long-simmering resentment at Britain's previous record of trouble-making.

Spoiling role

But the tussle reflects just as little credit on the original Six. They may have been so irritated that Mrs Thatcher should seek to out-manoeuvre them on the middle ground of pragmatism that they resolved to strike a posture on the high ground of Euro-rhetoric. It is even possible that they would genuinely be prepared to introduce majority voting on some issues, where the Rome Treaty prescribes unanimity. But it is sheer illusion to pretend that a 7-to-3 vote in Milan can determine the outcome of a constitutional conference, let alone the ratification process that any treaty revision would require in 12 parliaments.

The Greek Government played a characteristically spoiling role. Once it became clear that a large majority of the member states were determined to hold a constitutional conference, the right way forward was to adopt such practical, if modest, improvements in the decision-making rules as could be implemented immediately. This would have had three advantages: it would have restored some credibility to the Community; it would have speeded up decision-making right away; and it would have created a better atmosphere for the constitutional conference. By insisting on a choice between short-term improvements and long-term reform, the Greek Government has reduced the chances of either.

Mrs Thatcher must now rethink her position. Since she attaches great importance to the liberalisation of the Community's internal market and the removal of all national barriers to trade, it is essential to reach agreement on how the necessary decisions are to be taken. This means that she must reach an accommodation on the constitutional issues with the majority of the member states, on political as well as practical grounds.

Majority vote

The Greeks may care too little for the European Community to want to strengthen it. But for Britain, the Community is the centrepiece of a foreign policy dominated by the European imperative. The Government cannot afford to be at loggerheads with its main Continental partners for the sake of an ideological prejudice.

The Greeks and Danes may be able to prevent ratification of any new treaty; but under the existing treaty, decisions can still be taken by majority vote—although that will require explicit renunciation of the right of national veto under the so-called Luxembourg compromise.

Three dangers now face the Community. The first is that the conference will waste much time but produce no result. The second is that the Six will negotiate a new treaty among themselves; this can probably be discounted, because it would not dispose of their obligations under the old treaty. The third is that they will decide informally to move ahead outside the treaty framework. The British Government may, therefore, have to decide whether to be part of the majority or the minority.