

Interview with Leo Tindermans published in La Libre Belgique (16 February 1976)


Caption: On 16 February 1976, the Belgian Prime Minister, Leo Tindemans, grants an interview to the Belgian daily newspaper La Libre Belgique during which he discusses the future of the European Union.

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An assessment of the international and European situation with the Prime Minister

‘Europe must speak with a single voice on certain major issues facing the world,’ Mr Tindemans told us

In a long interview, which he granted to several sub-editors of *La Libre Belgique*, Mr Tindemans first of all addressed political and economic issues (see our editions of Saturday last). This broad assessment by the Prime Minister then moved on to cover international and, in particular, European issues. An account of the interview is given below.

Since the capitals of the Nine are considering, discussing and, at times, criticising the report which Mr Tindemans recently presented on the future of the European Union, it is quite natural that most of our questions related to that report. The Prime Minister thus had an opportunity to respond to certain criticisms, in particular those concerning the controversial subject of a ‘two-speed Europe’, but also those regarding majority voting, the powers of the European institutions and defence issues. From there, we expanded the discussion to question Mr Tindemans about the state of détente.

All this demonstrates that the Prime Minister considers his report on the European Union to be a fundamental vision consistent with the Treaty of Rome. It also shows that, in his view, if Europe wishes to affirm its identity, it has to speak with one voice in the areas which it selects and to accept the consequences of so doing.

— *You are called the ‘wise man’ of Europe. Do you like this title?*

— I think that it’s a label that people put on you partially for the sake of simplicity. I’m sure that, if I’d been a complete idiot, no one would have called me one. But I wouldn’t go as far as saying that I was a ‘wise man’, although I very much appreciate the confidence that my colleagues have placed in me.

I’ve been involved in the activities of the European Community for almost 20 years. I’m familiar with its various schools of thought, namely federalist, confederalist, functional or intergovernmental. Therefore, I knew that it was impossible to produce a report on which everyone would agree. As soon as you put forward a proposal, you are categorised as belonging to one school or another and subjected to attacks.

Besides, the expression ‘wise man’ does not mean a great deal per se. I would almost venture to say that, in this instance, it was necessary not to be one. To agree to compile a report on the European Union, it was necessary instead to be an ‘adventurous man’.

— *Nonetheless, some people are criticising your report for being too wise, are they not?*

— It’s only now that people are gradually discovering my report. As they do so, they are realising that there is a fundamental vision. Consequently, the various governments have set to work, and notes on various aspects of European policy, institutions, foreign policy and economic and monetary union have been secretly circulated. A leading specialist on European affairs and, what is more, an extremely intelligent man, told me that he put at 25 % the chances of the proposals set out in my report being implemented.

‘Two-speed Europe’

— *People have seen, or believe that they have seen, in your report a re-emergence of the ‘two-speed Europe’ advocated by Mr Brandt. How is it that they have picked up on this vision of Europe when the example that you cite in your report is that of the Benelux arrangement?*

— During the address that I gave to present my report to the press, I sought to illustrate the section on economic and monetary union by talking about a convoy. This image has probably given rise to some confusion. As soon as you talk of a convoy, two speeds are imaginable.

However, during my press conference, I tried to explain that, before setting out, everyone had to agree on a

final port of destination. If, whilst under way, you notice that not all the engines are working at the same rate, you still do your utmost to reach the port of destination. And you also place escorts around the vessels whose engines are working less well in order to protect them more effectively. That is what is known as the 'Community procedure'.

Therefore, what I am proposing is the exact opposite of a 'two-speed Europe'. That is what exists at present. Some countries are members of the currency snake and some are not. I propose making the currency snake a Community project and involving the Commission in it. The Commission could then play its normal role, which is to submit proposals. We shall then jointly define the policy to be pursued and determine the assistance to be granted to those who are unable to adopt or apply the measures which we have jointly agreed.

I was able to explain this during the 'Congress of Europe' which was held last week. Some welcomed it as a revelation, although it was merely an explanation of what I had said previously.

— *Your report proposes returning to what is set out in the Treaty of Rome, namely majority voting. However, this appears to pose problems for some. Do you genuinely hope that, one day, it will be possible to apply such a procedure?*

— I do indeed. Majority voting is enshrined in the Treaty, and it is clear that, sooner or later, people will realise that it is essential. Moreover, at the 1974 Paris Summit, President Giscard d'Estaing put forward two proposals on behalf of France: election of the European Parliament by universal suffrage and a return to majority voting.

There is now criticism of the fact that, in the chapter of my report on foreign relations, I state that the best way for Europe to affirm its identity is to speak with a single voice on certain major international issues. We shall have to select the area in which we intend to speak with a single voice. Once that selection has been made, we have to accept the consequences of it. That is what majority voting means.

It is obvious that, if we choose to speak with one voice in the North-South dialogue, we shall have to contemplate the consequences of such action. Therefore, if we enter into such dialogue as a Europe which speaks only when unanimity has been achieved, we may well lose our voice altogether.

— *The reactions caused by the section of your report on defence issues appear surprising since you put forward no proposal on precisely that matter.*

— That is true. Moreover, I believe that these initial reactions are perhaps ascribable to the British *Guardian* newspaper. The day before my report was presented to the press, it thought that it was in a position to provide a summary of my report. In this would-be 'summary', which was very brief, it referred four times to a common defence policy.

In actual fact, in my report, I merely state that a full-scale European union has to include a common defence policy, but I immediately add that, at present, it would appear impossible to put forward any proposals on this matter. Opinions on this issue in Europe are too divergent.

On the other hand, I state that it is impossible to speak with a single voice on major international issues if there is no joint security assessment. Europe spoke with a single voice at the Helsinki Conference on Cooperation and Security in Europe. Does not such action presuppose at least a joint review of security issues? Moreover, the dispute over the EDC (European Defence Community) has left very bad memories in several Member States.

[...]

In your report, you propose that the future President of the European Commission be appointed by the European Council and that he choose the members of his team in consultation with the Council. Will that not reinforce the 'intergovernmental' faction both within the European Council and the Commission?

— On that matter, I have remained fundamentally true to the philosophy of the Treaty of Rome. If I had not done so, I would have certainly caused a war between the various schools of thought.

Whether we like it or not, there is now a new element in European integration and that is the European Council. Some consider that there would no longer be any authority without it. Others take the view that it spells the end of all the subtle mechanisms provided for in the Treaty of Rome. I have taken account of this, and that is why, in inserting this new body into the European institutions, I also stipulate the conditions under which it may meet, which body which will be responsible for implementing its decisions and what its relations will be with the Commission. However, at the same time, I propose that, when the Council discusses an issue, the European Parliament should also be entitled to debate it.

As regards the Commission, there are also at least two schools of thought. In the view of some, the Commission should become the future executive body, in the view of others, a committee of senior civil servants. It is clear that any strengthening of the role of the European Council weakens the Commission. However, the philosophy of the Treaty of Rome requires the Commission to ensure that the European ideal is respected and that the 'small' countries are not crushed underfoot. I therefore propose that the European Council appoint the President of the Commission but also that he be endorsed by the European Parliament. Precisely by doing so, I accept the role of the Council and also strengthen that of the Commission. It is the standard principle of the Treaty that is being upheld.

Others criticise me for not having proposed that the entire Commission be endorsed by the European Parliament. I believe that the composition of the Commission will have to be pluralist for a number of years to come. If it were endorsed by an elected Parliament, there would be a great risk of a majority forming to appoint the Members of the Commission. That is a risk that the European Community cannot afford to run at present.

The delegation of powers

— *You say that you are fundamentally attached to the philosophy of the Treaty of Rome. In your view, is the delegation of powers that you propose consistent with this philosophy?*

— Yes. The more parties there are, the greater the likelihood of an agreement not being reached. Furthermore, with the present system of a rotating presidency, we don't always find the right person or method for conducting certain negotiations. The system of delegating powers remedies this situation. It could also be a partial response to those who refer to certain weaknesses in the present system in order to propose something different.

— *This week, the Council of Ministers for Foreign Affairs approved Greece's accession to the Community. Are you not concerned by such enlargement?*

— You have to know what you want. The Treaty provides for the possible accession of all those who undertake to comply with it. It is necessary to remain faithful to the Treaty. Having said that, it is clear that, the more parties there are, the more difficult it is to reach conclusions. And, in future, decisions will be even more difficult to take. Consequently, it will be necessary to specify the terms for accession very clearly in order to avoid any misunderstanding.

— *Is there not a danger that this will lead to a two- or three-speed Europe?*

— It is true that a new accession poses a problem. There will be a need for a transitional period and, possibly, additional measures to enable the new applicants to catch up with their future partners, as was the case with the countries which most recently acceded.

'The other Europe'

— *At the ‘Congress of Europe’ Mr Mitterrand criticised you for having ignored relations with ‘the other Europe’ in your report. What would you say to him in response?*

— The Soviet Union has not yet recognised the Common Market as such. Therefore, the problem of special relations with Eastern Europe does not arise at present. On the other hand, it does arise with the United States. In 1962, Kennedy spoke of partners on a basis of equality, but the development of Europe has not allowed such equality to be established. There is nothing to prevent us from being competitors, partners and allies at the same time, and we have economic and monetary problems that we share. That is why I propose that we study the nature of the relations that need to be established with the United States. President Giscard d’Estaing confirmed this argument by inviting the United States and Japan to Rambouillet. For the West’s economic and monetary problems to be resolved, there has to be agreement between those countries and Europe. That is clear. If I failed to refer to relations with Eastern Europe, it is because I don’t really see how the type of special relationship that is needed with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe could now be established. Moreover, Germany is seeking to normalise its relations with Poland and the Soviet Union. Europe should not intervene in this diplomatic operation.