

'Europe in convoy', from Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (10 January 1976)

Caption: On 10 January 1976, the German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung considers the proposals made by the Belgian Prime Minister, Leo Tindemans, concerning the conversion of the Communities into a European Union, primarily by strengthening the existing Community institutions and developing a common foreign policy.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Eick, Jürgen; Welter, Erich; Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Deschamps, Bruno; Fest, Joachim; Reißmüller, Johann Georg. 10.01.1976, Nr. 8. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Europa im Konvoi", auteur:Kobbert, Ernst, p. 8.

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Europe in convoy

The Tindemans Report is intended to provide a new impetus for the Community

By Ernst Kobbert

Brussels, 9 January

The origins of the Report on European Union by the Belgian Prime Minister, Leo Tindemans, make it something of a curiosity. One of the European summit conferences gave birth to this concept, with the aim of circumventing the old disputes about a Europe of states or of nations or an integrated political community. In December 1974, it was then announced at a subsequent summit conference that precise clarification of the concept of a 'European Union' was required. This was the intention behind the report by Leo Tindemans. The document did not turn into a 'Tindemans Plan'. Some people would have seen the obvious temptation to draw up a bold outline for the further development of the European Community. This would probably have meant the document soon joining previous concepts in the archives.

Tindemans the politician is a realist; he does not submit proposals that cannot be implemented. Nor has he allowed himself to be overwhelmed by the huge amount of documentation that he was able to accumulate on his tour through the capitals of Europe. Instead, he has taken a completely independent position and drawn up his own vision. In the introduction to his report, he writes of a contradiction that has struck him. A number of his partners in the talks had expressed the view that this was an inopportune moment, because the European Idea was going through a crisis phase. In spite of this, almost all of the people whom he met in talks assured him that they could envisage a better future for their countries only as a result of the further development of Europe and that that was conceivable only if the Community is strengthened.

Tindemans assumes here that it is not possible to overcome scepticism and Europe fatigue by proposing possible legal constructs; new and reasonable objectives must be established; his favourite expression is the 'turn-around in the quality' of the European unification project. He also thinks a leap forward is necessary; otherwise, the existing situation, all that has so far been achieved, could not be saved. However, all that is a political problem. The proposals and ideas in the report do not completely rule out some new settlements by treaty, but they are essentially restricted to the framework of the existing arrangements; for the moment, it envisages only a few shifts of emphasis between the institutions.

This is where the first criticism also begins. The proponents of national sovereignty, to which, in France, not only the group of the former Gaullists but also the Communists belong, see red when they hear that the European Parliament should be entrusted with greater powers following direct elections. Tindemans would like to give the European Parliament the right to propose legislation which, to date, has been the sole preserve of the Commission. That would, of course, be a significant step in the direction of what used to be termed the supranational. What is the point of direct elections, if the Parliament elected in that process does not receive a stronger position in the constitutional arrangements. By the second stage of the elections, most of the public would surely have already lost interest. The other shift of emphasis is intended to benefit the Commission. The proposal has already been heard from Chancellor Schmidt that the European Council should elect an outstanding politician as President and then grant him a large degree of freedom in the selection of the other Members of the Commission. In the Tindemans report, the investiture of the President by the European Parliament is also envisaged; this would reinforce his democratic legitimacy. Some observers already see this as the creation of a European government, which would rank above the individual states. A President of the Commission who is no longer just appointed by the governments would no longer have simply derived authority. The point of such proposals is, above all, to make clearer the political character of the institutions, because, as Tindemans puts it, the citizens do not want a Europe of technocrats.

It must be obvious to all that there is no sense in European union if it does not also, one day, bring about economic and monetary union. What is now striking is a shift in the hierarchies, which already emerged earlier in actual practice. It had previously been assumed that the logical development from the customs union would be to an economic union, which would then be crowned by monetary union, and the result of

all this would be political union. A popular expression in Brussels was ‘the effect of material constraints’. So, while the Community was stagnating in recent times on the economic front and even went into reverse as a result of currency upheavals, political cooperation was making significant progress. The Nine succeeded more and more often in speaking with one voice in the international arena. Now Tindemans is placing this cooperation in foreign policy at the top of the agenda in his recommendations for the stages towards European union, and he wants, step by step, to give it the character of a commitment. On the other hand, he views the revival of plans for an economic and monetary union as the most sensitive subject in his series of discussions. Admittedly, almost all his partners in these talks had been convinced that this would be inevitable, but none of them had seen a possible solution at the moment.

The result has been the creation of a proposal which is being somewhat graphically dubbed a two-speed convoy. The countries that feel able to approach economic and monetary union on the basis of the state of their economy should go ahead — and the others should be granted a longer deadline. Some critics see this as a sign of the break-up of the Community. Tindemans, however, is already opposed in his report to the idea that this should be termed ‘Europe à la carte’. It is different from the concept once promoted by Willy Brandt. The weaker countries are to also remain committed to the common goal, they are to sit at the same table as those making more rapid progress and, in addition, are to receive support from them so that they will be better able to catch up with the faster part of the European convoy that has already moved ahead.

The imminent debates on the report to be held in the European Council may also result in other proposals. What is of prime importance is that the turn-around in quality becomes clear and that the European Community is once again able to radiate increasing splendour. No government should be pursuing a European policy with their eyes closed. The outside world is increasingly looking for a ‘European identity’. How can the Community respond to this without improving its own image at home?