

Interview with Leo Tindemans, from La Libre Belgique (2 December 1985)

Caption: On 2 December 1985, on the occasion of the Luxembourg European Council, the Belgian Foreign Minister, Leo Tindemans, replies to questions from the Belgian newspaper La Libre Belgique on the issue of reforming the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 02.12.1985, n° 336. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "Les Douze vers l'Union ou la désunion européenne?", p. 2.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/interview_with_leo_tindemans_from_la_libre_belgique_2_december_1985-en-ea1c423d-3786-4691-882d-fb58b884e930.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

The Twelve on the path to the European Union or European disunion?

Leo Tindemans: no question of agreeing to a 'Union' which would distort an ideal!

Europe has an appointment, this Monday and Tuesday, with destiny. An exaggeration? Arguably so: after all, the reform which is on the table as the doors open for the European Council meeting in Luxembourg is, at best, rather anaemic. An agreement on a minimalist basis is still possible, but, in the event of failure, an answer will have to be found to the fundamental question which is gnawing at the Belgian Minister of External Relations: do people really want to kill off Community Europe?

— *One has the feeling that, in Luxembourg, the European Council will be missing the appointment that it had itself set with the 'European union'. The union that emerges will be a watered-down version at best. Is that your feeling too?*

— If I was in the habit of giving vent to my feelings, I would be tempted to say 'yes'. But the negotiations are not yet over, and, as the Milan and Stuttgart 'Summits' showed, the final sessions can prove decisive. So I do not rule out a change of mood and, hence, the possibility of a worthwhile agreement.

— *That being said, the deliberations of the 'intergovernmental conference' were far from constructive: the lowest common denominator seemed always to find favour, and the Heads of State or Government will, essentially, be served less with reform proposals than with statements of disagreement ...*

— It should not be forgotten that the decision to proceed with the present round of talks was not taken until the start of last summer. And, at the Milan Summit, the decision was taken by seven votes to three. In the meantime, some Member States are still arguing that there is no need to amend the Treaty.

— *But today, the seven in favour also have their differences ...*

'FIRST CLASS.' — That's true. But wisdom may yet prevail. For the Europeans, that wisdom will involve accepting and acknowledging the implications of one obvious fact, which is that they have no alternative but to reach agreement unless they wish to lose their 'first class' status in a few short years.

The doubts and the disappointment are well-founded; from where I stand, it is easy enough to see that the grand idea of integration is at present losing ground more or less everywhere, even in Belgium, even in Belgian political circles. But even if there is, today, little to suggest that the 'Summit' could turn out to be a major milestone in post-war developments, I am unwilling to conclude as of now that the European idea is no longer the main force driving the development of Western Europe.

— *Surely the main error as regards procedure was to leave the main reform effort to technicians who, though highly qualified, were lacking in any real political accountability? Would it not have been better to draw more heavily on the 'Spaak Committee' model of the 1950s?*

— I share that view ... It seems to me that the 'Dooge Committee' could have prepared the way; its members enjoyed the confidence of their prime ministers, were independent of their administrations and were not under any instructions. Initially, at least, the team did excellent work, and it clearly had potential. There is little doubt, on the other hand, that the subsequent reliance on the customary negotiating techniques significantly narrowed the range of opportunities.

— *A number of delegations have let it be known over the last few days that they would not endorse an agreement that fell short of a 'minimum threshold'. As they see it, no agreement is better than a bad agreement. Is that Belgium's position, too?*

— This is something I am still weighing up. In my view, a 'European Union' should encompass the Community as it exists today, external relations, economic and monetary union, a People's Europe and a strengthening of the institutions. If all these elements can be added to the Community, even if it is not done

perfectly, I shall view Luxembourg as a success.

TELLING IT AS IT IS. But if, for example, the treaty to be drafted ignored monetary matters, and if the weight of derogations and provisos were such that it was no longer clear where we were going, then Belgium would be unable to accept the 'Single Act', the great treaty on which we have set our sights. In those circumstances, to talk of the 'European Union' and of transforming the European Council into the 'Council of the European Union' would be sheer deception.

If things came to such a pass, and as I am not a negative sort of person, I would not turn down any advances that were available, even if I found them disappointing in the extreme. However, in that event, I would propose that they simply be recorded in a protocol or a modest ancillary treaty, rather than agreeing on a 'Single Act' devoid of substance. It would always be possible to try to do better at a later date and ultimately merge these treaties.

— *Where would Belgium's sticking point lie?*

— To take external relations first, there would be no point in simply codifying the existing 'political cooperation' without doing anything to improve it. As regards the aim of achieving economic and monetary union, if this is not written into the Treaty, there will be no real move towards 'European Union'.

WHAT KIND OF EUROPE? But the real crux of the problem is to be found in the strengthening of the institutions. I have the very definite impression that the tendency — an unconscious one, perhaps, and, hence, all the more dangerous — is now to curtail rather than reinforce the Commission's role. We are on the way to a permanent intergovernmental 'device'.

This is why I have recently found myself having to repeat on a number of occasions that the stroke of genius with the Treaty of Rome is the interplay between the Commission — whose Members must not have links with their national industries and who are required to further European interests — and the Council, made up of Ministers who are politically accountable to their national parliaments. The balance between the Community and the Member States is ensured in this way. This formula of the 'double eagle' — the Commission proposes, the Council disposes — also provides a guarantee for the smallest Member States.

It was hoped that, with the Community, a specific entity would be created which would not be dependent on the good will or ill humour of one or other of its Member States. If the balance referred to is discarded, if the Commission is downgraded to some sort of secretariat, it may be that we shall be back to the 'Zollunion', the customs union of the 19th century. Is that what we are trying to build?

— *Will you be asking that question?*

NOW OR NEVER! — I already have ... Belgium is not powerful enough to impose anything else. But I would not, simply because it had not proved possible for the time being to secure a majority in favour of continuing to build the Community structure, relinquish an ideal which is, at the same time, the fruit of our wartime and pre-war experience. There is rarely an opportunity to talk about the underlying philosophy, but I am ready to engage in a full-scale debate on that subject, for the Treaty of Rome is, to my mind, a masterpiece! There is no way that I would set that Treaty aside so as to dub 'European Union' something which would betray an idea which I hold dear.

— *Once it had been posited that unanimity would have to be secured at the end of the exercise, was it not inevitable that the substantive questions would not be asked, given that the reluctance of some parties to contemplate supranational or integrationist developments was common knowledge?*

— I remain convinced that it is now or never. It is almost 30 years since Messina; when will the opportunity arise again to amend the Treaty? If we do not succeed in adapting and reinforcing the Treaty, we shall have no option but to ask ourselves certain questions and come up with answers. Would that mean that we wish to abandon the idea of Europe, to go back to the intergovernmental model, to 19th century diplomacy? Would

that mean that cooperation would depend on the political hue of the governments in power, that Europe would float this way and that on the waves of domestic politics?

— *If things do go badly, if even minimum success cannot be achieved, might Belgium propose the holding of a conference attended only by those countries which share its concept of Europe?*

IMPROVEMENT. — That question cannot be addressed for the time being. We have agreed to negotiate as 12 countries round the table; as long as there is still a chance of succeeding, we should refuse to envisage all other options.

— *You spoke of the stroke of genius which you detect in the dialogue between the Council and Commission. But where does that leave the European Parliament, which is trying to elbow its way in?*

— The ‘parallel reading’, which would allow the European Parliament to express a view without wasting its breath, even if the Council did continue to have the final say, would be a significant improvement, at least if account is taken of the negative attitudes generated by the idea of extending the MEPs’ powers. The possibility of the European Parliament approving this solution cannot be ruled out.

— *The initial reactions are rather on the negative side ...*

— That is only to be expected. No parliament was ever born with substantial powers. All parliaments have always had to fight to extend them. The problem is how to develop more democratic arrangements without reducing the Commission’s role. Seen from that point of view, the ‘parallel reading’ is a serious proposal.

Some MEPs regret that something far more ambitious is not being proposed, while others fear that the Community may grind to a complete halt. The European Parliament may dismiss the Commission or refuse to deliver opinions, and that would prevent the Council from taking decisions. But nobody knows what such a total freeze might produce. Would Europe stand to gain or, conversely, would such a development spell the demise of the European Parliament or even of the Community structure as we know it?

— *How do you feel about the Italian Foreign Minister’s assertion that he will on no account endorse any agreement that has not received the European Parliament’s ‘blessing’?*

— I would tend to go along with him. If he means that whatever is approved has to be serious, then I agree.