

Interview with Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb: memories of European Summits (Sanem, 9 July 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Which particular memories have you retained of the atmosphere at the European Summits in which you happened to take part? Do these Summits constitute the real driving force for European integration?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Of the Summits in which I took part, those in Venice and London were interesting — I think I only took part in two, for I have no picture in my mind's eye of any others. I do have a bad memory of the London Summit. It was Mrs Thatcher. The same issue always took centre stage, and it was vital neither to break up nor to give in, so that was not very interesting. I have kept a much more interesting memory of the Venice Summit because that is when, for the first time, a position was taken on the Middle East at Head of State or Government level, so I was to find this problem again twenty years later on. I recall a good discussion where Belgium took a moderate stance, as usual, acting as go-between and seeking a balance. It was an important opportunity. Did we discuss practical issues in a down-to-earth fashion? In Venice, we decided on the composition of the Commission. That was the Summit that appointed Gaston Thorn. My impression was that the meetings were useful and short — I do not recall any long and tedious debates — where the essential things were said and we came to terms with a number of seriously impossible issues. So I regard it as having been positive. It was not yet the time when most problems were transferred to the European Summits and so it was not the time — if I am not mistaken — of lengthy statements. At any rate, we did not discuss interminably all sorts of subjects in which we were not immediately competent or involved. I think it was better thus. Later on, there was a turn for the worse. The Foreign Ministries were dispossessed of their function as coordinators in favour of the Summits. The media turned their attention to the Summits. The role played by the foreign ministers became increasingly difficult. I had been warned: when the Foreign Minister is with his Prime Minister, he is obviously secondary to the Prime Minister, who therefore presents himself and his country as he judges useful or opportune on that occasion. This is true for European Summits; it is true for international visits. I accompanied Wilfried Martens on a visit to the Congo. We did not do everything I wanted, and we did things that I should have preferred not to do, but within the limits of the Prime Minister's autonomy vis-à-vis Belgian diplomatic policy. The most important thing to watch out for is consistency, as seen from the outside. Of course being with his Prime Minister diminishes the autonomy of the Foreign Minister somewhat, just as it is diminished when the specialised ministers, the technical ministers, hold European meetings or direct negotiations. What else can you do to be consistent when problems have been settled on the spot? I can remember, particularly during my period, some problems with Algeria. The Minister for Economic Affairs was negotiating on the subject of gas. Interference from the general policy with this very practical policy did not benefit the general policy; it was the practical problem that prevailed. Unless he is to make a scene, the Foreign Minister has to give the right impression of a group that is sometimes rather disparate in terms of temperaments or concerns. But that is the role played by the Department of Foreign Affairs and its good international relations in political cooperation, because what I say of Belgian officials holds true also for their corresponding colleagues. They know, before they go to the summit, what stance each one will take. They have telephoned each other. They tell them: 'We will go as far as this; we will not go as far as that.' That is the right Europe: you have to go gently. That is why I say that cooperation is sometimes more effective than debate and decisions. All that can be prepared. The many preliminary consultations — we have not mentioned them — the Benelux consultations that we valued were still straightforward in my time. We had some good Benelux consultations. Later on, there were some important differences of opinion between the Netherlands and Belgium and things became somewhat formal. We met because we had always done so, working together to exercise our influence collectively.