

Interview with Paul Collowald: the Hague Summit, December 1969 (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What do you recall of The Hague European Summit, held in December 1969?

[Paul Collowald] When you look back over the years, sometimes you come across certain keywords and, for ten years or so, deepening and enlargement were often mentioned. Later on, you wonder: ‘When did this coupling of strengthening and enlargement first take place?’ Well, it was at The Hague Summit, in December 1969. There the phrase ‘historic turning point’ was also used. I believe that the Community had reached a point... There had been crises: the empty chair crisis in 1969; the British application for membership; the rebuffs by General de Gaulle made in the course of various press conferences; as a result, the atmosphere had become fairly strained. At that point, there were two new factors: General de Gaulle left power of his own accord and his successor was Georges Pompidou, a few months before this summit; in Germany, there was a new Chancellor, Willy Brandt. Therefore, the two leaders of the Franco-German twosome were new to the job and had found themselves in a situation where ‘something had to be done’; that was when we said: ‘Fine. The British seem to be making a move; soon the new man in charge will be Edward Heath.’ He was a European Conservative — yes, they do exist — and all this started off in December, in The Hague, in 1969. The Hague Summit is interesting on several counts. First of all, in itself: the decision was taken to open the door to the British; negotiations were to begin with the Irish, the Danes, the Norwegians, if they so desired. On the other hand, the sine qua non for such a bond was that the whole issue of agricultural financing be settled and put in place, reinforced by Economic and Monetary Union — a first step towards political union — so this was truly a new departure. It was a period of new initiatives, during which the services of the Commission, in the preparations for the summit, played a most important role. Both Raymond Barre, for Economic and Monetary Union, and Émile Noël, as Secretary-General, played a vigorous part in the preparations for what came out of The Hague Summit. Yet we were still in the aftermath of the crisis with France and with General de Gaulle, and the new President of the European Commission, Jean Rey, had the ill luck to arrive in this context, as successor to Walter Hallstein. The upshot was that Bino Olivi, spokesman for the Commission and I, deputy spokesman, went with our President to The Hague in these somewhat difficult circumstances, because the official role of the Commission had been reduced to its simplest terms. There was written into the agenda, at a certain point: ‘For Community business’ — underlined three times — ‘the President of the European Commission shall be received; he shall be allowed to speak for one hour and then be seen out by the usher.’ This is not quite what happened a few years afterwards when, under the same Treaty of Rome but in different circumstances, Jacques Delors, on his own merit, benefited from totally different conditions since he had the support of no less than Chancellor Kohl and President Mitterrand.

Throughout all this there runs a common thread and one can see that, in the history of Europe, there are the texts, there are the circumstances and there are the individuals. The Hague, for Bino Olivi and me, was an unpleasant experience, because it was after all somewhat humiliating to find ourselves in this situation. We did our best. That is to say that the preceding evening we knew what was going to happen. Bino Olivi attended the French briefing, given by Pompidou and his spokesmen; since I spoke German well, I went to the briefing given by Willy Brandt and his staff. Later on that evening, we would draft a report and the following morning we would meet in the hotel of our President, Jean Rey, where I would be given an explanation of what had happened that night. I should say that I do not remember much of those events, but, personally, I do not have happy memories of them. But, Jean Rey coped with it, Bino Olivi and I got our own back, as the Commission’s representatives for the press — ‘our own back’ in quotation marks — because a good Head of Private Office in The Hague and his close relationship with the Foreign Office enabled us to halt proceedings in the press hall for an hour. There were hundreds of journalists there. We had warned the accredited journalists that we got on well with and could trust. The hall was filled to bursting, to the astonishment of the delegations, who said: ‘But the Commission... the President has already come and spoken for an hour... What do you expect to do here?’ ‘We are holding our briefing.’ We explained the position taken by Jean Rey in its entirety, and we could see the reactions of the press attachés of the various ministries of the other States: ‘They have played a trick on us!’ and Jean Rey was delighted how we had handled a rather tricky situation.

One last thing to be said about The Hague Summit, and I think that the memory I have of it has been rekindled by the events of the summer and autumn of 2002, when a convention was held, and someone had the good idea to hold a youth convention in mid-July. I saw some supportive articles that said: 'At last they are thinking of the younger generation!' At which point I thought: 'Well now, I can remember one thing about the The Hague Summit of December 1969.' For, like every summit, it concluded with a statement. I have this statement to hand, and I am sure that everybody has forgotten it. What is in the last paragraph? The last paragraph runs as follows. 'All the creative activities and the actions conducive to European growth decided upon here will be assured of a better future if the younger generation is closely associated with them: the governments are resolved to endorse this and the Communities will make provision for it.' Of course, we can smile a little at it now because it is a strong statement, and the Heads of State or Government kicked it into touch when they said: 'Very well, the Commission can sort that out.' Yes, but Jean Rey took that very seriously; he convened a youth conference in the Berlaymont, and from all that there issued the forum, the European Youth Forum. So, in passing, I should like to recall something that has been widely forgotten.