

Interview with Paul Collowald: Raymond Barre at the European Commission (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Which relations did Raymond Barre maintain with the European business and monetary community?

[Paul Collowald] Raymond Barre arrived at Brussels in somewhat special conditions. Firstly, the way that this took place: since Raymond Barre was an economics professor in Paris, as such, he was occasionally member of a board of examiners. He was taking part in an examining board meeting when a porter told him: The Élysée Palace is calling you on the telephone. Barre, who was sometimes rather mischievous, thought: Somebody is pulling my leg. But he was told: No, it is Burin des Roziers, Secretary-General of the Élysée Palace. He then received the message: The General wishes to see you. I am in the middle of an examination! All the same&very well& but when? As soon as possible. So Barre tells him: Look here, I am in the middle of an examination and I shall be here for the whole morning. Well then, the General will expect you this afternoon. Very well. He went to see the General, Ah, Professor& They discussed various things and then, finally, the General told him: You can think it over, but you have to go to Brussels. To Brussels? Yes. The Commission is in the process of reconstituting itself and merging. You are the most suitable person for this task, because the French Vice-President, as Robert Marjolin had his General-Directorate and all that will be involved in a whole study process and a host of activities; the British have launched another offensive and applied for membership, so the Commission will need someone who can speak& Doubtless the General did not go into the details of the stop and go policy and of the pound sterling, but Barre understood that that was what it was about. That was it. In the end Raymond Barre accepted, and there he was in what was, for him, a virtually unknown universe. He had dabbled in politics because he had been Head of Private Office to Jean-Marcel Jeanneney, Minister for Industry, who, as such, had been responsible for the ECSC. Therefore Barre did not arrive there as a complete innocent, and furthermore he understood the political aspect, but he often used to say, somewhat coquettishly: I am no politician which is quite a different matter from being a political figure, I am well aware. He arrived in Brussels where he had an adorable Head of Private Office, Jean-Claude Paye, who was to become Secretary-General of the OECD and who rang me to say: Look here, I have been given an Organisation Chart; it provides for a spokesman, and also an assistant spokesman: that is you. You are the one who dealt with Marjolin; you will deal with Raymond Barre. Good, I said, That's fine. Come then.

There was then the first interview and Raymond Barre, in his rather mischievous way I think he had some trouble with his eyes, because he sometimes blinked a bit like this, but he had a really searching expression that was at the same time mischievous he said to me

e: Right, Collowald, tell me all about the press here. That is your field: what is going to be the hard part? At any rate, he told me, it won't be easy for you, because I have arrived here in a state of original sin. I said: Mr Barre, I too am in a state of original sin, like you. No, no, it was General de Gaulle who appointed me, and it is well known from the comments that I have already come across in the English and German press, and elsewhere: The General has sent Professor Barre to & here we have to find an acceptable phraseology to keep a close watch over the British dossier. Since it was well known that the General was not particularly open where subjects like the arrival of the British were concerned, for one day he said: I want England stripped naked, it thus had to be someone who understood the economy and monetary matters, and so forth. So I said, If that is original sin, it is true that it is a new way of looking at things, but I understand you absolutely. You are quite right; it will not be easy, for the English will launch bitter attacks, while the Germans are extremely upset by certain aspects of what is happening at the moment. We must not forget that in 1967 we were very close to the empty chair crisis; that Jean Rey, who had been the President of this merged Commission, had been given the go-ahead by the Élysée he had successfully handled the Kennedy Round, which somewhat went against the Americans but we were still in this post-crisis period, nonetheless. The German press had received the fact that Walter Hallstein had been dropped with some bitterness. Hence, this was a new phase. Everybody was thinking: The General does what he likes: he sacks Walter Hallstein; there's the empty chair crisis; he won't have the British & Then, as usual, he's very crafty: he sends Professor Barre there's going to be a fine battle with the British. We discussed this and then he said: Right, let's get down to work. Who are the important journalists? I replied: Well, since we mentioned the German press, there is a quite remarkable journalist working for the <ita>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,</ita> Herbert Götz. Then I mentioned a few names and he said: All right, let's look at the diary. We'll arrange a meeting. Tell him that I am prepared to meet him. Herbert Götz was delighted, because his background was as an economist as he explained to me, which meant that since Herbert Götz did not speak French well, and Barre did not speak German well, I acted as interpreter, and at times I noticed that these were specialists who were talking. I, of course, knew who Schlumpeter and others were, but I should say that it dealt at a fairly advanced technical level with the thoughts on economic and monetary progress of the new Vice-President responsible for this area in the Jean Rey Commission.

We continued with this type of work, and from time to time, like all the Members of the Commission, Raymond Barre was invited to make a statement or a speech. I saw a lot of my colleagues of other nationalities, and as we had been told at the time, Smoquina, the spokesman, and later on Bino Olivi, had always said to all the Members of the Commission: We have plenty of work of our own, so don't take us for members of your Private Office; we are not your hacks and we are not going to write your speeches for you. There were always exceptions and I said to myself: This is going to interest Ray

mond Barre. I shall see what his reaction& But it was very simple. The problem was dealt with in a manner biblical in its simplicity. Raymond Barre picked up his pen and always wrote all his speeches himself. Never any speechwriter! He had this tiny, fine handwriting. The only thing was that when I went with him, for one reason or another, I said to him: Look here, Mr Barre, if one wants something done, it's better to do it oneself, so please give me your speech, or just part of it, so that I can prepare a summary that I shall show you, because that will be the dispatch for *France Presse* or for the others there who are in a hurry. If you want a message, or three points to get through& At that time I received his speeches before everybody else, naturally, since I was writing the summaries but I never wrote the least thing for Raymond Barre. In the lives, therefore, of the Members of the Commission, this was an exception.

Raymond Barre then began to get involved with this dossier and the negotiations got under way with a certain amount of difficulty. Concerning the noteworthy episodes, as we saw positive responses on one side or the other, we could also see where the greatest difficulties would lie. We were wondering when the moment of truth would arrive. Well, it arrived in a manner that was something of a surprise, but this followed the natural order of things since what had been set in motion for the new negotiations with the British was the consequence of another chapter, that of The Hague Summit of December 1969. That was where the decision to move towards openness was taken since, by that time, life together was proving difficult. I have in mind an article by Michel Debré who said that we have to settle things now; our household is in danger and enlargement took place in that context. But in the lead-up to enlargement, there were two successive phases: firstly, the green light had to come on for British entry, and secondly, what could come under the heading of Economic and Monetary Union, and that is where Raymond Barre played a very important part: initially, there was what is called the Commission memorandum, but it was the Barre Plan, of February March 1969, which was practically at the heart of The Hague summit decisions as the Economic and Political Chapter, and that is certain. The Commission did not play a major official role at the time, for various reasons that we can come back to, but, fundamentally, it was Raymond Barre who led the whole of this operation.

So, to cover this history in a series of major steps forward: there was the green light in December 1969; the negotiations, 1970-71; and we are now at 1971. At this point there was the Heath-Pompidou meeting in Paris, in May. There at the Heath and Pompidou summit they talked and it was clear to see that a conclusion had to be arrived at. There was then a meeting in Luxembourg, which I attended, on the Kirchberg in the Council of Ministers building, where, at the opening of the meeting this was in mid-June 1971 ironically, it was Giscard d'Estaing who said: This is the French position. It was the green light that did not exactly sweep aside, but it did erase completely the fairly tough and abrupt Barre dossier, made in the n

ame of the Commission, because he reckoned that the Commission was working on this delicate dossier and that this was a political decision. I used the word ironically because eventually, a few years later on, the President of the Republic called on Raymond Barre to become Prime Minister. Well. But on that occasion I think that the consequence of this Government action when Pompidou said: That is enough. Let's go ahead. is that Barre, and perhaps here he showed his professorial side, as Vice-President of the Commission, said: No, this is quite unacceptable. We have studied this; we have objected to various points; these objections have not been answered, yet we are told: The dossier is O.K. It's complete. Raymond Barre was furious and he was unable to hide this as he left the Council of Ministers building. On the Kirchberg, at the exit to the building, there are steps there; it was June, the sun was shining, and the journalists were waiting & I cannot recall the two or three sentences that Barre spoke exactly, for I did not learn them off by heart. The journalists Philippe Lemaître for *Le Monde* and others were there to take down Barre's reaction and then his assessment: That's it. The negotiations are over. And so on. That day I understood that Raymond Barre could never become President of the European Commission, for it was a question of the President of the Commission, following enlargement, being French. I believe that President Pompidou felt that Raymond Barre had criticised him almost publicly and the result of all this was it was a member of Pompidou's Private Office, François-Xavier Ortoli, who became the first President of the European Commission. I cannot give you written evidence of this, for I do not think that it has been written down anywhere, but I am not alone in coming to this conclusion.