

Interview with Catherine Lalumière: reservations in French society towards the accession of Spain and Portugal to the European Communities (Paris, 17 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Do you remember the debates which took place in France regarding this possible accession?

[Catherine Lalumière] Of course. I would even say that it left a great impression on me. In France — and you will see that what we experienced with the accession of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe on 1 May 2004 is nothing new — the French people are very, very reluctant when it comes to increasing the number of guests at the table. We are not very hospitable, not very open. In 1984–1985, in early 1985, there was a real uprising in the southern regions of France, in particular in the agricultural, wine-producing and fisheries sectors. The Spanish fishing fleet was seen to be excessive and, as a result, a formidable competitor.

This caused the general public as a whole to be hostile and to show their hostility. You will no doubt remember that the Community, aware of these difficulties in the south of France but also in Italy and in Greece, had devised a special aid programme, IMPs (Integrated Mediterranean Programmes). The regions in the south of France, including Aquitaine, which is not really Mediterranean but was included with the others, benefited from these Integrated Mediterranean Programmes. And the government gave me the task of selling these IMPs in the main towns and cities in the country's southern regions. I remember these meetings organised by the Prefects, they were rather tough.

There was the Prefecture. The Prefect assembled the representatives of the various sectors, in particular farmers, wine-producers, fishermen, etc. Then I arrived with the civil servants who had come with me and the meetings began, and they were really very, very violent — not physical violence but considerable discontent. I should point out that, during the ratification debate held in the National Assembly, and we can refer to the Official Journal, not only were there speeches against the accession of Spain and Portugal to the Community, but there were political groups who voted against or abstained. However, they now seem to be struck with amnesia. Because our Spanish friends, our Portuguese friends, who have proved themselves to be excellent Europeans ... some French people do not want to acknowledge the responsibility that they had at that time.

I must say that the memory that I have of the ratification debate in the National Assembly ... I could see the members of the Spanish Delegation in the gallery, the entire group, who were there and who seemed shattered by the fierce nature of some of the speeches against their accession to the Community. For those people, there were economic implications, of course, but, for Spain, the implications were primarily political. It was recognition that the regimes of Franco and Salazar were finished, that now the Spanish people had deliberately opted for democracy, for openness, for respect for human rights. And some people were slamming the door in their faces. I must say that ... I have never forgotten that, I think that I shall never forget, no matter how many years go by, because I was not proud of my country.

I think that our view of the situation was really incredibly narrow and, moreover, false. Because, technically, we had negotiated well. When all is said and done, we currently export more agricultural produce and foodstuffs to Spain, for example, than we buy from it. So the invasion of the French market by these products was, quite frankly, very exaggerated. Very, very exaggerated. And we also underestimated the capabilities of the negotiators.