


Interview with Gaston Thorn: Benelux cooperation (Luxembourg, 6 February 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In 1974, you became the Head of the Luxembourg Government and Minister for Foreign Affairs. You remained Minister for Foreign Affairs. In the same year, Leo Tindemans, in turn, became Prime Minister of Belgium. From then on your contacts took place regularly. Do you remember the state that Benelux cooperation was in at the time?

[Gaston Thorn] I should say — and I am aware that this will not please a lot of people and a lot of politicians today — that it was in a better state then than it is now. At the time it was more sacred and more essential for us: for Tindemans, for me, for the Dutch and so on. And we, the participants, spoke of it only with the greatest respect, which is not the case today.

[Étienne Deschamps] What do you attribute this to? Is it, in your opinion, a matter of different generations, a matter of political will on the part of the three countries' leadership or a matter of international circumstances?

[Gaston Thorn] All that you mention contributes to the phenomenon, because, on the one hand, it is true that we thought differently and we saw things differently. Yet I am struck more and more by how difficult it apparently is to get our three countries to think the same way and to see certain things the same way. It reminds me of when de Gaulle said to me: 'Now look here, you lecture us, you tell us that we are poor Europeans. And you, Monsieur Thorn? Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg... What are you waiting for before you become part of Europe, because you can do so?' He spoke about the language, everything, the past... 'And you do nothing.' He was right.

[Étienne Deschamps] Those involved now, as well as the historians, have a somewhat ambivalent view of the Benelux experience; all the more so concerning what Benelux is today, but also as it was during the decade of the 1950s, when it seemed more dynamic and led by more determined individuals. But the term 'ambivalent' implies, however, some successes. Can you recall the benefits that Benelux was able, or might have been able, to contribute to the growing European Union on the one hand, and to the foreign policy of the three countries taken individually or as a group on the other?

[Gaston Thorn] The fact alone was important: for instance – although it was not essential – each time that there was a Council of Ministers of the Community of the Six, all three met beforehand to take stock of the situation. And to discuss things: 'What are we to say? What can we suggest to them? What could we complain of, if need be?' This was already essential.

[Étienne Deschamps] At the time did these preliminary talks, beyond being a friendly meeting of people that knew and perhaps appreciated one another, did they have any real importance or weight when facing the other three, when it was a Community of Six...

[Gaston Thorn] They had real importance and we even met of an evening, separately and before the summit or before the meeting ended. No, they had real importance. What is the Benelux position? And so forth.

[Étienne Deschamps] Were the other governments aware of this, and did they take it into account?

[Gaston Thorn] The others were... One moment, let us distinguish between the two. The others were aware of this, but did they take this into account? I could not tell you.