


# Interview with Leo Tindemans: Jean Monnet and the Action Committee for the United States of Europe (Brussels, 24 February 2006)

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## Interview with Leo Tindemans: Jean Monnet and the Action Committee for the United States of Europe (Brussels, 24 February 2006)

[Étienne Deschamps] In 1960, you effectively became a member of the Action Committee. How do you remember Jean Monnet — the Jean Monnet who today, as you know, is often regarded as having attained mythical status — what memories do you have of the man and his working methods?

[Leo Tindemans] His working methods were highly personal. He was not somebody, and I am not saying this to diminish him in any way, who had studied a great deal, yet he was gifted with a practical understanding and common sense that was extraordinary. He had some experience of working at the League of Nations following the First World War, and he had long been a civil servant.

[Étienne Deschamps] Secretary-General...

[Leo Tindemans] ... at the League of Nations, in Geneva. He noticed, for instance, that unanimity was necessary for all important decisions. He also observed that every time there was a problem at the end, just as a vote was about to be held, a unanimous vote was demanded and there was a deadlock because there were always those who said 'no' or who were... how can I put this...who had the beggar mentality. If you don't give me this or if I don't get this supplement, I will not say 'yes'. As a result, each time everything was brought to a standstill and there was nothing to be done. People made long speeches, some excellent speeches, but no decision was taken. He had lived through all this. Hence his conviction: 'I must fight the idea of reintroducing the unanimity principle in these European negotiations.' There again at his home, in Cognac where the family business was situated, his father was a realist: the family product had to be marketed, so he was well aware... His father told him, for instance: 'When you are travelling, you must not carry a book in your pocket. You have to listen to your fellow-travellers, listen to what they are saying, learn their mentality, how to persuade them, what their concerns are. That is what is important; not what you read in your book.' It is a curious thing, but he was a realist through and through.

[Étienne Deschamps] Very practical...

[Leo Tindemans] Very practical... His mother would say: 'Big ideas are all very fine. But what comes of them? How are they to be applied?' That is what his mother said. That formed my view of Jean Monnet to some extent. The remark is often repeated: 'Towards the end of his life he said: 'If I were to start all over again, I should give priority to culture.' Well, I knew him and I do not believe it. Neither his education nor his interests extended to cultural matters; they were clearly practical.

[Étienne Deschamps] Concrete and practical...

[Leo Tindemans] ... to do with economics and international issues, and so forth. That is what he was like. As for his way of working, he invited the non-Communist parties and non-Communist trade unions to be members of his committee of delegates. They agreed to come. It was terrific: what strength of character — to be able to convince them in such a way that they left the meeting as propagandists for the idea that had just been accepted. When he presented a paper, the cynics would always say that he had not written it himself, that he did not write but always had something...He had a talent for choosing his staff that was strikingly successful, colleagues such as Pierre Uri, Duchêne, and so forth...

[Étienne Deschamps] Van Helmont, Rabier...

[Leo Tindemans] Yes, but it was extraordinary. So he wrote a paper, or had it written; he took responsibility for it, but it was one and a half pages long, a maximum of two pages, never any more than that. His theory was: prepare one memorandum per subject, do not write several pages covering several proposals. Even regarding the Tindemans report — when I was asked to prepare a report on the European Union and how to proceed from the Economic Community to political union — even to me, when I went to Houjarray where he lived in France, in order to present my report to him, he said: 'There are too many proposals in your

document. There are too many proposals, but nonetheless, with a directly elected Parliament and this kind of document, it will go ahead,' he said. One subject, one memo. This was one aspect of Jean Monnet's practical philosophy: how to persuade people. He would think of something, he wrote his memo and he sent it to the members. Then, after a certain time, he went to see the members, to Brussels, always staying at the same hotel in rue de la Loi. I can still see myself there with Théo Lefèvre entering Jean Monnet's suite on the first floor. He did not receive the leaders of the political parties together. Always separately. He never, ever told anyone what his predecessor had said. You could have absolute confidence in him. When you were together with him, criticism was freely accepted but he was able to defend himself very well. He would or would not take account of a point made, then he left for Paris and later there would be a meeting based on the corrected text and a public debate within his Committee. It was only once a majority was in favour that he asked to be allowed to announce it and publicise the content of what he had done. His way of cooperating with these political parties and trades unions was unique, or at least was special, typically Jean Monnet. He had his philosophy; it was very important to him and he defended it because it was his own, it was the product of his experience, both political and that of his life.

[Étienne Deschamps] What status was he accorded when he met political party or trade union leaders? He was not a statesman; was he regarded as a top civil servant, or somebody working behind the scenes? How was he considered?

[Leo Tindemans] It is very strange. He was accepted. Neither his past nor his position were ever mentioned. No, it is most strange. For instance, during the First World War, he saw that ships were loaded in the United States and were still coming to Europe, to Great Britain and France, even during the war. He noticed that these ships were leaving without any cargo aboard. So he said: 'What a waste of time and money. Why not come to an agreement? What is loaded onto ships leaving the United States and arriving in Europe, and what could we load them with in Europe to have a return cargo? And he managed to see the French Prime Minister. He was 25 years old, I believe, perhaps less. Just try to see the Prime Minister to discuss a matter of this type in time of peace. You would never manage it. Yet this Jean Monnet, without influence, without being an ENA graduate or whatever, succeeded in convincing even the Ministers and the French Prime Minister. This was true for others too, such as businessmen involved in commerce or transport — he managed to convince them too. It was a skill that he possessed: he was short, he was no orator, but when he spoke or when he gave a press conference, even the most cynical journalists hung on his lips so as not to lose a single word that he uttered. Little Jean Monnet; when he spoke, others listened in an almost religious silence. That was Monnet, and these were characteristics that were typical of the man.