

Interview with Leo Tindemans: the Tindemans Report (Brussels, 24 February 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] On 29 December 1975, you presented this report and the ideas contained within it to your European counterparts. Can you recall how they received your report?

[Leo Tindemans] My colleagues had imposed two conditions on the publication of this report. Firstly, I should visit the capitals and meet the governments and prime ministers of the Member States and, secondly, I should not publish my text before the publication of a text on European Union that had been requested of the Commission. Therefore in the European Parliament there existed a text, whose rapporteur was Mr Alfred Bertrand — and therefore a Belgian — which the Commission had been asked for. This text had not yet been published; it was published afterwards. What is curious, if I may make a parenthesis, is that even the Commission has never defended its text. I have often asked myself the question: if the Commission rules at a certain point on an extremely important issue, is the Commission not obliged afterwards to continue to defend the text on which there have been so many discussions and exchanges of views? No, the Commission never defended its text later on, which is curious. Therefore there was that text, plus the visits to all the capitals; this gave me the opportunity to meet not only the politicians and the parties of the majority, but also those of the opposition and, for instance, what may surprise you is that later on I had a good relationship with the President of the French Republic, François Mitterrand. When we were at a European summit somewhere, he would leave, because as a result of the cohabitation policy, once the Prime Minister was in place, he would leave. The President of the Republic would return for certain questions of policy that were within his competence, and so forth. Well, if you will excuse my recounting this, it happened that he halted for an instant behind me, behind the seat where I was sitting, to tell me: ‘Listen, this will not do’ or ‘This discussion is starting to bore me’ or ‘Have you no other ideas, because this one is unacceptable’ and this was another curious thing. I have been told this, and one day he told me this himself too, he behaved like this because when he had been in opposition, I had done the ‘Tour of capitals’ and been to visit him. He appreciated so much that I had met him and recognised him in his role as leader of the opposition, that he had retained feelings of — how shall I put it? — yes, gratitude towards me. So, you see, small things sometimes play an important role in life. Then, when the text had been finished, when at last the Commission had published its text and my visits were over, I presented my own text.

It was the greatest disappointment of my life. I still have the documents. I prepared the text, I went to the meeting, I outlined my ideas, I explained slowly and calmly what I had encountered and what I was proposing, what I believed necessary and indispensable, quoting some of my colleagues who had made important statements... And, curiously, in the text I give a definition of political union, and what it is, in six points; well, Giscard d’Estaing, at that moment, addressed the meeting and thanked me, saying: ‘The lion has spoken’ — Leo — ‘the lion has spoken; we have all listened to him,’ and so forth, ‘He has done a good job, but of course times are not yet ripe to embark on ambitious enterprises, and so on.’ In this way he torpedoed, he undermined the very positions that I had set down in writing and that I had just argued. There was very little opposition; there were very few people who followed him or defended me. He was listened to, but clearly it was a surprise for them too. They possessed texts that no doubt came from a colleague who had written a couple of pages in order to say certain things. Some points in the text had not been understood in an orthodox fashion, so I had to add a few explanations, but it was neither war nor peace; let us say that the climate remained uncertain. Then they said to me: ‘We shall regularly discuss the text in order to see whether the time has come to implement one or other of the proposals contained in the text. We shall see. Therefore, every year, in the European Parliament a debate will be devoted on progress in implementing European union.’ I have always said that that should be the most important day in the parliamentary year: the day when Members of Parliament are called to comment on such progress, whether it is belated, good, bad or what have you; well, that day, which exists and must be respected, has never given any good results. This debate has never, ever given anything. It has never been characterised by the excellence of the contributions, the criticisms, or of the proposals made. No. It was dull; it was nothing at all.

Between ourselves, if I may be personal, I attended the presentation of a new book by a French diplomat, Mr Henri Froment-Meurice, a former ambassador. He was the ambassador to Germany after having been the French ambassador to Moscow; so you will appreciate his status — he was not just anybody. He wrote from time to time; he wrote some books on Europe; he published his memoirs under the title of ‘Seen from the

Quai d'Orsay' — therefore from the Foreign Ministry's perspective — in which the Tindemans plan is referred to, as is the stance of the French authorities at the time, and in which it is clearly stated that Mr Giscard d'Estaing wanted to destroy the text on European union. He had hoped to be the European Union rapporteur himself; however, this was someone else, and at the time it was he who knowingly torpedoed the text. I am telling you this because this is an ambassador who is now living in retirement, but a French ambassador who is nonetheless very highly thought of — Germany and the Soviet Union, as diplomatic posts, this is not just anything. This fellow has published his book and justifies what he writes in it. Hence my great disappointment, for I had thought that Mr Giscard was an ally, but according to the best of sources, he had opposed it for reasons that I do not know, but which I have learnt about by reading the book. There. It left me with no great wounds; yet I find it difficult to forget the disappointment that I felt.

Having said that, there were no miracles: nobody said: 'That is accepted; now we shall see what...'. No. But little by little, week by week, month by month, year by year, what was suggested in the text came about. This gives me a great deal of satisfaction, both intellectually and in terms of my political sensitivity — the fact that the work was not done in vain, was not superfluous; on the contrary, I was able to contribute something by doing it, along with my colleagues, who were called on to give their approval. So several of the proposals were put into effect; in fact, nearly all the proposals contained in the text.

[Étienne Deschamps] If you were to single out individual proposals that were particularly original and important for the further development of European integration, what would they be? Among the proposals in the report as a whole?

[Leo Tindemans] First of all, the confirmation of the existence of this Europe. This was not criticised; nobody maintained that what was proposed bore no relation to the reality. No. I mean the need to build this Europe and to continue with this Europe. Secondly, Europe is not only an economic artefact; it also has a political purpose. So it was necessary to do that. Then, Europe was called on to provide itself with a common foreign policy and a common security and/or defence policy. In itself, that was approved. Therefore this page concerning European union, these six points that characterise political union, were approved. This is never said, but this text was approved, these pages were approved. And, as for the rest, what was said was: 'We shall see about that later on.' The idea that this should be done, that it was part of all that, is stated in the text, which is extremely important; and I shall go as far as to say, and repeat, that when, in Maastricht, in December 1991, it was announced: 'Europe wishes to implement a Common Foreign and Security Policy', it was, in a way, a confirmation of what had been stated in the text of the Tindemans report. It had required 25 years, but it was confirmed. Maastricht was very important, extremely important for two decisions: firstly, monetary union: that was declared; secondly, the common foreign policy, foreign and defence policy. That was stated in Maastricht, confirmed, approved and announced. So there you are: the text exists, the ideas exist to create — what shall I call it? — a political wing, which would give this political character to European integration. The politicians in charge needed to be persuaded to go ahead with it. That was important. It was most important, because monetary union was wanted — the decision taken in Maastricht — and, happily, I should say, this was implemented. We now all have European currency in our wallets. But, therefore, when they say: European policy is a policy for peace; never again shall there be war between Member States — when you think of our history and the eternal struggles between France and Germany, and so on, when there is a Common Foreign and Security Policy, a military conflict will be out of the question. It will just not be possible.

So in future, in order to give — what shall I call it? — an impressive colouring to this European integration, a Common Foreign and Security Policy must be implemented. Regarding security: the armed forces and so forth; as for foreign policy: a common stance on the important issues of foreign policy. Here, Jacques Delors Synopsis makes a fine distinction, and I should like to repeat it now; this is because a lot of people — those who are firmly attached to the nation-state, but who, nonetheless, little by little are prepared to accept what has been done for Europe and probably will be called on to give their agreement to certain other proposals — when you say 'foreign policy' to them, they hesitate, for they do not like that. Jacques Delors always says: a 'common stance on certain foreign policy actions.' Therefore, on the Middle East, for instance, we want a common policy, on Korea we want... This is different from saying 'foreign policy.' This therefore enables countries to maintain friendly relations or special contacts or whatever, without abandoning the

basic issue, by saying 'foreign policy joint action'. Therefore, I make this distinction when it comes to implementing a foreign and security policy, for it is important. Not perhaps right now for us, but in future, in this way one could accept ideas that go in the right direction.