

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

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[Étienne Deschamps] 1974 was an important year for Europe, and for you too, since this was the year that the newly created European Council gave you the task of drafting a Report on European Union. Why did the Nine — at that time they were nine — why did the Nine give you this task and how did you deal with it? What was your working method?

[Leo Tindemans] I have no idea why they chose me. I was one of the Nine. It is a question that I often ask myself. The time was ripe for taking an initiative; this is true. We also wanted a political Europe — this was quite clear — but we did not agree on the form it should take. What would this political Europe be like? What needed to be done to have a common foreign policy, a common policy on security or on defence, and so forth? Because these were the terms in which the political character of Europe was expressed. It is often forgotten that, following the success of the ECSC, the Coal and Steel Community, there was a proposal to create a defence community. I think that it originated in the office of Mr Pleven — the French Minister, René Pleven. This was a failure; it was not followed up. In the end, the Belgian Parliament, for instance, approved it, but in France, Parliament — the Parliamentary Assembly — blocked any discussion on the plan. They postponed it definitively, so to speak, and thus there was no vote and no agreement. As a result, you can see how the idea of a political Europe came to nothing. Firstly, the Community; next, this proposal and ... what was to be done? At this point France, I believe, felt obliged to make a proposal. This is when the proposal was made to create a committee led by a French diplomat, Christian Fouchet, who was then Ambassador to Copenhagen, I think. This group was asked to make a proposal and to send it on to the politicians, namely, the Prime Ministers, who would then decide on it. It was rather odd. Civil servants and diplomats were being asked to make political proposals, and it was not the politicians who had a text and were asking the experts to correct it. It was the wrong way round.

[Étienne Deschamps] Furthermore, Fouchet was a Gaullist, so de Gaulle's ideas were well known, and particularly those on the issues in question.

[Leo Tindemans] That is so. He had been the Secretary of the first political party created by the Gaullists. He had spent the war in England, so anyone who took an interest in politics knew who Christian Fouchet was very well. Before leaving France during the war, he was young and a diplomat so he was able to return and continue his career, but, in fact, he was the embodiment of a very marked political tendency. The Fouchet plans did not have any success either. There were three versions and each one was rejected. The text of the third version was never even published, but a doctoral thesis was based on it nonetheless. However, the discussions on these texts, drawn up by these civil servants, incontrovertibly created problems between the Member States, yet things evolved all the same. The second version was different from the first; the third was even more — how shall I put it? — orthodox within the European orientation. I experienced personally — I was present on one occasion at a meeting held in the Prime Minister's residence on rue Lambermont, here in Brussels, where there were present the Belgian Prime Minister, Théo Lefèvre, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Paul-Henri Spaak, his Dutch counterpart, Joseph Luns, and Jean Monnet. And I. At a certain point, Monnet, who always showed great self control — he always kept the same tone when speaking and controlled himself admirably — became angry, yes, he lost his temper and attacked Mr Luns, saying: 'You have rejected it now, but understand that in all your life you will never again have another proposal like that.' I have kept this to myself until now because in certain European circles it is not done to recall it, but Monnet criticised Luns and Spaak for having rejected it, saying: 'You will never again have a proposal dealing with defence and security with all the articles that were in it.' Is that true? Whether it is or not, I do not know.

We were quite alarmed; it was suggested that the Secretariat of the European Union be moved to Paris. We therefore feared French domination which, up till then, had been very strong. We were again in an impasse, in an extremely difficult situation. How could we get out of it? I think that the suggestion of having a report drawn up by a politician, by a Prime Minister and on European Union, answering the question 'How do we proceed from the economic union to a political union? What needs to be done to achieve this?' was, in my view, the inevitable outcome of these failures. Something had to be done; otherwise, we would remain in a

climate of hostility where we regarded one another as enemies. We discussed it, and of course not everyone was very happy or even content, but to be against working on a text on the European Union itself was not such a serious issue for the opposition. Yet, strangely enough, it was the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, who said: 'Tindemans ought to do it.' 'Why?' Some of the remarks I had made had impressed him. Did he consider me inoffensive, or did he say: 'He is orthodox, but harmless'? I have no idea. What was the reason — did he have the idea, or had one of his staff told him: 'Ask for this Tindemans'? I do not know. It was he who suggested it. And the suggestion was accepted. Suddenly, I was the one. Next, I brought together a small working group here. Naturally I had been to see our Permanent Representative, Mr Van der Meulen, the main Foreign Affairs specialists, Mr Davignon ...

[Étienne Deschamps] Philippe de Schoutheete?

[Leo Tindemans] Yes, I shall be coming to him shortly. I even consulted Jean Rey, the Liberal, for whom I nonetheless had enormous consideration and admiration. He was an excellent Commissioner and President of the European Commission; he was pleased to be consulted in his own country, and not excluded. And some others ... Yes, regarding the economy and the monetary issues, I consulted quite a few people. That was the group, a standing group. But we needed to have someone to take up the pen, someone to follow all the negotiations concerning the European Union and to lay down the guidelines. And who was to be given this task? That was the main question. I could not do it myself because it was a job that ...

[Étienne Deschamps] A full-time job ...

[Leo Tindemans] Yes, a full-time job, and it necessitated a great deal of consultation. To do this alone, without any assistance, was not an attractive prospect. First of all you consult the people who trust you, who work with this or that minister, then you go on your own to see the others, because you had to visit all the Member States, which I did, accompanied by some of the group, but not all. Then, towards the end ...

[Étienne Deschamps] And not just the Member States, but also the active elements, the unions, the intellectuals, the employers ...

[Leo Tindemans] Yes, yes. Quite so. Even the students sometimes, the student organisations, and so on. Some names were suggested to me. I already had my eye on two, but it is a delicate matter ... And can one be trusting? Because there was a need for secrecy and therefore to avoid leaks, misplaced remarks, whatever ... It was our Permanent Representative, Mr Van der Meulen, who said to me: 'I know a diplomat who is currently at the Belgian Embassy in Bonn. He is excellent, excellent. So if you are looking for someone well versed in the diplomatic tradition but with fresh ideas, let me suggest that you get in touch with Mr de Schoutheete, and see whether you can work with him.' That is how I came to call on Mr de Schoutheete. In the end there were two of them, for there was a Belgian professor as well. Which one should I choose? In the beginning I asked myself why I should not give the job to both of them. But they would not have it. They said: 'If I do it, I want to enjoy enough confidence not to have to negotiate with other people before being able to draft something.' So I took the decision: 'I will take Mr de Schoutheete.' And I think I made an excellent choice.