

Interview with Charles Rutten: the association of the OCTs with the Common Market (The Hague, 29 November 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] How did the Netherlands respond to Belgian-French demands regarding overseas territories?

[Charles Rutten] The initial reaction was negative. We were then just emerging from our own colonial problems and the agreement with Indonesia on its independence had just been reached. We could see that similar problems were going to arise in Africa and there was no way we wanted to get involved in discussions over decolonisation in Africa.

The Germans shared the same position: it was 'no'. We were quite prepared for agreements on economic relations and maybe also for agreements on some financial assistance, but for a limited period of time to allow for re-negotiation of such accords. In Venice, the French had said, 'We want the conference to deal with this issue from the very outset.' That did not happen, because the French and Belgians did not come with any proposals.

Apparently it was very difficult for Brussels and Paris to agree on what type of relationship with overseas territories to ask for. Don't forget that at that time the overseas territories were still colonies, in the traditional sense of the term. At one point it is true that France proposed the 'French Union' to include all those territories, but in fact they would remain totally dependent upon France.

In Belgium there was still no clear idea as to the future of the Congo and, when the problem was discussed, it was still in terms of the Congo, a Belgian colony. Then there was the Matignon Conference at which the French said, 'Listen, this is so tantalising for us, it is crucial — it was practically the last remaining item — and something must be done, otherwise there will be no treaty.' So there was the Matignon meeting, at which Guy Mollet, the Prime Minister at the time, was under pressure and because the other governments, since we were now practically at the end of the negotiations, wanted to bring things to a close, they wanted to get on with finalising the treaty. And finally, under that political pressure came the Matignon Agreement on the Association of Overseas Territories, but with ... well, the principle behind the agreement had no time limit, but every five years, if I remember correctly, there would be a review of its provisions. That would allow for a possible renegotiation of the substance and the form, etc. But the principle was established. Well, that was the final item in the negotiations and so it allowed us to move on to preparing the finalisation and the signing in Rome.