

Interview with Charles Rutten: the atmosphere at Val Duchesse (The Hague, 29 November 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] The Val Duchesse talks — you also took part in them as the secretary of the Dutch delegation. What are your memories of the negotiations in Val Duchesse, the working methods and the atmosphere surrounding the preparation of the future Rome Treaties?

[Charles Rutten] Yes, that is also an enormous task, because I can't answer all your questions... But in general terms, the atmosphere at Val Duchesse was very positive. Actual conditions were very primitive. Val Duchesse, at that time, was an old building that had remained empty, I believe, for years and years and was in a very bad state of repair. When we began there was only one telephone. Well it was very, very tough, even in practical ways.

Having said that, the atmosphere was very upbeat [within] all the delegations, including the French one, where notably Jean-François Deniau was one of the young but very active members. There was the head of delegation, Marjolin, who was also very upbeat.

The decisions were difficult ones of course, often very technical. It required experts who were familiar with the issues. I remember especially the talks on the common customs tariff which were extremely difficult, drawn out and technical. One of the main concerns, particularly with the Germans and ourselves, was that there was a strong French, Belgian and Italian inclination to create a protectionist customs union with a common customs tariff that was much higher than the one in Germany or the one we had at the time. In fact ours was the Benelux tariff.

In the end, there was a Belgian official, Mr Dubois, who played a really crucial role and managed to get the delegations to agree upon an intermediate level acceptable to everyone. Product by product, it was an awful business ... One list still had to be agreed upon after the entry into force, because it was too difficult to reach agreement beforehand.

That was one of the discussions that I recall very clearly. There were lengthy debates on agricultural issues, institutional issues, transport ... — it was literally a huge undertaking.

Having said that, it was quite fantastic, really, that the delegations reached agreement [in] six months. For such a complex treaty, it was almost unbelievable. Besides the economic and technical aspects, there were also major political problems. There was the institutional problem of course, the question of how the committee of ministers would take decisions, the question of whether there would be qualified majority decisions, what formula would be used for the qualified majority, and what would be the role of the Commission. Well if I was to go into all these details with you I'd be talking for hours and hours ...

There was of course the political problem, which had already been raised in Venice, about relations with overseas territories.