

Interview with André Dubois: the working atmosphere in Val Duchesse (Brussels, 8 December 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What was the atmosphere like in Val Duchesse this time, two years later, between people, some of whom knew one another and were used to working together, and others who were fresh arrivals in the European enterprise? Yet there was undoubtedly a lot of mixing of the two in Val Duchesse itself, given that you were some way away from the centre of Brussels. How did things...? As a Belgian, you must have had a viewpoint on this that was somewhat different from those of the Italian, German or Dutch delegates. Which particular memories have you retained of the atmosphere, during those few months, at or on the fringes of these discussions or these meetings?

[André Dubois] I should say that, as for the atmosphere prevailing during the negotiations, there were two factors determining this atmosphere. The first was the exceptional convergence of political will, which drew together all the Member States in a project that was truly very ambitious at the time. After the failure of the EDC, reviving a plan for customs and economic union was a leap in the dark and something quite unprecedented. So everyone was aware that this was an exceptional opportunity, following the failure of the EDC, to be able to begin again on such a large scale — which had not been the idea at the start. Mr Monnet, for instance, was much more wedded to reviving European integration on a sectoral basis. Historically, I believe that it was the Dutch Foreign Minister, Mr Stikker, whose idea it was...

[Étienne Deschamps] Stikker, then Beyen...

[André Dubois] Beyen, yes, that's it; you know these things better than I do. The other factor determining the atmosphere was, of course, the huge personality of Mr Spaak. It is easy for me to speak thus of him, his being a compatriot, but his role is recognised unanimously these days. As I told you, he put a great deal into it personally, into these negotiations. He observed them closely, day by day... Just as we pointed out with regard to the ECSC, this whole team of high-level officials who were involved in the negotiations, particularly at the level of Heads of delegation and the large groups, were people who had all known the war and were conscious of the importance, as I have said, of making a success of this undertaking after the failure of the EDC. It was also probable, and in my case virtually certain, that such a revival could not be brought about again later on. I should like to emphasise one point here: it is that the lapse of time between Messina and the entry into force of the '58 Treaty was very short, during which time there was this convergence of political will that I was never to experience again, and then General de Gaulle came to power, thus this enterprise could not have succeeded afterwards. It must also be remembered that it was General de Gaulle who took the economic measures that were needed for France to enter the customs union.

So there really was a palpable atmosphere of complicity prevailing; among all these officials, and I believe very swiftly too, both friendship and complicity took root. Very probably the backdrop of Val Duchesse contributed to this, not that it was a château of great architectural quality, but, when we were occupying it, it was in a very dilapidated state. I shall always remember one anecdote that I can pass on briefly... On one occasion the entrance drives needed to be repaired because it was raining and there was a vast amount of mud. The Belgian engineers were summoned, and using their excavators, they brought to light the cemetery of the nuns who had occupied the site beforehand.

The park had probably been a place where many strange conferences had been held and confidences exchanged, and for those who wished to engage in silent reflection, there was the little chapel dedicated to St Anne. So there you have the prevailing atmosphere, with its tense moments, certainly, for there were some difficult issues, but one never had the feeling that things would not turn out all right, and Mr Spaak was always careful to make political objectives prevail over technical problems. When he came to an impasse with an expert on a technical issue, we waited for one of Mr Spaak's angry outbursts, which occurred frequently and were sometimes feigned and sometimes not, and the experts knew very well that in fact there was someone pulling political strings, and he would go over their heads to contact the governments in order to sort things out.