

Interview with Georges Berthoin: the political activities of Georges Berthoin in London (Paris, 22 July 2005)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What you say is most interesting for I think it demonstrates very clearly just how you perceived and exercised your role as representative of the High Authority and, later on, of the Commission in London. In concrete terms, how did you put your ideas into practice when among your British associates?

[Georges Berthoin] The answer is rather delicate. It is delicate because it forces me to talk about myself, which is not something that I enjoy doing. Nor was this our custom. However, I very soon realised that Luxembourg and Brussels would never issue proper diplomatic instructions. Also that London was an essential European and global crossroads. And that the job of managing the Association Agreements was not very absorbing. There is something that surprises certain academics who have asked me this question. I was chargé d'affaires for two years before Mr van Kleffens was found — a very eminent Dutch statesman, a former Foreign Minister of the Dutch Government in exile, President of the UN General Assembly, all in all a great jurist — who came, who was European, or rather, who was not in the European teams but who brought a measure of authority and prestige to the work of the delegation. I discussed this with him and I said to him: 'Leave it to me!' This was because, as a Foreign Minister, he was waiting for instructions from Luxembourg and Brussels, and there never were any. For 17 years there never were any instructions. You see, an Ambassador receives instructions every day. So, when he says in the course of conversation: 'Personally, I think that ...' it comes from the telegram that he has just received. So I acquired the habit of saying: 'I think that ...' But, in my case, it really meant: 'I think that'. So when the negotiations were settled in this six-month period, I invited the great mandarins of Whitehall for a luncheon meeting. As Ambassador, I was well equipped to receive them, and I was told: 'It is most interesting; we never managed to fathom the instructions that you received.' They had really done all they could to do so. I replied: 'That's because I never received any.' They were furious. 'What?' 'No,' I said. So what was it all about? I explained to them: 'You see the reason is that, right from the start, the thinking within Jean Monnet's team was so moulded and impregnated by what was expected of us, what had to be done and how it was to be done, that we needed no instructions.' But this runs completely counter to acceptable classic diplomatic discipline. I recognise that.

I also held conversations in private. The Prime Minister came for luncheon. I was the number two at the time. It was bizarre. Other Ambassadors or number twos were perplexed ... I know that at one point the French were asking one another: 'Who does he take himself for?' I did not take myself for anyone. The cause that I was defending was what was important, not me. The result was that it was politically coherent. I regularly spoke to Jean Rey, Mansholt and Hallstein, but privately. Not like a civil servant. Monnet too, of course. I was always meeting Monnet. I met him here in avenue Foch; he came to London. He was in his hotel, and I would always lend him a car with an elderly driver — a former British army colonel. So we were taking part in what I might call a sort of European maieutic process, creating a European strategy.

On the strictly technical level, we did compile technical reports. One of these became fairly well known, for there was someone in Brussels who was a very interesting man, Maciotti, I don't know whether ... At any rate, Maciotti was a genius. He could read Chinese. Well, he read the journals coming from Hong Kong, etc. and from reading these journals he came to the conclusion that the Chinese were going to explode a nuclear bomb as an experiment. I was chargé d'affaires at the time and he said to me: 'I am certain that they are going to explode it. Will you sign the report?' I said: 'Right. So you are ...' I then signed the report announcing to the EEC Commission and to Euratom that there would be the atom bomb. I can tell you that I received comments from the President of Euratom telling me: 'Look here, be a little more careful. This is not very reliable.' Then China exploded the atom bomb three months later. Well, that was quite something, after all.

This is just to point out that we were concerned with lots of other things as well. I spent a month in Moscow. I had been invited there by a friend from the French Embassy there because there was an exhibition on. I had all the Soviet contacts at that time. Next they sent me to Latin America; after that, to Iceland, and so forth. It was all to do with foreign policy, but at a practical level. It was conducted — much more than London was prepared to acknowledge — with a total lack of discipline. But this was incomprehensible for the traditional diplomats from the Foreign Office or from the Member States. So it was rather anarchic, perhaps, but,

strategically speaking, well targeted.

I shall give you an example. When there was de Gaulle's veto in January 1963 — it was in January 1963 — I held a meeting [at my residence]. I was number two at the time. I invited the president of the workers' unions of the Community, Kohnstamm, a whole series of people, Macmillan's diplomatic advisor and everyone. No French. And all those people explained to the British that despite ... — because they thought that de Gaulle's veto would anger everybody and that the Community was going to explode — they explained, the Dutch, the Belgians, the Italians who were there, all people carrying a lot of weight, that the Community would carry on. I know that this meeting angered the Prime Minister enormously. And he believed that I had been manipulated by the Quai d'Orsay, whereas this was not so. I have never, ever, been subject to any such attempt, or received the least instruction from the French Ambassador.

There was one case where I met the Ambassador out of courtesy: it was Chauvel, then Geoffroy de Courcel. There was one instance where, before I met someone, I consulted the French Ambassador. It was during the Algerian war, when I met one of the leaders of the FLN who wanted to see me. That was very interesting. He wanted to see me — a Labour MP acted as intermediary — and when he arrived, since I had been in the Resistance I knew about these things, I said to him: 'I shall receive you and I shall not ask your name.' We talked for five hours. Morning came and I invited him to lunch but he replied: 'No, I will not have lunch with you; we are enemies.' But the fundamental question that he was posing was: 'Once Algeria is independent, will it be able to remain in the Common Market?' Because as a French territory, it was in the Common Market. We talked about everything. But on that occasion, before receiving him, since at the time there was the Franco-Algerian drama, that was the only case where I said to the French Ambassador: 'Should I ...?' And I spoke of the conversation and I told the representative of the FLN that I would speak to the Ambassador. That was the only case.

I can give another example to show you just how many things we were involved in. I took part in negotiating for peace in Vietnam. I was in a marvellous situation, able to enjoy this freedom with Senator Fulbright, with the Pentagon and so on, to such an extent — I was still number two at the time, which was most imprudent — that Ambassador van Kleffens, an extremely prudent and experienced man, produced a note on the possibilities for peace in Vietnam. So you can see what a wide variety of things we did there. But all this was accepted because it was done most discreetly, with absolutely no desire to seek the least profit for oneself — I never did so, for personal publicity never interested me. Some people live for that, but it never interested me. I always refused, and as I said just now, until a few years ago, I did not want to be interviewed; except for when I had to appear on English or American television for professional reasons, but that is different. But now one has to do so for the record. One is so much freer when one is not a public figure; in that case one no longer belongs to oneself, but to one's image. It is the image that takes one over. But it was very effective.

And Hallstein understood this very well; for this is why Hallstein had some arguments with de Gaulle. He received Ambassadors with decorum. When he went to Washington he stayed at Blair House. President Eisenhower treated him as a Head of State. De Gaulle did not like that. (There was a personal bond between Hallstein and myself.) Hallstein thoroughly enjoyed it. I used to send him notes to a private address and not to the Commission, because he lived quite alone — at least in Brussels — and I met him regularly and told him lots of things.

For instance, I worked for rapprochement between the Anglican Church and the Vatican because we had European friends who belonged to the Anglican Church Council. This was because the church was against Great Britain's entry into the European Community as the Anglican prayer books are voted on by the British Parliament and they were afraid that they might no longer be able to ... I met the Archbishop of Canterbury, and made a contribution, without being mentioned, to a report published by the Anglican Church Council. The Church of Scotland was even more hostile. I went to the Vatican to prepare for the Archbishop of Canterbury's visit, and there was the famous photo of the Archbishop in the Sistine Chapel with the Pope. So you see, it is a long way from coal and steel. But it just shows you how exciting and useful it was, how it provided me with so much experience, and, needless to say, it gave rise to incredible jealousy on all sides. But that is life. But I am sure that, thanks to the crossroads that was London then, I was able to bring one

small stone to add to the edifice.