

Interview with Catherine Lalumière: making contact with Community circles (Paris, 17 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] And this Europe that you encountered in Brussels — you gradually learnt how it operated. Did it correspond with your previous ideas of Europe, given that to a certain extent you were outside these debates and these Community circles?

[Catherine Lalumière] Yes, honestly I had no training in European affairs. I was a lawyer, but one specialised in French public administrative law, so I had very little to do with European issues and my lack of knowledge was considerable. I had to learn fairly rapidly. And not only did I learn a certain number of things, but I was impressed, very quickly impressed, by the scope of the decisions that we had to take. It was something that I had not properly gauged before. It was then that I realised that these decisions were really constructing a new society.

And I discovered — and at that time it was very clear — the quality of the people working in these European institutions. The Secretariat of the Council at the time was led by the Secretary-General, Émile Noël, who was the archetypal senior official devoted to Europe, who had a sense of what was in Europe's general interest and combined a perfect knowledge of current issues and a perfect ease in finding compromises and ways out when an issue seemed to have reached a deadlock. And behind all that lay a genuine European conviction — he wasn't just a technocrat who was only familiar with the techniques involved in procedures and issues. This was really someone who was motivated by a European spirit. I must say that people like that, with several fundamental qualities, fascinated me, and Émile Noël and those who worked with him in the same spirit had a very great influence on me, that is clear.

I fear that it is something that is increasingly difficult to find as time passes.

[Étienne Deschamps] It is doubtless — and this is not the only reason — but it is doubtless also a generational question. People like Émile Noël ...

[Catherine Lalumière] Of course, and this is a genuine political problem for the European integration process. The process was masterminded and envisaged by men and women who had experienced the war, who had thought a great deal both about the spirit of Europe and also about the demons of Europe, which have been capable of the best and the worst through the centuries. And these people, who were familiar with history and who had studied throughout the war the ways to prevent horrific situations from emerging at regular intervals, were fully equipped with ideas and principles to follow and were clear about what should be done and what should not be done. This generation, which we might call the generation of the pioneers of European integration — whether these people had political responsibilities or were officials or senior officials — they breathed life into this integration process. Perhaps afterwards things were rather different ...