

Interview with Catherine Lalumière: the workings of French diplomacy in European policy matters (Paris, 17 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Mrs Lalumière, I would like to talk to you about the workings of French diplomacy in European policy matters. You told us that President Mitterrand, as President of the Republic, set the course, set the major objectives. Of course, the Foreign Minister had authority in this area because it was foreign policy, and obviously the State Secretariat for European Affairs also had its own views. How were both the decision-making and, during negotiations, the defence of this joint position adopted by France organised?

[Catherine Lalumière] The account that I am able to give requires a variety of factors to be borne in mind; it was, after all, the experience that I had, personally, at a given time and at the time of the Presidency of François Mitterrand. What I have to say isn't necessarily valid today, because the personal equation of the individuals involved played a part. This institutional millefeuille can often seem rather mysterious — who does what, how does it come together, and so forth. This is what I experienced in the field of European policy during the period 1984, 1985, 1986: at the top, there was a President who was hugely involved in European issues and had very clear ideas. We really had an undisputed leader who was ready to get involved at all times, so it was a very comfortable position. This is what I always maintain: it is a very comfortable position, when one is at a lower level, to have someone at the top who has clear ideas, determination, who shows the way. Of course, if there were to be a real conflict, the person at the lower level would have only one option and that would be to resign.

But that wasn't the case; indeed, I was very happy with the guidelines that were given from the top. So it was clear: there was just one leader, there weren't dozens of them. At that time, the Prime Minister was not particularly involved — it was really the President. Then came the Foreign Minister; at that time, not only were European Affairs not independent from Foreign Affairs — they were still part of Foreign Affairs — but the new Foreign Minister, Roland Dumas, had previously been responsible for European Affairs, and that was something that I had to bear in mind.

Clearly, Dumas had launched a whole series of things: for example, the negotiations for the accession of Spain and Portugal. So if I had arrived as State Secretary with the idea that I was going to be completely independent from the Minister, that would have been absurd. Once again, had there really been a fundamental disagreement, my only option would have been to leave, to resign. So the fact that the Minister was interested and would continue to be interested in European Affairs was clear — it didn't come as a surprise to me — it was obvious.

And then there was the State Secretary. One might ask, 'Well, what was there left for him or her to do?' In practice, Roland Dumas was very interested in European issues, but he also left me considerable freedom because he could not do everything — there was the question of relations with the United States, with the Soviet Union, and so on; significant issues. And what did he actually ask of me? He asked me to inform him if a new problem arose; to brief him on what we had done, day by day, on a daily basis, on the eve of important meetings. I must say that briefing him did not take much time because he was someone who grasped ideas very quickly and as long as I was able to summarise the main points, he would grasp the issue like a lawyer who knew his job very well and very quickly. Then, once he had taken a leading role in meetings at his level, he asked me to implement the decisions that had been taken. This meant that I had to understand quite quickly and be shrewd enough to implement them properly. Overall, these three levels, during the period that I am familiar with, seemed to me to work very well. Of course, this meant that I could not allow myself to try to act in complete independence from those who were above me. That would have been stupid, really stupid. And what made it effective is that I believe that the three levels fitted well together and that each had a role to play at its own level. Of course, that makes me wonder what would have happened had there been different visions. I think that in that case this would have led to paralysis, it would not have been able to work. But I was fortunate that, as it turned out, there was no inconsistency. That was important with regard to the other Ministries, very important.

You know, when people sometimes say that the Ministry of the Economy and Finance always wants to do its own thing — well, it's true, it's a real French problem. If the humble European Affairs representative is

aware, and everyone is aware, that behind this humble European Affairs representative — me, at the time — there is the support of the President, the atmosphere of the meeting changes. On the other hand, if, in the higher spheres, things are hazier, everyone is aware of that too. And, faced with a Finance representative, the unfortunate European Affairs representative does not measure up.

This also has an impact with regard to the partners in the Community. I think that, at the time, France's voice in European matters was consistent. During 1985, we were also fortunate to have Jacques Delors at the Commission. So given all those elements, and with all those people working together, directly or indirectly, this led to consistency, something that is utterly vital in this field. That is what I can tell you.

Your question also referred to diplomats and officials. I must say that I have very positive memories of my work with the officials — of whom there were not very many because the teams were very small — who worked on European issues. There was my cabinet, of course, but also this economic cooperation service, the small structure within the French Foreign Ministry, which monitored European issues, and also the SGCI [the Secretariat-General of the Interministerial Committee for Questions on European Economic Cooperation]. I found that there were not many people, but they were people who were very competent and with whom it was a pleasure to work. I really didn't have any, any ... — of course, there were those with whom I particularly had a lot in common, but overall I found that it was a very pleasant working environment and they really taught me a great deal in terms of European affairs.

I should also mention the role of the Permanent Representative to Brussels. The issues on which he worked were known perfectly by the officials, from the Ambassador to the second-in-command and the advisers in each section, and it was also very pleasant to have people who knew the issues perfectly, who were familiar with the difficult areas and who could give advice — while leaving the final decisions to the politicians — on the advantages and disadvantages of such and such a position. I would say that that was the highest level for a civil servant to attain: to be capable of saying to politicians, 'If you do this, the consequences will be so and so; if you do that, they will be so and so.' That is the borderline between politics and administration.

And there were these officials who ... — people like Vidal, for example, he was an Ambassador, he later became an Ambassador, but he knew all the issues and he ... I sometimes felt rather as if I were his pupil. I'm sure that he would say, 'No, not at all, I never went beyond my role as an official ...', which is true, but at that level, one has an influence on politics, one teaches a lot to politicians. So that was a good thing.

One regret is that in French administration — and I fear that it has not changed in the meantime — the European spirit exists in the spheres in which I worked, but in most of the traditional Ministries people are trained according to the French model, full stop. As for the European spirit ... this was clearly the case at the time and I fear that it may still be so. Earlier I mentioned the resistance to the Schengen Agreement and the European passport from the Ministry of the Interior. We realised that, culturally speaking, people were saying, 'It is not possible, it is not possible', because they had very strong national models and they could not imagine it working, that it could work, outside these national models. This was the case in most of the Ministries. It was very rare to have people with the European culture, with the European spirit.

[Étienne Deschamps] But civil servants with this type of profile, culture, tradition and experience — you met such people at the Council of Europe, you met such people within the Commission and the Council. Of course, we know that officials at the Commission are not dependent — are no longer dependent — on the government of their country of origin. Nevertheless, do you remember having met and worked with — you mentioned Émile Noël — having met and worked with French officials who, in Brussels or Strasbourg, had a different — if I might describe it as such — a different vision, a different perspective from French officials on assignment in Brussels?

[Catherine Lalumière] Indeed. I met French officials who were patriotic — very French — but who had acquired, or who had spontaneously — I don't know how it came to them — who had a European culture and a vision of European integration that inspired their actions. I met such people in the administrative circles of the European Community and then the European Union, and I also met such people at the Council of Europe, of course. No, the officials who I am talking about, who seemed to me to be indelibly marked with a national way of thinking — not nationalists in the pejorative sense, but truly national — were in

France. It was in France, and when we prepared for a decision or a French position, the person with responsibility for European Affairs had to gather together the Ministries involved and try to listen to the various people and then to establish what the French position would be. It was in this situation that I was struck by the very national vision of a great number of officials from our technical Ministries. And to a certain extent this is a handicap for France, one might even say that it is a great handicap for France, because there is often such an intellectual deadlock that we miss opportunities, we lack the flexibility required to establish contacts with the various people involved, to negotiate compromises that would enable us to defend our points of view, etc. Strangely, there is a certain French stiffness, too widespread for my liking, in administrative circles. It was true at the time, and I fear that it is still true today.