

'Tindemans' Europe', from Le Soir (20 February 1976)


Caption: On 20 February 1976, the Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir publishes an article written by the Belgian Minister, Pierre Vermeynen, in which he analyses the possible implications of the Tindemans Report on European Union.

Source: Le Soir. 20.02.1976, n° 43. Bruxelles: S.A. Rossel. "L'Europe de M. Tindemans", auteur:Vermeynen, P. , p. 1.

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Tindemans' Europe

As yet, no official reaction to the Tindemans Report.

The European Commission and every chancellery are on high alert, for it is certain that any innovator will arouse reactions among those whom he hopes to shake up, even if it is for their own good.

Public opinion has reacted emotionally, which is understandable. On the extreme nationalist wing are the French Communists who, according to Georges Marchais, see the election of a European Parliament by direct universal suffrage as 'a crime against France, against her people'! Fortunately, this retrograde point of view has been rejected everywhere else. As François Mitterrand has so aptly put it, the European Parliament exists; if it is not to be abolished, should it not represent as closely as possible the people who make up the Community?

The other critics, from every level of political life and of every ideological hue, bear witness to a certain disillusion, whose motivation can readily be understood but which does not detract from the essential validity of the report. One must give Leo Tindemans, a committed European, credit for having curbed his maximalist tendencies. In a philosophical and conciliatory way, a role that suits him better than that of leader where he has to be decisive and act, he has set out to define what might impart a new and constructive impetus to the Community.

This report, which will be dissected and no doubt torn to shreds in the months to come, is an invaluable tool. With particular regard to the institutions, it makes some bold proposals, although some of them are a little too utopian.

Mr Tindemans proposes, for instance, that the President of the Commission, appointed by the Council of Ministers — to which we shall return — should personally choose the other Members of the Commission. In theory this is fine. Who, in our European democracies, does not expect the Prime Minister to form a cohesive group by surrounding himself with Ministers of his own choice? However, Mr Tindemans, the rapporteur, seems to have dissociated himself from Mr Tindemans, the Prime Minister, who knows that the distribution of portfolios has become a jigsaw whose pieces are assembled individually but, ultimately, in the light of certain imperatives. How can one hope that it will be any different on a European level, where nations in competition find themselves side by side, if not face to face?

But this is not the crux of the matter. It is the vision of how Europe might be transformed so that ultimately it becomes an integrated political entity. All Mr Tindemans' hopes lie in the strengthening of the Community institutions, particularly the Parliament, which should have a genuine power to propose legislation, and the Commission, which should define common policies and promote their implementation. It is on this subject that Mr Tindemans shows most circumspection. What is important is that he is more expansive on the subject of the Council of Ministers.

Rightly, he advocates the abolition of the right of veto, to be replaced by majority voting — which will not be popular — but he gives the Council more responsibility, in the hope that this will be only temporary. This is where the shoe pinches. Any evolution ends in revolution, with decrepit structures being replaced by new ones. For the European Community, this decisive moment will be when the national governments hand over power to a common authority which has its own policies. The election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage will, perhaps, precipitate this change, but it is to be feared that extending the powers of the Council of Ministers will prevent such transition. It may even hasten a conflict between reactionary centrifugal forces and progressive centralising aspirations.

The time has come to harmonise the powers of the executive body, the European Commission, with the responsibilities that a European Parliament, elected by direct universal suffrage, will soon be claiming.

In other words, far from facilitating the creation of a united Europe, implementation of the report by Tindemans, the mediator, would make more hazardous the solution that Tindemans, the reformer, would

certainly want.

Mr Tindemans was right to be prudent in order to be heard. However, it is regrettable that his timidity may well reinforce the main obstacle that is holding Europe back, the selfishness of nations, as is maintained by the faint-heartedness of their representatives, the Foreign Ministers, who fear being accused of handing over their countries to an, as yet, poorly defined and abstract entity.

There is no disagreement over the final aim (if disintegration, favoured only by the Communists, is to be avoided): a united, powerful and independent Europe.

However, if we are to get there, we must conquer the eternal enemies of progress that often cause revolution and sometimes lead to war: distrust of the new, fear of the unknown.

P. Vermeylen
Minister of State,
Flemish Socialist.