

Interview with Georges Berthoin: the early stages of the diplomatic mission of the High Authority in London (Paris, 22 July 2005)

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[Étienne Deschamps] You were well acquainted with this diplomatic mission that you have just mentioned since you became Deputy Head of Mission to the Dutch diplomat, Van Vredenburg, in 1956. How did things work out in practice I am referring to the political relations between the High Authority and the British leadership?

[Georges Berthoin] In the specialised field of coal and steel, relations were good. I should even say that they were quite easy. But outside that field, things were very complicated. We understood this immediately the diplomatic mission was established. At first it was led by Max Kohnstamm. He stayed for several months. We were all staying in the hotel, but, anyway, there was still nothing to do and we had to improvise everything. That was it. It was just like Luxembourg in 1952: we had to improvise everything. By the way, all the European institutions that still exist today were established in 1952, in the course of a few weeks. This may be regarded as a normal development, but all the traditions and all the institutional balances were put in place during that period. It was quite remarkable that, within a few weeks, the entire institutional structure had been created while the rest was being developed. So we had to improvise, and I should say that, except for coal and steel, we were accorded a fairly poor reception. The traditional British authorities, and the Foreign Office in particular, were wondering what this somewhat bizarre entity was precisely. At first the traditional embassies of the six States ignored us entirely. Once they did begin to take notice of us, they took a dim view of us.

Then, where Britain was concerned, we found it difficult to find any premises. The English system is based on leasehold, or rather freehold. The landowners in the areas where all the embassies and their like are situated were the Duke of Westminster, the Cadogan family & We found a marvellous location right next to the Luxembourg Embassy. I believe that Lord Mountbatten had a small house there. When they heard that we wanted to buy the lease, the residents were against it because they were afraid that we would store sacks of coal on the pavement. Coal, steel, and so on. They thought we were selling coal. What is more, there was the scrap metal as well, for scrap metal was also included in the Treaty. In fact we needed to take a lawyer to explain the Treaty, to say that there would not be any sacks of coal. And we were unsuccessful. Just to illustrate the frame of mind & So we had to look around in the same neighbourhood and luckily we found a house that did not come under the authority of the freeholders, that is to say, of the Duke of Westminster or of the Cadogan Estate. Right. It was in Chesham Street. It was there that we at last found premises that were both suitable and in a good neighbourhood. This is just to show you the difficulties we faced. T

he traditional diplomatic circles in the Member States just did not understand at all who or what we were. The basis in law of our delegation was very narrowly defined. It was solely to contribute towards preparing for the meetings of the Association Council that alternated between London and Luxembourg. But very early on, we made use of this possibility, this presence, to push European politics. I shall explain how in more detail later but the legal basis was very narrow. We had to wait a fair time for a special act to be passed in the British Parliament for us to be given a statute, because in terms of the Vienna Convention we were not the representatives of a sovereign power. That was when we began to have philosophical discussions on the nature of our power. If we had represented a sovereign power, we should not have had any difficulties. Between two sovereignties, the British and the sovereign state, there were exchanges of diplomats and automatically diplomatic conventions were applicable. Whereas in our case, we surprised everyone by saying: Yes, but we too have a measure of sovereignty. And at the same time, we used the fact that the British had sent a diplomatic mission to Luxembourg, to the High Authority, in order to claim that, on a reciprocal basis, we should at least be treated as we treated their delegation. However, the British delegation in Luxembourg possessed a statute only in so far as the Grand Duchy recognised this British delegation's diplomatic status. The High Authority did not have the power to grant it diplomatic status. This illustrates how, right from the start, we understood the ambiguous nature of our situation. Therefore it was because the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg accorded diplomatic status to the British delegation that they had it, but there could be no reciprocity on that basis between the Grand Duchy and the British Government. This then was the challenge. In the end matters were settled by means of a special Act of the British Parliament that accorded us virtually full diplomatic status; this was later increased to full diplomatic status. This was all very interesting in terms of political philosophy because we had put our finger on the ambiguous nature of this Community institution.