

Interview with Catherine Lalumière: the Schengen Agreement (Paris, 17 May 2006)

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[Catherine Lalumière] All these measures which were actually intended to make it easier for people, for natural persons, to cross borders, and which were measures that had been particularly requested by the President of the Republic ... François Mitterrand had understood that this border crossing was a practical measure for people and that, if it were to become possible to cross borders without having to undergo all the formalities and controls, it would be seen as a very positive point for Europe. So it was an issue on which he placed great importance.

However, this reaction was not shared by the Ministry of the Interior. I have a very vivid memory — especially with regard to Schengen, but it was also the case for the passport — of all the negative arguments which were formulated by officials from the Ministry of the Interior. I remember, during the negotiations which took place before Schengen, that one day I went — I do not remember whether it was to Luxembourg or to Brussels ... and the train was not comfortable at all, it was not a high-speed train like a TGV or a Thalys, that did not exist, it was just a train. I was there with members of my Private Office and officials from the Ministry of the Interior.

Throughout the journey, these officials tried to dampen my enthusiasm for the conclusion of the Agreement. They said to me: ‘But don’t you realise, it will be impossible to control this, impossible to control that,’ etc., etc. I was obliged to listen to them, but, at the same time, I had the political impetus from the Élysée Palace and also my own convictions. So I said: ‘Yes, of course, it will complicate things, but we cannot continue *ad vitam eternam* with these controls which, it must be said, are anachronistic.’

But there was such resistance. That is even without taking into account the resistance which came from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, via customs. Because, for the customs officers, of course, it was their job, and they believed that their livelihood was at stake. So there was great resistance there, too.

So, regarding these two issues, which for me are linked, Schengen and the European passport, there was great resistance from the authorities. Was there support from the general public? Not really, because people did not realise to what extent it would be easy and beneficial to lift these border controls. People were in favour, but there was not really ...

[Étienne Deschamps] ... any popular enthusiasm or genuine commitment ...

[Catherine Lalumière] There had to be political commitment. This political commitment existed at Head of State level. Then there were these officials, who were really very, very ...

[Étienne Deschamps] Who had excellent reasons, in principle, not to sign and not to conclude.

[Catherine Lalumière] ‘It’s not possible, you don’t realise, there will be dreadful consequences, we shall regret it ...’, the whole nine yards.

[Étienne Deschamps] How do you explain the fact that this Agreement — the Schengen Agreement, which you signed in 1985 — was negotiated and finalised outside the Community structure?

[Catherine Lalumière] Well, the reservations which I have just outlined came not only from France. There were reservations in several countries, and the truth is that we reached a point where we were faced with this situation: if we wanted an agreement, we could not involve everyone because we knew that there were some countries which were not going to accept it. The time was not ripe. So we said: ‘Right, we shall establish a partial agreement between those who wish to be involved.’

Once again, it was a question of political commitment, of saying: ‘Of course, it is not the ideal solution, of course, it would be better if it were a Community agreement, but it is better to begin with a few rather than to do nothing.’ So we met, and it really was rather bizarre ... These Schengen Agreements, I think that there are lots of people who wonder ‘Why Schengen?’ Now, Schengen is a little village, a tiny village. The

signing did not even take place on the village square but on a boat floating on the water.

So why did it happen like this? This was during the Luxembourg Presidency. It was just beginning, because it was the Presidency for the second half of 1985. The Luxembourg people had thought that it would be good to sign this partial agreement — which was not at Community level — in a symbolic place, at the border of three countries: Luxembourg, Germany and France. There is a confluence of rivers and the borders are practically connected there, in this corner of this tiny village of Schengen. That is why they put us on the water, as that way we were a little ... I would not say that it was extraterritorial, but it was symbolic on that boat — where, I must say, it was extremely hot. Because, in June, the weather was very nice, we were hot, we had had a very good meal, we were perspiring profusely, I must say, and we signed this Schengen Agreement in this symbolic place.

It provided a picturesque memory, because it had a ‘country picnic’ feel. We were all there, and everyone who signed was happy. It was progress. However, it must be said that we had not fully considered — at any rate, I had not fully considered — the consequences of Schengen. We were aware, we were very aware of the idea of progress, the opening of borders, the abolition of controls. That aspect, we had seen it, we had negotiated for it, we were signing for it, that was clear.

What we had not seen, what I had not seen, was that Schengen threatened to create a fortress. If you observe the situation today, the borders of Schengen are seen by outside countries as the borders of a fortress. And that was not the intention of the signatories. It was openness, openness, openness, progress towards openness; the element of closure to the outside, to migrants, to people who want to enter the fortress, was something that we had not considered. At all events, it was not what we had intended.