

Interview with Catherine Lalumière: France's official position during the negotiations for the accession of Spain and Portugal to the European Communities (Paris, 17 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In the early 1980s, in 1984 in particular, a new issue apart from the internal market found its way onto the negotiating table: the accession, or possible accession, of Spain and Portugal to the European Communities. As Junior Minister for European Affairs, you were, naturally, directly involved in this debate.

[Catherine Lalumière] Yes, indeed.

[Étienne Deschamps] What memories do you have of this issue?

[Catherine Lalumière] I was appointed to this post of Junior Minister in December 1984, at the time when Roland Dumas succeeded Claude Cheysson as Foreign Minister, thereby vacating the European Affairs position. I remember spending the Christmas break studying files — which were always very well drafted by the Foreign Ministry staff, they were impeccable — I really studied very hard so as to absorb what was in the files, in particular the file on the negotiations for the accession of Spain and Portugal, because the French President, François Mitterrand, had given us all very clear guidelines: we had to achieve results. 'Do your best, negotiate as best you can, but Spain and Portugal will accede.' Moreover, at the end of the negotiation process, we even enjoyed a 'mammoth' Council of Ministers in which we were shut away and were not allowed out. It was like the conclave to elect the Pope: 'You will not be allowed out until you have reached a conclusion to the negotiations.'

Anyway, in December 1984 that was the major item on the agenda. During this 'study' period, I tried as best I could to absorb all of these files, which were in their final stages, because the negotiations had been going on for eight years; they had begun during the Presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, but they had come to a virtual standstill. With the arrival of François Mitterrand, the political commitment was there. Whatever the obstacles, we had to achieve results, as I said. Before my arrival in European Affairs, many issues had already been settled. But, of course, it is always in the final straight that the most sensitive issues still remain on the table. So I had to continue the negotiations begun by Roland Dumas — which he continued to monitor, in fact; I was really under his authority — but, anyway, all these negotiations on fruit and vegetables, tomatoes — we tore our hair out over the tomato problems; there were negotiations on fisheries ... as far as steelworks and the iron and steel industry were concerned, that was already virtually settled. However, that final straight was very intense. Very, very intense.

This just goes to show that political commitment is very important. I am not defending stubbornness; that is quite a different matter. However, after giving careful thought to the situation, if a statesman has convictions about major issues which will have significant consequences, it is his responsibility to express a conviction, a decision, and to bring everyone else along with him. I must say that, during this time, being responsible for European Affairs was a very comfortable position. I would not say that the negotiations were easy — no, technically, they were not easy — but I was in a comfortable position as I was able to base my actions on a clearly formulated political conviction. And Mitterrand personified this clearly formulated political conviction. If I had been in total disagreement, I knew where the door was, I could resign; but no, I shared this conviction. I would probably not have been capable, personally, of setting the tone as he did, but he was the President, so it was his role. We put into practice what he considered to be beneficial both for France and for Europe.