

Interview with Catherine Lalumière: the Luxembourg European Council (Paris, 17 May 2006)

Source: Interview de Catherine Lalumière / CATHERINE LALUMIÈRE, Étienne Deschamps, prise de vue : François Fabert.- Paris: CVCE [Prod.], 17.05.2006. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:09:18, Couleur, Son original).

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Étienne Deschamps] In December 1985, as you said, the deadlock was finally broken in the negotiations on the Single Act, the European spirit prevailed, and, in that respect, the Luxembourg European Summit was very symptomatic, very symbolic. You attended the Summit ...

[Catherine Lalumière] Oh yes, for me that is one of my favourite memories of my Community life, the Luxembourg Summit. Well ...

[Étienne Deschamps] What happened? Why such positive memories?

[Catherine Lalumière] When we opened the Luxembourg Summit, which lasted two days, there still remained some unresolved issues. We had negotiated for six months and had resolved a certain number of things, but there were still some problems. We rather wondered what was going to happen. So the Heads of State or Government met, and there was deadlock. There was deadlock and, in particular, if I remember correctly, there were particular problems involving what was Article 100 at the time, which concerned the recognition of standards from country to country. This was the ‘cassis de Dijon’ case-law, if you like, but elevated to the level of procedures for the reciprocal recognition of decisions taken by the various countries.

The basic principle of Article 100 — and again my memories are distant — was unanimity. However, we introduced possibilities for qualified majority voting. Then, subsequently, exemptions from the exception. So, principle: unanimity; exception: qualified majority; exemption from the exception in certain areas. Overall, a rather horrendous article. The entire debate was based on the drafting of these exceptions, exemption from the exception, exemption from the exemption from the exception, etc. A painstaking task ... why? Because national interests were very different. Each Head of State or Government, in his backyard, had all these Ministries which were saying: ‘But you can’t give in on that issue, it’s not possible, we need an exemption.’

And it went on for hours and hours. It went on for so long that, at one point, several of us said: ‘They’re not getting anywhere. We’re not getting anywhere. It has reached deadlock, they’re going to leave.’ I imagined Mrs Thatcher leaving everyone behind and setting off back to London in her aircraft; the same thing for Helmut Kohl; I think that it was Andreotti who was representing Italy; François Mitterrand, etc. We all genuinely had the impression that it was a fiasco. Then the miracle, what I call the European miracle, happened. So what caused this miracle to happen? The Luxembourg Presidency. They are always amazing, these Luxembourgers, they know how to oil the wheels, they do not antagonise anyone, they are honest, well-meaning, and that creates an atmosphere. I believe that even Mrs Thatcher could not leave and abandon the task, despite the constant criticism that she had levelled with regard to this or that point.

It was not meant to be photographed because it took place in camera — I do not think that there were any photos — but when we saw all these great political leaders, pencil in hand, trying, themselves — because, behind the scenes, we, the worker ants, we had tried all the solutions that we could, and it never worked. So, in the end, it was the Heads of State or Government themselves who drafted the various solutions in order to reach a compromise which was acceptable for everyone. At a later date, people would say to me — official commentators, eminent university professors, etc. —: ‘My goodness, this article is written ... it’s horrendous, it’s so confusing! Who wrote that? It’s useless.’ And I said to them: ‘It’s not pretty. On that point, we are in agreement, it is not drafted in a nice way. But that is the price of compromise.’

Each person found the little bit that suited him or her. That is why it was drafted with principle, exception, exemption from the exception, etc., etc. Aesthetically, there is nothing more ugly. Politically, however, it was wonderful, because it enabled us to reach agreement — the implementation was a little complicated, because you virtually had to be a technical expert to find your way around all those nuances — but that was a small price to pay, given the fact that the Single Act was established, that we broke the deadlock in the system, and, in the end, we were very happy. But we had glimpsed the abyss and failure.

So it was a lesson, I believe, which demonstrated that difficulties always exist. There are always, always, always difficulties. Our starting points are very far apart, we are very different, we have different views, different prejudices, and so on. However, little by little, patiently, we manage to reconcile our views, to overcome the obstacles and to move on.

[Étienne Deschamps] But you said yourself that this only works if every leader, every political leader, assumes his or her responsibilities — including the British at that moment in time — and is not prepared to run the risk of failure. They must all have the same faith, the same will to succeed.

[Catherine Lalumière] Exactly. If ... of course, we would have to carry out a psychological analysis 25 or 30 years after the event. Why didn't Mrs Thatcher leave? It is true that the force of the Kohl-Mitterrand duo might have dissuaded those who wanted to leave. There was also Delors, but I do not think that Mrs Thatcher would have been overawed by the reaction of Jacques Delors. But it was everyone. Yes, there were people who believed in Europe, Mitterrand and Kohl, Delors; Andreotti was someone who was very European, the Spanish who arrived were very European. So all of that was hugely important.

In an atmosphere ... when there are leaders, it is much more difficult to dodge the issue and do just any old thing. That is the driving force of leaders. There is no doubt that that played an important part. The Luxembourgers' skill and flexibility and the presence of leaders who caused problems for themselves, too. Because, make no mistake, it was not easy to have this notorious Article 100 accepted in France and Germany.

I can still see them, pencil in hand, working to find acceptable solutions themselves. People always say that it is the experts working behind the scenes, but, at a certain point, the acid test will always come. The experts remain behind the scenes, and it is the Head of State alone who must find the solution. It was remarkable, I must say, a remarkable sight. Afterwards, we were pleased, we were very happy. I shall never forget that feeling of relief, because we were scared. It was a close shave, but we were relieved afterwards. The workings of Europe are a very curious thing.