

Interview with Catherine Lalumière: the European Confederation according to François Mitterrand (Paris, 17 May 2006)

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[Catherine Lalumière] In January 1990, when François Mitterrand launched his idea of a European Confederation, I followed the story on television with particular interest. I had been at the Council of Europe for six months, a little more ... I can sum up my reaction when I heard it: it was twofold and contradictory.

[Étienne Deschamps] Had he not spoken to you about it previously?

[Catherine Lalumière] No. So, my first reaction: the analysis made by the President of the Republic was accurate, in my view: namely, something had to be done. All these regimes which had changed, these revolutions everywhere, something had to be done. I agreed completely on that point. Secondly, the Confederation left me perplexed, because I saw fairly quickly — and it has to be said that, in the following months, my view would be confirmed — that this Confederation was undoubtedly not the solution.

I shall not try to hide the fact that I would have liked the President to see the Council of Europe as a valid solution for welcoming new members, because I suspected, from that moment on, that establishing a Confederation would not work. I shall outline my immediate reactions as I heard the President, but add retrospective comments. I hoped that he would turn to the Council of Europe for support, because I had seen that, for six months, people had been turning to us, that we were in a situation where we could provide a service for these countries; on condition, of course, that we received financial and political aid. Because, being the Sleeping Beauty on the banks of the Rhine, to use General de Gaulle's phrase, we did not have a great deal of influence.

So, in order for us to be able really to play the role required, we needed this support. The Council of Europe, however, with its philosophy, its principles, its availability and its capabilities, was genuinely able to play the role that was needed. Secondly, the word 'Confederation' scared several countries. 'Confederation, oh dear, what's that? It will be something like the Helvetic Confederation, but we don't want to go that far.' Thirdly, open to Russia and closed to the United States. Oh dear ... for the countries of Central Europe who had only recently been freed from Soviet hegemony to find themselves side by side with the Soviet Union — because, at the time, it was the Soviet Union — and without the United States ... otherwise it would have been the CSCE — Conference for Security in Europe.

So, this Confederation, with the members as envisaged, seemed to me to be completely unrealistic. I was very, very hesitant. I asked to see the President, and he received me in late January. I set out my views ... and he carried on with his view and his proposals. Throughout the year, I monitored the plan as it developed, while remaining discreet. I continued to do all that I could at the Council of Europe, to establish contacts, and I heard a lot of things. I tried to warn the Élysée Palace that the proposed Confederation was not working.

The Prague-meeting was held at Easter 1991. I had received a final SOS from Prague via the Czech Ambassador. He said: 'President Havel does not want the Confederation, France will have to withdraw its proposal.' I forwarded the message. Nothing further came of it. The Prague meeting went ahead, and Havel put the Confederation to bed once and for all. But that was predictable. It was at that point that I realised that all these contacts with the Austrians, the Germans, the East Germans, who were in close contact with all these countries — I had ended up being aware, to a certain extent, of the reactions which were not necessarily forwarded by the diplomats and embassies. Within the Council of Europe, we were very aware of what was happening.

[Étienne Deschamps] In your opinion, François Mitterrand was not aware of this? Did not want to understand? Why did he dig in his heels?

[Catherine Lalumière] I was never given an explanation. I think that, firstly, he had no confidence in the Council of Europe, because he had had experience of a weak Council of Europe. I recognise that it was weak and that it would really have taken a great deal of energy to strengthen the Council of Europe further,

but it was a challenge. I think that, with the help of the governments, we were able to meet this challenge. However, it was not deemed to be the case. The idea of a Confederation could be attractive, but I think that, at the time, it was something which scared people, the proposed members made people scared, the circumstances were not right.

I never really knew the real story. I have told you what I personally witnessed. I was sorry, but, at the time, I realise that turning to the Council of Europe for support was not easy. It was an organisation which had grown old and which really needed to be given a new lease of life. Whether this was possible, I don't know. We shall never know. There is no point dwelling on 'ifs' and 'buts'.