

Interview with Leo Tindemans: Benelux cooperation (Brussels, 24 February 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What was the situation of Benelux when you became Prime Minister and, with the benefit of hindsight, what was its role in the European negotiations?

[Leo Tindemans] In the years you allude to, Benelux was going through a crisis. Those who were not around when Benelux was established were not that interested. Obviously the Netherlands were conspicuous in the Foreign Trade sector, as everyone knows, and in maritime affairs; in short, the Netherlands counted in the maritime world. As a result they had their own concerns and their own conception of things and this conception did not always correspond to ideas that Belgium held dear. A second point is that, little by little, a notion developed in Belgium that, given the language problem in Belgium, Benelux might become a negative factor for Belgian French-speakers, namely, a majority capable of playing a role that would not please the French-speakers. So relations were becoming increasingly difficult. Nonetheless, the great names, the pioneers of Benelux were French-speakers: Paul-Henri Spaak, Jean-Charles Snoy et d'Oppuers, the Foreign Trade specialists and those who had spent the war-years in London, in England, and saw the need to set an example. To quote the great debate on Benelux that was held in Parliament: 'This is the beginning of an opening-up towards other countries and this core must become much larger.' It was the birth of the European idea. Benelux went through a period of tension — in some people's minds, not in everyone's, but in many — a negative perception, let us say. I even experienced a failure there, at the last Benelux ministerial meeting held, I think, in 1978. I was chairing it and there were 14 ministers present: Belgian, Dutch and Luxembourgish, 14. No decision was taken. Just to give you an idea, we had good discussions, we liked several ideas, the proposal was made to implement them together, but when it was a matter of approving it, the answer was 'no'. It was 'no'. However, I was able to speak, for there was a sort of Benelux Parliamentary Assembly and when I was invited to come and air my views, I said: 'If we go on behaving at the European level as we are doing now, the small countries, operating within a common foreign and defence policy and with a much more European economy, we will be swallowed alive by the larger countries in the European Union unless the smaller defend themselves or cooperate to a much greater extent.' I realise that before European meetings, ministerial meetings, summit meetings and so on, an attempt was made to follow a Benelux tradition and get together beforehand in order to reach an agreement, but let me tell you, without hurting anyone's feelings, in important matters this has never worked. We did so and there were two or three policy papers which were significant, but one cannot say that they dominated thought in the Netherlands, in Belgium or in the Grand Duchy, no. Not at all. Even during discussions when serious difficulties were encountered, no one ever managed to make the Benelux representatives work together to find solutions.

[Étienne Deschamps] And your interlocutors, the larger countries like France, Great Britain, Italy and Germany did not consider Benelux as... Because after all, some years earlier, ten years earlier, in 1955, in 1956, in 1957, then, during the recovery period, Benelux would draw up joint memoranda... At that time there was a functioning core, one that other countries took seriously.

[Leo Tindemans] We set the right example. And when economic union was mentioned: 'Ah, it is not possible, monetary union is not possible, it cannot work.' And with Luxembourg? With Belgium and Luxembourg, it worked very well. I shall not mention the errors that were sometimes made... I am well aware that Belgium did not always inform the Grand Duchy or inform them quickly enough for requisite steps to be taken in Luxembourg as well. But these were blemishes, ink spots on a sheet of white paper, but a white sheet nonetheless. Yet it worked and it continues to do so; there were examples, there was a spirit... Of course, more ought to have been done, since each time the Government changes and after every election, there are new people taking on important political functions who were not there at the start, who do not know all the duties that the position entails, namely, the ministerial duties. But it exists, it works and it could work still better. But what I said was most strange: 'Take care, you will be swallowed alive'. I always used to use that verb, but it has not had much influence so far.