

Interview with Leo Tindemans: the United Kingdom and Europe (Brussels, 24 February 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] We spoke a short time ago about Harold Wilson, what stance did your British contacts take on these issues?

[Leo Tindemans] Yes, I believe that this episode is fairly well known. The position taken by Mrs Thatcher was... how shall I put it... one of attack. If she did not obtain satisfaction on the budgetary issue, that is, the position taken by the United Kingdom on the budgetary policy, she threatened to invoke what she called the Luxembourg compromise — which was not, by the way, a compromise — and say that the agricultural policy, the prices of agricultural produce, constituted a vital issue that she had the right to oppose. That was her position. Well, we did the right thing: we did not believe her and we said no. I was present at the meeting when the British — it was in Stuttgart, I think — obtained a temporary rebate in their contribution to the budget, saying: ‘There, a limited period during which more lenient measures can be adopted for the United Kingdom.’ In the end, when this period was over, she did not want to listen to her partners. We worked together, the President of the European Commission, Gaston Thorn, the Secretary-General, Émile Noël, the French Minister for Agriculture, Édith Cresson, for Belgium, the Junior Minister for Agriculture, de Keersmaecker, and myself; and we found a formula, so that at a given moment we said: ‘Since there is nothing against..., it is approved.’ Mrs Thatcher was surprised, because no other member had made a move nor said a thing, and the necessary majority was there to approve these measures. She was furious, but the matter was settled. So there was this cooperation between the institutions — orthodox attitudes, but rejected until then by Mrs Thatcher — the institutions, Émile Noël, Gaston Thorn, France, Mme Cresson and the Belgian Presidency cooperated in order to salvage something. I was delighted that there was this possibility to come to an agreement and to cooperate.

[Étienne Deschamps] Where this British deadlock was concerned, were all the European partners on the same wavelength? Some of them had been more or less favourable to the United Kingdom’s entry into the Communities. The French, particularly, had been opposed for a long time whereas, on the contrary, the Belgians, Luxembourgers and Dutch had been more favourable. When the problems began to arise in the early 1970s, was there a common front among the European partners or were there perceptible divergences regarding the British, who were then in a position to exploit these differences?

[Leo Tindemans] Here we are entering a domain that is extremely delicate and difficult to explain. Life is like that, be it in personal relations with your friends, or professional ones with your colleagues at work or whatever: have you got to come to an explicit agreement before you can change things, before you can say: ‘This is what we decided’ or can you count on the influence of time? ‘You have to give time time,’ as François Mitterrand used to say, I believe. It is extremely difficult. England’s stance was anti-Community, let us put it like that. That was its right, but it wanted nonetheless to be part of the Union — but not where all the institutions or all the nuances were concerned. What was the solution? Some said: ‘Oh no, that’s just not right, no’, but this meant that by excluding Britain problems would obviously arise, since there were countries that had close relations with it, such as Denmark or even Portugal, and so on. England had always been a partner for lots of reasons. There were also countries that did not like to hurt or displease Britain: Germany, for instance, in conditions that we are aware of. So, what was to be done? Then there was the theory: ‘No, they must either accept or refuse; they are either members or they are not. Pitiless, but clear. That is the way to act.’ Or some said: ‘But you will see, they will have to fall into line, they do not understand the prevailing mood and you will see that soon, in two, three or five years’ time, they will accept everything. That is what the British are like: at the beginning they are against, but as soon as they see it works, they jump on the bandwagon because they do not want to be left behind.’ So, then what? Who would be proved right in the end? It is true that what they did accept, they implemented, and they are often more faithful or more orthodox than the others. When they accept a decision, they carry it out. On the other hand, in our case, Belgium is sometimes the last country to implement, due in some measure to the complexity of its construction, but still, you understand what I mean. Can one just trust them, saying: ‘You’ll see, it will be settled’? Or should we say: ‘It will never be settled.’