

Interview with Leo Tindemans: agricultural negotiations among the Benelux countries (Brussels, 24 February 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] From 1949 to 1953, you were an attaché in the Economic Service of the Belgian Ministry of Agriculture. While you held that position, you took part in various Benelux meetings. What do you recall of those debates and what were the implications of those Benelux agricultural discussions for Belgian agriculture?

[Leo Tindemans] Firstly, they were international contacts — the first ones, I should say. Before the war, I was in college as they say, for my secondary education; then, during the war, I was lucky enough to be able to follow my university studies without interruption, and my professional life began – not immediately after the war, since I was still at Ghent University where I took my degree, and after that I did my military service. But later on, in real – and realistic – life, I became a civil servant – after passing the entry exam, by the way – and I thus became a civil servant in the department of Economic Affairs, administrative secretary in the commercial agreements service. I did not know what life held in store for me, but it was a preparation for international negotiations, I should say. I also became acquainted with Dutch specialists who, where agriculture was concerned, were probably in advance of Belgium; but, on the other hand, the war had hit the Netherlands harder than Belgium. Indeed the last year was extremely hard. The Netherlands were still occupied, whereas Belgium had been liberated since September 1944. I made the acquaintance of these officials and I learned how to negotiate, as well as the economic aspects of agriculture, because that was the job; I was in the General-Directorate for Economic Affairs, in the ‘Trade Agreements’ section. There, at Trade Agreements, I had to learn about attempts to establish a world trade organisation. At first it was GATT, as it was called – English taking up an ever larger place in international affairs – the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. It was an opening on a world that few people knew of at that time and, on the Belgian side, the agricultural organisations defended themselves tooth and nail, fearful as they were of the Dutch technical superiority that they recognised. We came to an agreement, a sort of compromise: For some agricultural products a minimum price was fixed, and if the Belgian price was lower or if the Dutch price was lower, there was a compensation, and one could then demand a type of compensation in the prices. That saved Benelux: the Benelux Agreement. At that time, agriculture was also included in the Benelux Agreement. It was very interesting because I realised that Foreign Trade was at an extremely delicate, sensitive and difficult point. Before the war, international relations, commercial and economic relations were typically protectionist. In the 1930s, as opposed to coming to understandings or reaching agreements that I dare call European or international, on the contrary, they increased import duties, they hit one another with customs duties and they allocated quotas, with the result that permitted imports were fixed and limited in quantity, and it was in this spirit that they entered the war. So then, after the war, which was the right policy to follow? By the way, just as a personal observation, later on I asked myself this question, and I do so again today: what did those Belgian and Dutch politicians, for example, and others who were living in London during the war, what did they think, what ideas did they develop? Because to come back after the war was won and announce to the people: ‘We shall go on with the same policies that we followed before the war’ would not have been the right start for a better world; on the contrary, I imagine that people were afraid of pre-war unemployment, economic difficulties, protectionism, and so on. Which policies then were we to suggest? Benelux was a start, and in itself it was an opportunity to reach different agreements, to have new ideas. But Benelux was not enough, we needed to open up markets with other countries. With the neighbouring countries, starting with Luxembourg, there were no problems since we had had an economic union since the early 1920s, but as for France, for instance, and then Germany... What was to be done with Germany? There had been no peace conference, no peace Treaty, after the Second World War – it is unbelievable, but people do not realise, it is not mentioned enough these days, because it gives an idea of the difficulties that were encountered following the end of the Second World War. What was to be done with this Germany that was divided into four occupation zones? There was an American zone, a Soviet zone, a British zone and France too had been included in this group. France also occupied the Saarland, the territory belonging to this region. So what was to be done? Given that there was no agreement, it was not clear whether Germany was to be divided definitively or whether Germany was to be made to pay a price as...

[Étienne Deschamps] A war debt?

[Leo Tindemans] Yes, a war debt, just as was done at Versailles, or rather was decided at Versailles after the First World War. So there were all these problems but no solutions could be found because no conference worthy of the name had been organised. Ideas on the subject were so opposed to the mentality and attitude of the winning side in the war that no one could even agree on an agenda for a possible conference. I came to learn this while taking part in the Benelux meetings. We discussed GATT, if I may be allowed to use the term, and what should be done to create an organisation for world trade against protectionism, against quotas, against all these measures that had hindered foreign trade before the war. That was my job and I had to learn it, to take notes such and such a product and then convince the politicians who had to take the decisions in that area. Looking back on all that now, I say to myself: 'What a first-rate training that was.' It was relevant for my personal development and for my ideas on foreign trade as well, that is clear. I realised that without a wider agreement, there would be no future, no happy political solution that could save the economic situation in our countries. I was certain of that. So, before the negotiations on the Treaty of Rome and on European economic union, I was already convinced of the need for these kinds of operations. This, then, was the start of my professional life and, at the same time, how my ideas evolved regarding international economic life, foreign trade and the position taken by Belgium, the Netherlands and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg in these matters. I appreciate now just how excellent a training it was. That was where I learned to overcome obstacles that were traditional in Belgium, and therefore in agriculture too: namely, this tendency to protect agriculture. It had been done before. In Belgium it was a traditional problem. When the Liberals were in power, they tended to advocate free trade or unimpeded commerce; when the tendency referred to at the time as 'the Catholics' was in power, small farmers were protected much more, and therefore agriculture since Belgian agriculture was characterised by small undertakings. All of a sudden I was thrown into the midst of these difficulties, which had to be overcome and for which there were no quick solutions. I did not stay there very long for I was not a typical civil servant; I left administration. In my political career and during the phases that followed, I was nonetheless able to take advantage of the lessons that I had learnt from my time in the Department of Agriculture. Agriculture, I have to say, was an extremely important factor both in neighbouring countries and in the world generally; this sector was important in economic life, not merely for food production but also because so many people still made a living in agriculture. It is not realised now, but at that time the percentage employed in agriculture or horticulture was very large, which raised issues not just about unemployment and work, but social problems as well. Can these people earn a living in traditional agriculture here and in neighbouring countries? I emphasise this aspect because in France many of the big names have spent time in Agriculture and have all been Ministers for Agriculture, given the importance that agriculture still has in the French economy today. Jacques Chirac was Minister for Agriculture, just to mention one, but I could mention many others. Edgar Faure was Minister for Agriculture, and so on. You can still see the importance of agriculture in neighbouring countries, even if agriculture has become less important in Belgium, although it was very well organised and defended itself very well too. That is an aspect that must not be forgotten either. That was the agricultural phase in my intellectual life and in my economic education.