

Interview with Leo Tindemans: the Paris Summit and the establishment of the European Council (Brussels, 24 February 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] As Prime Minister of Belgium, in December 1974 you took part in the Paris Summit, which had been prepared by President Giscard d'Estaing. Can you recall for us in what way this meeting was important — it was the one that set up the European Council — in what way it was important for European integration and what the atmosphere was like among the Heads of State that were present in Paris at the time?

[Leo Tindemans] This meeting was one of the most important ones, although this is sometimes forgotten... Given that Giscard had just become President of the French Republic, what would his stance on European Union and European affairs be? The mere fact of having convened a meeting of Prime Ministers was in itself a significant political act. There were protests from the Netherlands: 'Are we to discuss Europe?' The reply was 'yes'. The Dutch reaction was: the Dutch Constitution does not allow the Prime Minister to attend a meeting where foreign policy matters are discussed in the absence of the Minister for Foreign Affairs. 'Is that so?' Giscard gave in, so foreign ministers were also invited. Then, again. 'Are we to discuss foreign policy and therefore European policy?' 'Of course.' 'And the Commission? Has the Commission not been invited?' So the European Commission had to be invited and they did so. It was Ortolí, François-Xavier Ortolí, who was invited. Indisputably, this happened thanks to Giscard d'Estaing; he wanted this meeting and he had ideas of his own — I shall not comment on his orthodoxy, but he did realise that you could work well with these European institutions, very well indeed, whereas the ministers' attitude was, increasingly... how shall I put it?... that final responsibility for decisions did not lie with them. And as you well know, the philosophy of the European pioneers was: it is the Commission, which has the right of initiative, that makes proposals and it is the Council of Ministers that decides on them. Well, there were many proposals that came from the Commission but did not get a decision out of the Ministerial Committees. Often these proposals and difficult questions were postponed until a summit when the Prime Ministers could decide on them. But if they wanted to do so, they had to follow the Community procedure. It was not a case of: we are together; we, the Prime Ministers, will decide. No. A proposal, a Commission position, was necessary; next, discussion with the Parliamentary Assembly— later on, Parliament; first, an Opinion, after that, often a vote and a very important one, and then the Council decision. The Council dithered, it wasted time, it would not decide. That was where Giscard d'Estaing deserved such great credit. At first, in some circles there was a lot of hesitation: if the Prime Ministers were separated from the rest of the institutions, would this be a new institution or would this not lead to a Europe of Nations? The States and their Prime Ministers would be present and decisions would be taken among States; it was no longer the institution, the European institution, that would take the decision. Anyway, it was done, and it brought with it a dose of dynamism unknown until then, with the responsibility held by the Prime Ministers. They often took decisions, especially when they were in agreement. The Mitterrand-Kohl couple would decide, and others too, although not always in the same style or the same way, but the great merit of the Giscard initiative was to separate, to create the European Union; the Union, the Council of Prime Ministers, Heads of State or Government. And even the presence of the President of the Republic was not an obstacle for this body, which was to become an institution.