

## Étienne Deschamps, More than 'honest brokers'? Belgium, Luxembourg and the 'empty chair crisis' (1965 1966)

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## More than ‘honest brokers’? Belgium, Luxembourg and the ‘empty chair crisis’ (1965-1966)

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*Some fear a vote, others fear a veto* (Pierre Werner, 19 January 1966)

When the Treaty that created the European Economic Community (EEC) came into force on 1 January 1958, it postponed application of the majority vote procedure in the Council of Ministers to the third phase (1 January 1966) of the transitional period for the establishment of the common market. However, General de Gaulle, who had not negotiated the Treaty, rejected this prospect, which he considered an unacceptable abandonment of sovereignty. Although he finally accepted the common market, whose commercial advantages for France he fully appreciated, the President of the French Republic refused to accept that Community Institutions should encroach on the political prerogatives of States.

In Brussels, in the night between 30 June and 1 July 1965, the French Government demanded that the majority voting procedure should not be implemented. Noting that the Council had not reached an agreement on the financial regulation of the common agricultural policy (CAP) in the allotted time, Maurice Couve de Murville, French Minister for Foreign Affairs and acting President of the Council, closed the session, thus provoking the failure of the negotiations. Couve de Murville at once communicated his intention not to take his seat in the Council of Ministers until France received satisfaction. It was a complete breach. On 6 July, Jean-Marc Boegner, the French Permanent Representative in Brussels, returned to Paris. France boycotted not only the EEC Council but also the Special Council of Ministers of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the Council of Euratom. By acting in this fashion, General de Gaulle was directly attacking the functioning of the Communities. He was trying to force the hand of his partners. This policy, known as the ‘empty chair’ policy, led to the first large-scale crisis in the history of the Community institutions. For more than six months France was to boycott the Community. It was the first time that the Community was to see its operations brought to a halt by one of its Member States.

### 1. Dissension in the ranks of Benelux

While considering the political crisis that occurred between 1965 and 1966, France’s attitude throws the divergences on European policy within the Benelux countries into stark relief. Whereas the Dutch adopted a strong stance in opposition to France, Belgium and Luxembourg did their utmost, throughout the crisis, not to worsen the situation but to seek a peaceful solution to it: one that would enable France to return to the negotiating table in Brussels.

In fact, such differences within the three countries regarding strategy were not new. They did, however, make themselves felt all the more after 1963 as de Gaulle’s France progressively distanced itself from important Community issues and from the American President J.F. Kennedy’s ‘Grand Design’ for Europe. We know that the Dutch — who were often irritated by what they took to be Francophilia — lost no opportunity to criticise their Belgian and Luxembourg colleagues for being too ready to align themselves with the French position, which they found excessive, and for their willingness to compromise. The 1961-1962 Fouchet negotiations, however, had already shown just how difficult the Benelux countries found it to defend their own interests, not to speak of sharing a common teleology of European integration.

Nonetheless, from the very beginning of the crisis, Belgium did its best to minimise the divergences within the Five, to avoid any friction unilaterally and to set in place a common position for the Three. No going back on the setting up of the common market — so vital for Belgian industry — was to be contemplated. It was essential to ‘save the machinery’ and the Brussels seat of the Community institutions. It must be said, however, that Paul-Henri Spaak, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, was personally in a very delicate situation due to the results of the elections of 23 May, which clearly showed that the Christian Social and Socialist parties had lost ground. The Government of Théo Lefèvre, in which he was also Deputy-Prime Minister, was still in business. What is more, the country’s French-speaking electorate was not entirely unsympathetic to France’s claims. It was not until 27 July that Pierre Harmel formed his new government, in which Spaak

kept the Foreign Affairs portfolio. He again found himself flanked by a Secretary of State for European Affairs, the Flemish Socialist, Henrik Fayat, who, however, played no personal part in the crisis. The truth is that, in this matter, the Belgians were clearly pragmatic, wishing to give the impression that the French position was not going to interfere with the normal functioning of the Community. As opponents of any amendment of the Treaties, they held that all attention should be focused on restarting discussions with France on the basis of new proposals coming from the European Commission. Spaak, who laid aside any desire for revenge resulting from the 1963 failure and refused to dramatise the situation, kept as his priority the political revival of the Six.

In fact, the break that occurred on 30 June placed Spaak in a deeply embarrassing position. Although he fundamentally agreed with the substance of the Commission's proposals, he took exception to the faulty judgement it displayed, and especially to the way in which it had made its proposals public. Spaak would be seen right in the forefront playing a personal role throughout the crisis. In July he let it be known that a technical agreement among the Five might be possible, but that no further commitment could be made without France. The Belgian Delegation also insisted that the French Delegation be kept informed about the discussions held in Brussels. In other words, any diktat from the Five must be avoided.

As for the Luxembourgers, their attitude was, initially, one of withdrawal. Thus Pierre Werner, who was both Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, advised Albert Borschette, the Permanent Representative in Brussels, to be prudent during meetings of the five Permanent Representatives which, in his opinion, absolutely had to remain unofficial. Werner held the Commission largely responsible for the failure of 30 June, but he thought it would be possible to bring the French back to the negotiating table. The problem would have to be limited to the implementation of the Treaty and a commitment to a rapid financial settlement of the CAP, at least until the merging of the Executives of the European Communities or, at the latest, until the end of the transitional period. Werner also let it be known that he had no intention of acting as a mediator, even though Luxembourg declared itself ready to intervene were 'overtures made that would lead it to believe that a compromise might be successful'. The Luxembourg Government's attitude consisted in avoiding anything that could be construed by France as a hostile gesture; this was confirmed on 7 July in the Permanent Representatives Committee (Coreper). The diplomats from Luxembourg and Belgium met with a refusal from the other representatives when they proposed what was in effect the postponement of the meeting. However, no decision could be taken at this meeting since the Belgian and Luxembourg representatives kept to their positions on all the points and let it be understood that they had no desire for any agreement to be reached by the five Delegations in the absence of France.

Behind the scenes, the bilateral discussions were going well. During the summer, Werner and Spaak, who held similar views on who was responsible for what in the crisis and on the possible means of resolving it, came to an agreement on the course of action that the Permanent Representatives should adopt in order to avoid a confrontation. Although they were not in favour of the Council meeting, they regarded it as politically inopportune for the Commission and the Five to pursue discussions on the issue of financial regulation in France's absence. They also decided to oppose the addition to the agenda of renewed discussion of matters that had remained in abeyance since 30 June.

From the Luxembourg viewpoint, a distinction was imperative between what was stipulated in the Treaty, and what was new to the Treaty. The Luxembourg Government believed that circumstances were not favourable for such a development since there existed no agreed political long-term view among the Six. Luxembourg also deplored the tactical error made by the Commission when it linked the parts regarding the implementing of commitments already made (such as agricultural funding) with those parts that were known to be controversial (such as 'own resources' and the extension of the powers of the European Parliament). Luxembourg held the Commission largely responsible for the crisis, even if it recognised that the 'empty chair policy' practised by France was incompatible with the commitments of the Rome Treaties. Having said this, if the basic rules of the Treaties (such as the arrangements regarding the Commission's role and qualified majority voting) were to be questioned, the Luxembourg Government would vigorously support the need to respect the Treaties to the letter.

The Council session of 26 July, held in the absence of France, demonstrated yet again the divisions among

the Five in the face of the crisis. While the Italian, Dutch and German Delegations wanted to carry on working in Brussels as normal, Belgium and Luxembourg were primarily interested in bringing France back to the negotiating table. As a result, it was not possible for Benelux to hold an agreed position at that time. However, by not allowing the Council to take any decisions, the Belgians and Luxembourgers provided against France's ire and skilfully manoeuvred themselves into a position where they might later become intermediaries between France and the Five. This was an extremely prudent attitude to adopt, as confirmed by Pierre Harmel, who, following the famous press conference given by General de Gaulle on 9 September, and after a private audience with King Baudouin, drew up a memorandum on the attitude that was to be taken: 'Avoid any co-ordinated aggressive stance: instead, defend the common interest and those of each of the five other countries'. Nonetheless, the remarks made by De Gaulle on 9 September, attacking supranational Europe and the Commission, did not encourage optimism.

The Luxembourg Government remained typically prudent, refraining from any official statement, although it regretted that the French position had elicited no official statement on the part of the Five. The diplomatic records do, however, clearly convey prevailing opinion in Luxembourg. The Secretary-General in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pierre Pescatore, criticised De Gaulle's remarks, accusing France of dictating to the Five the essential conditions for the negotiation it proposed: a proposal that they obviously could not accept without suffering a blow to their prestige. What is more, in the face of what he regarded as a very serious distortion of facts and intentions, Pescatore wondered 'whether there still remained sufficient grounds for trust to maintain the Community'. From Luxembourg's standpoint, only a Commission that was representative of the common interest and equipped with a degree of autonomy, and the introduction of majority voting in the Council thus 'allowing it to avoid the excesses of the absolute veto', would enable the Common Market to become a reality. In other words, France's partners were faced with a dilemma: refuse France's claims and the breach would be total; accept her claims and the common market would fail.

In the immediate future, the Luxembourg Government believed that the Five, or at the very least the three Benelux countries, ought to adopt a joint position on the basic issues before opening talks with France. This coordinated Benelux position should be founded upon three principles. Firstly, the three governments must resolve the crisis within the framework of the European institutions and on the basis of the Treaties. Secondly, they must oppose any challenges to the institutional structure of the Communities, since they regarded this as essential to their success. Thirdly, the operation of the Common Market and the continuity of its institutions must be safeguarded whilst awaiting the return of France. Concerning the institutions, a balance between the governments' prerogatives and the Commission's powers must be sought, while details on application of the majority vote should be clarified.

Nonetheless, Pescatore considered that coordination among the three governments had been made more difficult as a result of the requirements set down by the Dutch Parliament regarding the broadening of the European Parliament's powers — a requirement which was among the causes of the crisis. Moreover, and this is quite remarkable, he also stressed the role that the Benelux Inter-parliamentary Consultative Council (CICB) could play in encouraging greater awareness of political realities, thus leading to united action by the three countries.

## **2. The Belgian initiative or the 'Spaak plan'**

During the months of September and October, Spaak — who was aware how much France had appreciated his conciliatory and constructive attitude in the discussions on the night of 30 June — acted as intermediary between France and the Five in the hope of finding a solution to the crisis.

On 16 September, a Belgian Cabinet meeting held to discuss the European situation gave him the opportunity to announce a 'diplomatic initiative' aimed at resuming dialogue. He was, however, careful to make clear at all events that, whatever the outcome, Belgium remained closely attached to the Treaty of Rome and to the Atlantic Alliance, and that Belgian moves would take place within this clearly defined framework. This commitment to compliance with the Treaties could hardly surprise anyone, for it fitted in closely with Spaak's long-held convictions. He had always maintained that, in the European context, Belgium's real interests lay in a supranational formula that was at odds with the unanimity rule. For while it

might not remove the differences between ‘large’ and ‘small’ countries, the supranational principle did guarantee relatively greater political influence of the smaller countries by protecting them from being subordinate to a Directorate of the larger. However, given France’s attitude, Spaak did not hide that the principle of the majority vote could be a cause of tension among the Six. For it was inevitable that the progress that it would enable them to make towards European economic and political integration would affect what he called ‘the false myth of absolute national sovereignty’.

What some observers were to call the ‘Spaak plan’ provided for a special meeting of the Council without the participation of the Commission. Spaak justified recourse to this rarely used procedure, despite its being foreseen in the Rules of Procedure of the Council, citing the extraordinary situation created by the crisis and the political nature of the issues. He made it quite clear that this meeting should not adversely affect the prerogatives of the Commission, which the Belgian Government had no intention whatever of modifying. Besides, Spaak believed that the Five, if they were to be able to make France a proposal, would have to reach an agreement on the main thrust of a solution to the problems posed. He intended that the Council meeting tabled for 25 October should allow an agreement to be formulated on the principles underlying issues that had not yet been resolved in the common agricultural policy (CAP) and define the objectives in other matters, such as the multilateral negotiations in Geneva, customs union, and so on. It was not, therefore, a question of handing France the final draft for an agricultural financial regulation. But neither should new requirements be introduced or former decisions re-examined. If a consensus were arrived at, France would be invited to a meeting of the Council without the Commission being present. Despite his hostility towards any revision of the treaty, Spaak was not averse to a discussion of its interpretation on the part of the Six.

Wishing to place his plan on a firmer footing, Spaak did what he could to get support from his Benelux partners before the Council met. Without early agreement on their part, Belgium would find herself on her own and the document would at once be sent on to Bonn and Rome solely in the name of the Belgian Government. It turned out that the Netherlands were hesitant and disinclined to reveal their position before the forthcoming Council meeting. The Dutch Parliament’s reaction indicated clear reservations, and the Government preferred to leave the initiative to Amintore Fanfani, the Italian acting President of the Council. Although Dutch sources implied that the Belgian memorandum could perhaps be used as a basis for initiatives later on, an explanation of the main reason for The Hague’s reservations seems to be the Commission’s absence at the discussion of the agricultural issues, to which the Dutch gave great importance. On its side, the Luxembourg Government was displeased at having been consulted after the Belgian diplomatic initiative had already been made public; however, they made it known that they could accept these proposals, although they were prepared to wait until the meeting of the Five on 25 October to give them their final approval.

Although Belgium’s European partners had initially rejected the ‘Spaak plan’, it did establish the foundations on which the measure proposed by the Council of Ministers that met on 25 and 26 October 1965 was based. Following a thorough exchange of views on the agricultural policy, the Five were unanimous that it was essential for the Treaties to be implemented while respecting Community procedures and institutions. They invited France to attend a meeting of the Council held in the presence of the members of government alone, without even imposing a deadline by which France should accept the invitation. Spaak was able to get the four Delegations to agree to the ‘Spaak plan’ after making them some concessions. Afterwards, he lost no opportunity to let it be known that the continued operation of the Community of Five was not out of the question. Although it was largely hypothetical, this option was actually publicly advocated by certain Belgian officials, in the forefront of whom was Jean-Charles Snoy et d’Oppuers, who had remained in close contact with his former ‘boss’ during the Val Duchesse negotiations. Although the Treaties contained no provision for a Member State’s withdrawal, and Spaak could not conceive of European integration going ahead without France, this did not stop him questioning his staff on the eventuality of unilateral secession by Paris. In such an emergency, as in a divorce case, it would be up to the Court to apportion blame and, ultimately, to pronounce judgment by default.

In the course of a meeting in Luxembourg of the Benelux political consultation committee (Cocopo), which brought together policy directors at regular intervals, Pescatore stated that France had taken no diplomatic

initiative, and had only made its objectives known via public pronouncements: namely, one press conference statement and one announcement made in the National Assembly. Such a method was clearly aimed at ‘conditioning’ her partners, in Pescatore’s opinion. Furthermore, it gave France the advantage of leaving its hands free and of allowing it to change its demands whenever it liked.

When it came to the role of the Commission, the Cocopo speculated on the subject of the French criticisms. Was it the style of the Hallstein Commission, or, more fundamentally, were the French questioning its role and its institutional position? According to their information, the Luxembourg Government believed that French grievances stemmed from the way that the Hallstein Commission did things. If this were so, it would be a lot easier to come to an agreement, since merging the executives would allow the members of the Commission to be replaced. It would be more worrying if the French criticisms were levelled at the powers and the role of the institution as such. Did France want to take the right of initiative away from the Commission in order to change it into some sort of international secretariat, or would it rather have the right of initiative of the Member States increased? If the first hypothesis were unacceptable, they would have to examine the second one in order to find out whether such a measure would really upset the institutional equilibrium.

Pescatore also wondered whether a solution to the crisis might lie in merging the executive bodies, which could make a new start at intergovernmental level by nominating the members of the new Commission. This would enjoy the confidence of the governments and be, once more, an interlocutor that would be recognised by all parties. If it happened soon enough, it would save them from the somewhat questionable procedure of holding a Council meeting without inviting the Commission. For all these reasons, it was important to know what the attitude was of the other governments and national parliaments towards ratification of the Treaty merging the executive bodies. In Pescatore’s opinion, a merger would ease the way to finding a solution to the problems facing the Five, who had no alternative but to refuse the French demands. By including the issues raised by the French Government with those of merger, these issues would come within the context of enlarged negotiations. Lastly, Pescatore considered the feasibility of the Community’s continued existence without France. In his opinion, this hypothetical alternative would pose difficult political, legal and economic problems. Such a situation would effectively leave Benelux and Italy on their own, facing an ever-stronger Germany.

Robert Vaes, Director-General for Policy in the Belgian Foreign Ministry, explained that the aims of the ‘Spaak plan’ resulted from Belgium’s immediate concern with France’s absence. Convinced that it was necessary to know what Paris’s intentions were officially before launching a wide-ranging and detailed debate, Vaes openly criticised the Commission’s action. He thought that, when necessary, Community leadership should be in the hands of the Five, and all the more so since certain decisions had to be taken urgently. Not to take them would furnish General de Gaulle with further arguments against the Community. In Vaes’ opinion, it was vital to act with the utmost prudence in this affair if they were not to find themselves at France’s mercy.

Johan Adriaan de Ranitz, Director-General for Policy in the Dutch Foreign Ministry, informed his partners that Joseph Luns, the Foreign Minister, was pessimistic about the efforts being made to bring France back to the negotiating table. The Dutch view was that France’s aim was to decide for herself in cases where actions to do with international policy were concerned, and this was incompatible with the policy of the Five in many areas. The Netherlands were immovable regarding the institutional questions posed by France. Not only did they think that the Community had to be led by the Five as long as the crisis lasted, but also that efforts must be made to push matters along. At the same time, The Hague doubted that the empty chair policy could continue indefinitely. Moreover, the Netherlands held no hopes for a plan of European political cooperation, since the positions held seemed too far apart. All three Delegations thought that increasing consultation between the Foreign Ministries of the three countries would be worthwhile.

In November, aware of the risks of prolonged isolation and of its consequences on the national economy, France accepted to take part in an extraordinary meeting of the Council; however, this was to be held in Luxembourg, since it was the turn of the Grand Duchy to hold the rotating presidency of the Council from 1 January 1966.

### 3. The ‘Luxembourg Compromise’. A political *modus vivendi*?

In the Council Chamber of the Hôtel de Ville in Luxembourg — where Jean Monnet had opened the first meeting of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) — the Six came together on 17 and 18 January 1966 in a restricted Council chaired by Pierre Werner. The Council meeting was qualified as extraordinary, in that it took place away from the usual venue for Council meetings: the Brussels Palais des Congrès.

As had been agreed beforehand, the Five opposed any modification of the Treaties made in order to satisfy the demands of the French, who held the view that the objective of Community action should be agreement and compromise between the divergent positions of the various partners. The Germans and the Dutch held that decisions taken within the Community institutions had always been inspired by mutual consideration. Luns reaffirmed his opposition to the right of veto, which he blamed for crippling the Community. Werner preferred to approach the issue more positively, holding that the Treaties conceived the common interest only in relation to the interests of the Member States.

It is undeniable that Spaak showed great goodwill. Spaak’s view was that on every occasion when important decisions needed to be taken, the Council should do its utmost to reach a unanimous vote ‘en toute sagesse’ (a term indicating ‘informed goodwill’). He regarded the majority vote as no more than a last measure once an impasse had been reached; his suggestion was a stage by stage conciliation procedure. This involved the Council proceeding with several readings of the Commission proposals each time one or two Member States invoked special or vital interests. In this way the majority vote would be called only if there were a failure after three attempts at reaching unanimous consent. Although the Five judged it complicated to put into effect, they made no fundamental objections to the conciliation procedure that Spaak proposed, although it remained unacceptable to France, since it culminated in a majority vote after all. Werner, who was always on the look-out for a political compromise, had to devote his efforts to reconciling the concerns of those who wanted to guard against abuses of the majority rule with those who were worried about abuses of the minority or of the right of veto. In fact, the Luxembourg presidency paid close attention to the French complaints — to their long-term consequences and their legality.

The Five maintained that any modification of the terms of the Treaty had to be agreed jointly with the Commission (Article 236 providing for consultation of the Assembly and, where appropriate, of the Commission) which, at all events, had to continue playing an active role in the Community process. As Werner went on to examine the French ‘Decalogue’, he excluded from the discussion the points relating to those powers delegated to committees by the Council that, first of all, came within the responsibility of the Council. The Five agreed to admit that the bicephalous nature of the Community was not adequately represented externally by the terms of the Treaty; they declared themselves ready to accept a reorganisation of its external relations and information policy along the lines of cooperation on an equal footing between the Council and the Commission. Spaak even proposed adding a further item to the Decalogue: the possibility of improving cooperation between the Commission and Coreper.

Although Werner regarded the French timetable as both an inventory of the most important decisions that they faced and a working hypothesis, he knew it was impossible to commit to a fixed timetable while waiting for a solution to the political problems. The six Delegations therefore decided to suspend the meeting until 27 January. Nonetheless, they made a note of their agreement to instruct their Permanent Representatives to examine the issues linked to majority voting and also to the French Delegation’s aide-memoire on lines of conduct for the Commission. However, France found Spaak’s political formula quite unacceptable since it still culminated in a majority vote after all. It was deadlock. The decision was taken to meet again ten days later in Luxembourg.

When discussions resumed on 28 and 29 January, joint efforts by Luns and Spaak enabled the Five to come to a common position. This stipulated that the conciliation efforts aimed at unanimity could not go on beyond a reasonable period, even if very important interests of a Member State were at issue. At this point, and in the absence of a unanimous solution, the qualified majority rule would have to be applied, as laid

down in the Treaty. This clarification of the position of the Five confirmed the fundamental, and legally irreconcilable, divergence of views between the French Delegation and the Five.

Spaak considered that the question of majority voting was of academic interest rather than a real possibility, for it was unlikely that one country would ever find itself isolated on an important issue. In these conditions, what form should the political agreement of the Six take? Ought they to cover up this difference of views with ambiguous formulæ or should they recognise it openly? Spaak favoured the latter approach, and in the end this was the one presented by Luns. Doubtless Spaak judged it preferable to see the Dutch Delegation adopt this proposal, in order to increase the chances of its being accepted. In contrast with the Belgians, the Dutch had always taken an intransigent attitude towards France. Spaak also considered that his conciliatory attitude throughout the crisis had aroused suspicion among certain Member States which, like the Netherlands, had no intention of displaying any indulgence towards France.

In the end, since the dispute about majority voting could not be settled, the Luxembourg agreement recorded the divergence between the views of France and the Five. If the search for a unanimous solution were to come to nothing, the Five would have recourse to a majority vote, in conformity with the Treaty. As for relations between the Council and the Commission, the Six adopted a sort of code of good conduct, made up of seven points: a 'Heptalogue' that some were quick to describe as a 'catalogue of the seven deadly sins'. The compromise bound the Commission more closely to the Council by limiting its right of initiative, having tacitly relinquished the notion of further developing the powers of Parliament. It was what remained of the ten-point French document (the Decalogue), after eliminating the French demands for the Delegation of Council functions to the Commission, the excessive use and detail of directives, and the discretion that members of the Commission were to observe in their public pronouncements. Although it calls into question the potential for supranationality in the Treaty of Rome, the Luxembourg Compromise, which was the practical result of adapting to circumstances, remains a political agreement with no real basis in law, containing no formal modification of the Treaty at all. Furthermore it does not respect the revision procedure laid down in the Treaties, nor does it interpret the Treaties, a function which remains the monopoly of the Court of Justice of the European Communities.

## **Conclusion**

The debates concerning the 'empty chair crisis' and the Luxembourg Compromise, which was their political result, put Benelux solidarity to the test on more than one occasion. However convinced the Belgians and the Luxembourgers were of the need to pursue European integration together with France despite all the difficulties, they were swift to make common cause in order to find a solution to the crisis. By virtue of their experience of compromise and of playing the role of honest broker, they turned out to be useful intermediaries between France and her partners within the Common Market. But although Belgium and Luxembourg criticised the tactics of the Hallstein Commission, they had no intention of abandoning the majority rule and the supranational potential of the Treaty of Rome, which they considered the best guarantee of equilibrium between the smaller and the larger countries in the Community.

The January 1966 negotiations also showed the importance of the personal role played by the Luxembourg and Belgian negotiators. Prudent in his dealings, Pierre Werner strove to adopt a positive attitude, unremittingly seeking solutions that would be acceptable to everyone. He knew how to choose just the right moment to interrupt a debate in order to allow the various Delegations the time to confer. Throughout the negotiations, Werner also took care to maintain a cordial and frank atmosphere, thus improving the chances of seeing a successful end to them. He was seconded admirably in his task by Pierre Pescatore who, as a former member of the legal team in Val Duchesse responsible for drawing up and formulating the Treaties of Rome, had a perfect command of the provisions of the Treaty and of their institutional significance.

As for Spaak, he remained alert throughout the negotiations for any opportunity to propose possible solutions. Clearly, he wanted to save the common market and the Treaties of Rome, for which he had chaired the preparatory working parties ten years previously. The best interests of both Belgian industry and of Brussels, as seat of the Community institutions, were at stake. But his aim was quite as much to bring France back into the Community. A Common Market of five members therefore seems to have been, above



all, a catastrophic scenario or a threat that the Belgians hoped never to have to put into practice. Spaak also worked extremely hard to reduce what was a fundamental divergence between the Five and France to a false problem or, at the very least, a purely theoretical problem. Little by little, faced with France's shillyshallying, he abandoned diplomatic manoeuvres in favour of the Community framework, at the same time seeking to prevent any moves the Five might make to put themselves in the wrong concerning the absent French Delegation. His criticisms of the Commission, which he happened to consider the best guarantor for the small countries, were also to grow more discreet. Four years later, he was to write in his Mémoires: 'In all those days I never ceased to play the role of conciliator between France on the one hand and Germany and the Netherlands, who turned out to be the toughest among the Five, on the other.' He was particularly skilful at drawing back at the right moment in order to let others do the job of presenting one of his proposals in order to increase the chances of its success. The empty chair crisis was his last European campaign. In February 1966, the Belgian Government fell. At the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Pierre Harmel replaced Spaak, who withdrew from the spotlight of the Belgian and European political scene for good.