

Interview with Leo Tindemans: Christian democracy and Europe (Brussels, 24 February 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In 1976, in Luxembourg you helped establish the European People's Party, of which you also became the first chairman. What were the objectives at that time of the Christian Democrat leaders who participated in the establishment of the EPP? What were the objectives and the implications of establishing a federation of Christian Democrat parties?

[Leo Tindemans] This is a subject that I am happy to deal with — the others as well, but here the terrain has been relatively unexplored. There are extremely positive factors that led to the establishment of such a party; there are less attractive elements too — I won't say they are ugly or bad, but less attractive than what is sometimes put about. Even before the war, in Europe, parties of Christian inspiration would meet from time to time, but there existed no structure for this. However, after the war ended, the need was felt to meet, to consult, even perhaps to adopt the same policies and so forth. There was Germany, and at first no one knew what Fate was holding in store for Germany; but when you looked at the map — I don't want to dwell on this point — but central Europe was empty. It was a desert; there was nothing there. Speaking geopolitically, it was a dangerous situation. There was the Soviet Union, with its people's democracies and their Russian troops and so on; half of Europe was under a different regime, whereas in the west they had demobilised as soon as possible. Of course it was the greatest desire of all the soldiers — of all the military and the prisoners of war — to return as quickly as possible to their countries and go back to their families. So, you see... The illusion that 'we are all brothers in arms and all democrats', or what have you; this end of the war euphoria: 'we have won; we are the good ones' had dissipated very quickly and soon disappeared. An increasing tension could be felt — the Cold War — so this euphoria did not last long. In 1948, there was the Prague coup d'état — the revolution in Prague with the Communist regime taking power; there was the Berlin blockade; in several of these countries, in Poland and elsewhere, there was a change of government and a Communist regime was installed. People asked: 'What is happening in Europe?' And, yet again, alas, we had to think about security. So meetings were held; there were Social Christian parties present in several countries, but their commitments were not the same. They were not all governing parties, so one was led to ask: 'How can we cooperate? To do what?' As a result, we looked for all sorts of ways to cooperate. We started with the *Nouvelles équipes internationales* — the New International Teams. Then we asked all those who could move, who could travel, to get together and meet. These were, of course, the Christian Democrat parties. However, France and the French intellectuals did not care for this title, because they did not relish the potential for confusion between religion, Christianity and politics. To use the term 'Christian Democrat' in France did not satisfy the intellectuals — which was not the case in Germany. In Germany, the churches had played a role. Philosophers held that the churches played an important role in forming a consciousness during the post-Nazi period. Therefore, the State, the citizen and the responsibilities of the citizen were issues that were examined in quite a different manner than here or in France. So we found the name: *Nouvelles équipes internationales*.

It must not be forgotten, if you will allow me to say so, that the section of the population in France holding Christian beliefs had not participated in politics since 1870 and the end of the monarchy; it detested the Republic. Thus, for the first time, Christians were again going to play a role in political life, with, among others, the Popular Republican Movement. The MRP in its very name referred to the Republic, recognised the Republic, and wanted to practise politics within the Republic. That was something new. They too were extremely careful not to create any misunderstanding through the naming of this political configuration. Hence, *Nouvelles équipes internationales*. Théo Lefèvre once said: 'The Frenchman fights with his flag in his pocket,' because they would not use the term 'Christian Democrat'. In our country we would say 'Social Christian' on the one hand, and 'Popular Christian', on the other, but this did not really matter. Other opinions were aired that defended the same approach as that of France, but they were not in the majority. We had to find a means of working together so, in this Europe, we met and we talked, but gradually, it became a question of the organisation of this Europe. Well, firstly we had had, while still suffering from the wounds of the war, the European Payments Union, and at one point the European League for Economic Cooperation — which several countries were members of, but not all. Then the ones that did not belong to it demanded that these issues should be discussed, and that policy matters be debated in their presence, all together. As for those who were part of these organisations — and this became very difficult with the ECSC, the Coal and Steel Community and the Economic Community — the Six at that time wanted to meet, to confer, to debate, to take

a stand according to the structure and within this structure, whereas those who were not part of it demanded that they be present and that their voices and opinions be heard. This created tension between the members of these institutions and the non-members. Finally, the idea was suggested: ‘Look here, we must have an opportunity to meet — the six of us, without the others. It is not an anti-patriotic move, in my view, to exclude the others, but we must make a stand when the Six all meet. As a consequence, we must have an opportunity to talk among ourselves about the future of this Europe: about what we want and how we can come to an agreement.’

That is how the idea of a European People's Party came to be accepted. What is more, we realised that the national political parties seldom discussed European affairs. Their congresses — as we saw in Belgium — were excellent, with fine speakers, and so forth. Then, just before the end, there was the last point on the agenda, and it was Europe once again. Well, it was two o'clock and everyone was hungry and wanted to leave and hear the President give his closing speech. But this is the truth: Europe was the last point and we did not have enough time to talk about it seriously. So they said: ‘Europe will never come about if we do not create European parties.’ These three elements taken together led to the decision to create the European People's Party.