

Interview with Pierre Pescatore: the international context at the time of the Val Duchesse negotiations (Luxembourg, 10 September 2003)

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[Étienne Deschamps] May we now turn to the subject of European revival? Do you consider that the international political climate in those years — namely, 1955, 1956 and 1957 — had an effect, and if so how great, on the course of the negotiations among the Six?

[Pierre Pescatore] It certainly had an effect, both negative, yet also, in the long run, positive. We were well aware of the failure of the EDC; we had drawn conclusions from a criterion that enabled us to differentiate between a projection for the future and utopia, on the one hand, and the European reality, on the other. We had been brought back to earth; we were conscious that Europe could not end on this note of failure and that we would have to make the best of what was still possible at the time, given that General de Gaulle was already stirring things up behind the scenes, but it was still the Fourth Republic. There was a feeling of urgency; the Algerian problem had not been resolved, so there was this urgency and a wish to make the best of what was possible. So there was, above all, this overriding need to overcome the failure and build a Europe based on realism and practicality.

At the same time, there was also an urgent need to regroup in the face of a Soviet threat that was still very real, the Cold War atmosphere that I experienced personally for a period in New York, living with the nagging worry: ‘Shall I still be able to return to Europe, or will something happen there?’ There, we felt acutely a constant threat hanging over us that the present generation cannot imagine. Therefore, you must add together the two pressures: to overcome the failure, and, as Europeans, to do something constructive so as to be able to continue with our integration process. There was no allergic reaction against integration at that stage, but there was against supranationality. People had had enough, given the position of the State in France and the failure of the EDC, which had been attempted in a supranational spirit: the word was taboo. As for integration, you could still talk about it at this time.

It was in this atmosphere that these negotiations took place in a spirit of prudence, of awareness of our limits and also of the need to do something tangible, with a view to ... — and this is another element that is as a rule nowadays disregarded, namely that it must not be forgotten that GATT, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, preceded the OEEC as well as the Common Market. For no union or integration could be created unless the terms of Article 24 of GATT were respected. Today, people no longer know what was, is, or remains of Article 24 of GATT, which exempts from the most-favoured-nation clause those member states that unite either in the form of a customs union or a free-trade area. For the ECSC, the free-trade area pattern was chosen — it is not worthwhile going into the details — but for the Common Market, a customs union was taken as the basic option, in accordance with the requirements of the GATT Agreement. Hence, if we are speaking about the general atmosphere, we must take all of these factors into account, including that of the GATT requirement, which would not allow any other form of organisation than that of a very thoroughly integrated customs union. It is therefore not by chance that Article 9 of the EC Treaty, as it was then, as it became then, read: The Common Market ‘shall be based upon a customs union’. It is an explicit reference to the GATT rules, you see? That constitutes the first framework, then the failure of the EDC, the need to move on under realistic conditions, and lastly the ever present and acute threat posed at the time by the Soviet Union. All six of us were also members of NATO, too. Membership of NATO was an identification that, unfortunately in my opinion, was lost later on. Now, we even have neutral parties in the Community; we have experienced the events of 1966 and the withdrawal of France from NATO, but at the time NATO still had real and tangible consistency in the context of Cold War unity.