

Interview with Charles Rутten: the Messina Conference (The Hague, 29 November 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] The Messina Conference, you were there, so, again, what was the atmosphere like at the meeting and what were its immediate consequences?

[Charles Rutten] Once again, it's very, very difficult to say what it was like. There was an optimistic atmosphere amongst the Benelux delegations but there was considerable scepticism on the part of the French. Amongst the Germans opinions were divided. There was Hallstein and Adenauer who supported the basic ideas contained in the Benelux document, but there was also Erhard who was strongly opposed, so he did not want to have anything to do with it and did not want to go beyond what was in the OEEC framework. Italy tended to support the Benelux document.

But clearly what was crucial was to know what the French reaction would be. And the French reaction was very, very cautious. That, in itself, was a major step forward, because everyone was wondering 'What will they say?' Of course, Mendès France had left the political stage, and the new French government realised that with the failure of the EDC France had played a nasty trick on Europe and therefore had a sort of debt towards Europe.

In Messina they kept a very ... they adopted a very, very cautious approach. Clearly there were problems. They wondered how it would work etc. They kept pushing forward the Euratom idea, which was crucial for them at the time. But it was really — how should I say — we were sounding each other out, we wanted to see what each other's reactions would be. The upshot was that it was very difficult to agree on a text, on a final text. In fact, we did manage to agree on a procedural decision. That is to say ... we set up a committee that would study the proposals contained in the Benelux Memorandum and in the other memoranda. Today we would say that we decided to conduct a 'feasibility study' that tied nobody down. Everyone could later say, 'No, I'm not convinced, let's move on to something else.'

But ... that was very important. The other key point (and this was very decisive for the future) was that we decided that the committee would indeed be a committee of experts, but would be chaired by a politician. That gave a political angle to the way the procedure was actually applied. And clearly, of course, the final decisive element was that we agreed to make Spaak the chairman.

While Beyen was crucial in the preparatory stage and for fostering the idea of an economic union, Spaak was crucial to the success first of his committee, the Spaak Committee, and then for the success of the Val Duchesse talks. We wouldn't have managed without Spaak. Since I took part in both, I am perhaps the only remaining witness who can still assert that without Spaak it would never have worked.