

Interview with Charles Ruttén: the proceedings at the Venice Conference (The Hague, 29 November 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] So this Spaak Report is submitted, or rather studied, by the six Foreign Ministers in Venice — an extremely important Conference which notes the Spaak Report and determines the future procedure to be followed. Could you tell us what your recollections are of this very important stage in the revival process?

[Charles Rutten] Yes, well, as you say, the Vienna Conference was very important because it was a matter of seeing whether the governments could fall in line behind Spaak. The Report was, as I was saying, very straightforward and recommended the negotiation of a treaty on economic union. Everyone was very concerned about how things would turn out, because there was particular fear that France could not accept this Report's conclusions. And, if that were to be the case, then what was to be done next?

The meeting was planned to allow for lengthy discussions, lasting two or three days, but — just to summarise as briefly as possible — to the astonishment, I must say, of all the delegations, the French Delegation asked to speak first and immediately stated that it could accept the Spaak Report and could therefore agree to start negotiations on the Spaak Report's recommendations, under certain conditions. There were a number of conditions, particularly on the harmonisation of social sector legislation. This was very important because, after the war, France had introduced the principle of equal pay for men and women, something which did not exist in any other country, so France feared that she would be in a weaker position under this system. The other point raised by France was the issue of the Overseas Territories. France demanded that talks on economic union, in which it would participate, should also include a decision on the association of the Overseas Territories. Initially, of course, there was a great sigh of relief that this step had been taken, because all the other delegations were ready, and had stated their readiness, to accept the Spaak Report's recommendations.

With regard to the French conditions, not much was said. It was said that they'd be looked at once the negotiations were under way. France, and also Belgium, which aligned itself with France, called for a special conference to be convened as soon as possible after Venice to discuss the issue of the Overseas Territories, and nobody objected to that, and that meant that, after one hour of debate, the Conference had achieved its goal, and the decision was taken to continue with the ... to open negotiations on an economic union.

A practical problem arose, because all the delegations had reserved rooms for three days, and, in those days, you couldn't say, 'Look, things have changed, we're catching another flight.' Anyway, most people had come by train. So we went off on some excursions. In Venice, you're spoiled for choice in terms of outings. And, on one of those outings — I think I have already told you this — there was quite a remarkable encounter. That is, the six Ministers of Foreign Affairs who were on the islands met former President Truman who was now ... well, he had completed his term of office and was travelling around Europe and did not recognise the six Foreign Ministers at all. He didn't understand what was happening, but then it was explained to him, and they hugged each other warmly. That was important all the same; they thanked the former US President for the support that America had given to the principles of the Spaak Report, because in some European circles it was feared that, if we went forward without the Americans, without the participation of the Americans, it would be a disaster, and the Americans strongly supported first of all Monnet's ideas and then the ideas set out in the Spaak Report, and that was clearly a very strong argument for the supporters of those ideas, particularly Beyen and Spaak. So that was the Paris [*sic**] Conference that paved the way for the opening of the negotiations in Val Duchesse.

* Venice.