

Interview with Catherine Lalumière: François Mitterrand's commitment to Europe (Paris, 17 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] For virtually the whole of your European career you were in close contact with President François Mitterrand. How, with the benefit of hindsight, do you now regard his vision of Europe and his European message?

[Catherine Lalumière] You have to read the last address that he gave to the European Parliament a few weeks before the end of his second term of office. It is a speech that, I must say, affected all the MPs that were present because we very soon realised that it was his testament — in every sense of the word 'testament'. His testament as President, as a convinced European, and the testament that covered his whole life. It was therefore quite a remarkable text, very largely improvised, incidentally, as we realised when he ignored his notes and addressed us directly, speaking from the bottom of his heart and, to put it colloquially, giving it all he'd got. Right. I really think that he was European to the core but — well, it is not a but — he was very typical of his generation, one that had lived through the war. There is no doubt at all that men of that generation — not all of them, of course, but many of them — had thought at great length about this unbelievable problem: how is it that this continent — the most civilised in the world, the most modern at any rate since, in terms of civilisation, perhaps China or elsewhere might be on a par; but let us say the most modern, the most advanced, the most sophisticated continent — was able to engender forms of totalitarianism that were cruel to the point of brutishness? Be it Nazism or Stalinism. This gave rise to a great deal of reflection and François Mitterrand was one of those who asked themselves the question: how can this have happened? He was a very cultivated man with a keen knowledge of literature, history and a variety of cultures. He was one of those political figures who were also intellectuals and who had been marked by that period; it is my belief that, in his political life, much of his energy was focused on the principle: 'Never again!' A determination to ensure that war and its disruption should become impossible on the continent of Europe — and so should totalitarianism. François Mitterrand was a legal expert; he was a lawyer. Of course, like all men he had his weaknesses — you could accept some things, yet you would be shocked by others. However, fundamentally, he had great respect for the individual. On his lips, human rights were not merely a puff of wind; they were really very important. During his youth he saw human rights flouted in the most abominable way possible. So it was important not just to avoid wars but also to avoid such violations of the individual. Take the concentration camps — there has never been a worse violation of human rights. Pure horror. How can we ensure that all that does not happen again? We know that both the best and the worst can be found within the European tradition. We are capable of the best and of the worst. This is the origin, this is the key to his European commitment — and it was not a policy of expediency, although there may be expedient elements. Of course, at a given moment, in order to break a deadlock and satisfy some pressure group or other, there will be an element of expediency, but there is a main thread which has its origin in his youth during the war. The war and totalitarianism. I emphasise this strongly because people talk a lot about peace. It is just an objective in the European integration process. A very important one, but it is equally important to prevent a return to these abominable violations of human rights. In other words, he is perhaps someone in the tradition of Hannah Arendt. How could Germany have been able to do what it did — Germany, and others, in the field of human rights violations? There. He remained faithful to this principle until the end of his days, and everybody who met him, particularly abroad, was struck by this commitment. In his second term of office, after 1989, he followed the same thread, held the same convictions, but I have the impression nonetheless that this Central Europe, by its peculiarities, disconcerted him a little. No doubt he would also have had reservations about the reunification of Germany, this confederation, the place of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Soviet Union in August 1991. It seems that he was unable to imagine that the Soviet Union could disappear.

It was in this period that I received the man who was to be Boris Yeltsin's Foreign Minister at the Council of Europe; he had been sent by Yeltsin, and he said: 'The Soviet Union is going to fall apart, but you have to help us.' It is true that at that time one could not do much in the Council of Europe other than listen with great interest to what was being said, but in Paris they hesitated, because the Stalinist shock troopers who were trying to take power in that wavering state were not rejected at once by Paris. I think that at that time President Mitterrand — and it must be said that the situation was tricky, it was not at all easy — generally remained constant to this central thread. This was for the reasons that I have indicated, reasons that went

back to his youth, in my opinion, to the period of his youth.