

'Removing obstacles to the building of Europe' from Le Monde (23 December 1983)

Caption: In an article in the French daily newspaper Le Monde on 23 December 1983, Leo Tindemans, Belgian Minister for External Relations, speculates on the future of the process of European cooperation, in particular in the field of defence and security, and moots the idea of a reactivation of Western European Union (WEU).

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Removing obstacles to the building of Europe

In a world more tense than at any time in the last 20 years, the Europe of Ten, meeting in Athens, has given us a display of impotence which springs from disunity. The whole Eurasian land mass is rocked by conflicts, but its western extremity, which for several centuries dominated the world, brings its leaders together on Greek soil to discuss cutting milk production — and they fail! If only we can learn the lessons of this failure before it is too late — and there is a lot it can teach us!

All I would like to concentrate on at this point is political cooperation. This developed for 12 years, in a quiet but surprisingly dynamic way. More recently, everyone has noticed a few cracks appearing. Europe has kept mum when it should have spoken out. Ministers have on occasion tended to make a show of what divides them rather than what unites them. In Athens, the European Council remained silent on political topics, which was the right thing to do. It would have been slightly ridiculous to take a stance on the Middle East or Central America when we couldn't agree on how to deal with our own problems. Without an Economic Community there can be no common policy with any validity in the outside world.

Luckily, everyone now admits that international problems cannot be approached by making a sharp distinction between the political and the economic. The Stuttgart Declaration on European Union encourages ministers to deal with both these aspects together. It is when, directly or implicitly, it uses the economic, commercial or financial weight of the Community that political cooperation proves to be really effective. In Athens, a Community in crisis discovered that it had no political force.

We are going to have to conduct a critical re-examination of all Europe's structures, and, when we do, political cooperation must be given proper attention. As far as I am concerned, there are two difficult and interconnected problems which still worry me, because they are still just as acute as in 1975 when I stressed how important they were in my 'Report on the European Union' ⁽¹⁾: dialogue between Europe and the United States, and security questions.

In transatlantic relations, no one questions either the number or the quality of the contacts — it is the nature of those contacts which raises questions. We have close bilateral relations in many areas, and in most cases they are frank and direct. The mechanisms established by the OECD and NATO work well in their respective spheres and, in the latter case, they have certainly been made more efficient at the ministerial level by the introduction of restricted sessions and informal meetings.

There are also western summits, held at irregular intervals but on the way to becoming the usual practice. What bothers me in this apparently well-stocked set of arrangements is the absence of the Community. The building of Europe, in both its economic and its political dimensions, very obviously has aspects, both positive and negative, which are of the greatest importance to the United States.

Conversely, it would be in the interest of European countries to use their newly acquired solidarity more often in order to put forward a collective position in transatlantic relations. But that is a discussion which never takes place, for lack of a framework or of anyone authorised to act as interlocutor. The Community of Ten is in everyone's minds, in the many forms which Europe-US ties take, but it is there like Hamlet's ghost: you run into it in every corridor, but it says nothing or speaks indistinctly.

Our governments, for once abiding strictly by the rules laid down in the Treaty of Rome, leave it to the Commission to deal with the thankless task of sorting out the conflicts of interests which inevitably arise in trade relations. They leave it to the Presidency to notify the United States of the workings of political cooperation, following procedures which are so inconspicuous as to border on the clandestine. Besides that, the idea of adopting a collective approach is so far from everyone's minds that North America is the only part of the world for which there is no provision for any working party in the political cooperation system. We ought to be able to do better!

As for the European dimension of security problems, there is a growing interest in it on every side, especially in France. President Mitterrand's very important speech in Bonn on 24 November, and his

television interview on 16 November, were in this respect a follow-on from two addresses by the Prime Minister to the Institute of Higher National Defence Studies. For a variety of reasons, and in particular as a means of putting up stronger resistance to neutralist tendencies, it seems to me that we should look for a greater 'Europeanisation' of defence problems. I agree with Mr Mauroy when he says that there can nowadays be no substitute for the American nuclear systems which guarantee the security of European countries, especially those countries which have no national nuclear force.

A lesser evil

Like him, I think that our governments can and should be thinking about strategic concepts and certain forms of defence cooperation. Not everyone in the Community takes this view, which means that we cannot use the structures of political cooperation, which are the natural extension of the Community. That leaves us with WEU, an old organisation, whose structures and potential are by and large not used. I myself would have no objection to our making an effort to develop some sort of cooperation on political and military problems in that forum, provided the organisation itself were open to all members of the Community which agreed to abide by its rules.

Development along these lines would, at least temporarily, introduce the concept of a 'tiered' Europe similar to that which the European Monetary System is establishing in the monetary field. This concept would obviously put the cohesion of the whole system at some risk, but, provided only those who excluded themselves were excluded, and that a serious effort was made to bring the various structures as close together as possible in practice, such an approach would seem to me to be a lesser evil.

Europe can no longer afford to waste any opportunity that comes along, on the pretext that it does not look quite as the most demanding among us might wish.

A historian would no doubt conclude that what prevents the building of Europe is the gradual adoption, for complicated reasons, of a decision-making system too biased in favour of negative stances. It only takes one party to prevent the whole group doing anything at all, whereas it usually takes more than a strong majority to be able to take any action whatsoever.

There is no simple solution to this state of affairs. When it comes to political cooperation, I think that a reminder of the overall perspective, of the motives for acting, of the special effort we owe to this forum to which we have decided to attach special importance, and of how useful it is to all of us, should be a way of getting past the first effects of routine so that we reach a consensus more often. When that proves impossible to achieve for new, large-scale operations, then we will need to give careful thought to the interim solution of a tiered Europe: however imperfect it may be, it gives those who want to make progress the power to bring others along behind them.

France, which is going to have to lead the Community past some hazardous pitfalls, is in a good position to take on this twofold operation. From the outset, it has had a strong influence on political cooperation, whose basic concepts spring, in part, from a de Gaullian way of seeing things. Its geostrategic position, too, gives it a key position in any common discussion of defence problems. France's two previous Presidencies, in 1974 and 1979, were marked by significant advances in political cooperation. Let us hope the same will happen this time.

LEO TINDEMANS

(1) Mr Tindemans was commissioned by the Member States to produce a report on ways of making progress with the political union of Europe.