

Transcription of the interview with Étienne Davignon (Brussels, 10 January 2013)


Caption: Transcription of the interview with Étienne Davignon, Member (1977–1981) then Vice-President (1981–1985) of the Commission of the European Communities with particular responsibility for the Internal Market, Industrial Affairs and the Customs Union, carried out by the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (CVCE) on 10 January 2013 in Brussels. The interview was conducted by François Klein, a Scientific Collaborator at the CVCE, and particularly focuses on the following aspects of Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa's life: his personality and his activities at European level and as Chairman of the 'Notre Europe' think tank (2005–2010).

Source: Interview d'Étienne Davignon / ÉTIENNE DAVIGNON, François Klein, prise de vue: Nicolas Donnerup.- Bruxelles: CVCE [Prod.], 10.01.2013. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:17:49, Couleur, Son original).

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URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/transcription_of_the_interview_with_etienne_davignon_brussels_10_january_2013-en-5d15fb8a-25a1-463a-aa9e-f923ba4e954e.html

Last updated: 11/09/2017



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I. Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa’s work at European level

[François Klein] Hello, Mr Davignon.

[Étienne Davignon] Hello.

[François Klein] Thank you for agreeing to share your experiences with us as part of the project commemorating the work of Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, for which various interviews are being conducted in cooperation with Notre Europe and Sciences Po Paris. You were Vice-President of the Thorn Commission at the time when Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa arrived in Brussels, where he took the helm of DG II Economic and Financial Affairs. What impression did he make on you at the time, and what role did he play in the Commission during a period when Europe appeared to be in the grip of a latent crisis?

[Étienne Davignon] Well, his arrival was preceded by his glowing reputation. It was an important appointment, since the position of Director-General was truly an inspirational position, not only for the Commissioner responsible but for the entire Commission. I remember this because François-Xavier Ortoli was in charge of financial affairs at the Commission, and he talked to me about it and, very rightly, had great confidence in Tommaso. And it was a very close collaboration. We should bear in mind that it was a key moment because the European Monetary System — set up under the presidency of Roy Jenkins, with the involvement of Giscard and Schmidt — had just begun working, and obviously since the economic situation was difficult, the monetary situation was difficult, too. So he was really thrown in at the deep end. He didn’t have a human chance, and given his past, he was well-versed in these affairs. He played an important role because I’d say that at that time the horizontal relations within the Commission, between the various people in charge, were perhaps better than they became afterwards with the increase in the number of Commissioners and Directorates-General. For example, I dealt largely with industrial and economic affairs, and Tommaso Padoa would help us with the macroeconomic aspects, and the Directorate for Industry didn’t simply operate alone in its silo. So I grew to know him well and to greatly appreciate him. He was competent and exercised his proficiency serenely. He showed no intellectual arrogance towards those who knew things less well than him, and I certainly belonged to that category. He took over a major Directorate-General and retained its importance, including in relation to the Member States — because at that time the preparations for Council meetings were not split. They were undertaken by the permanent representatives. So he was directly involved in what I’d call ‘political’ negotiations, in order to bring about the desired results.

[François Klein] Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa belonged to a group of Italian senior officials, together with the likes of Renato Ruggiero and subsequently Mario Draghi, who worked hard towards the country’s modernisation by using the lever of Europe to encourage reforms. What kind of reputation

did they enjoy on the European stage?

[Étienne Davignon] As you quite rightly mentioned, there was a strong tradition of involvement of the Bank of Italy. It started with Carli and so on, who became deeply involved in European integration, with real proficiency — which means that the main players at that time were the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the one hand and the Bank of Italy on the other, as well as the political leaders of the government of the time. They were full participants, and the difference between their European and national activities was barely noticeable as it was the same issue. If Europe progressed, it provided support for Italy; if Italy progressed, it strengthened the European framework. They were entirely at ease with this almost dual responsibility and were thus the Italian individuals who played an extremely important role in European integration throughout the entire period, both at the level of senior officials and a certain number of ministers. Italy was therefore a key player. This was one of the paradoxes of the situation, because the Italian political situation was complicated — it always has been and remains so today — but that did not prevent them from being front-line participants in European integration, and at that time we were not at all in a situation that we subsequently experienced with regard to the difference between northern and southern countries. Italy was not classed as a southern country on this path which led towards monetary union.

[François Klein] Indeed, in the late 1980s, Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa played a key role in preparations for the monetary union. What, in your opinion, was his main contribution?

[Étienne Davignon] I think that ... and Jacques Delors could be an even more accurate witness than me, but when we analyse European integration, we always see that there are two levels: there is a level of political impetus whereby the horizon is fixed, and it succeeds in that a structure of expertise, of implementation, is formed on the basis of, or in relation to, this political vision. So just as there was political impetus towards monetary union, there was also a structure for analysing the means of how to implement the administrative and legal organisation. There was thus this combination between the political impetus on the one hand and the capacity to create something operational with it on the other hand which made it necessary to enter into detail and to have to carry out the necessary checks as to how it might or might not work, and he played a decisive role in leading this assignment of turning the main objective into operational elements.

II. Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa as Chairman of the ‘Notre Europe’ think tank

[François Klein] Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa was also a networker at European level. He was very active in the world of think tanks, in particular in his role as President of Notre Europe from 2005 to 2010. At global level, he was a member of the steering committee of the Bilderberg Group, of which you were also chairman. In both cases, what was his contribution to the collective work carried out?

[Étienne Davignon] I believe that first of all, on the basis of an initial observation, the major European companies are collective companies. And these entail a political impetus as well as the need to involve a large number of players because we are bringing about change. It's not simply a question of management. When managing, things are easier — we know who is in charge, we know the people who are affected by the management. When creating, we have to involve all those who have to learn what the new situation will be. Therefore, in the history of European integration there is always this association, whether with regard to trade unions, public undertakings, companies or academies. This goes back to the idea that it's the legacy of what we referred to at the time as the Monnet Committee and which, given the passage of time, enabled this fairly large group comprised of this combination of players who were not simply political leaders to continue in an informal manner. Tommaso was quite naturally part of this exercise of conviction, of pedagogy and listening because it's extremely important not to embark on something new without taking on board the experience of those who were familiar with the former situation that had to be improved. As a result, he was quite naturally a

negotiating partner to whom people listened and who wished to listen and garner further elements from the people he knew in his specific position, whether at the Commission or the Bank of Italy, or later at the European Central Bank. He had a completely natural approach of bringing elements together, of being sure that all of the relevant information could be known, not necessarily used as was suggested, but known, and in this sense, given his temperament, people liked to talk to him and listen to him.

[François Klein] We mentioned think tanks earlier. More generally, how do you assess his contribution to these often disparaged European integration networks?

[Étienne Davignon] As regards this matter of networks, there is the usual cliché, which has now been strengthened by social networks, etc. People like to believe in great conspiracies. They like to believe that there are a certain number of people, hidden somewhere, who rule the world. I remember well that we used to say more or less the same thing. One day, we were asked about Bilderberg. We were told we were the secret world government, to which we all replied that if that were true, the first thing we would have to do would be to resign and hide because given the state of the world, it could hardly be said that we had plotted a great course. So there is this ridiculous conspiracy theory fantasy which has always existed. We can see it in history, for example, in the case of a French author who sold 100 000 copies of a book explaining that no aeroplane hit the Pentagon on 9/11. As we can see, anything is possible if we bear in mind that there is still some debate about Lincoln's assassination. So they exist; and I simply believe that they are useful things, but they aren't essential. They're useful because it's important to know about other people's lives, and to know about their lives, you have to be able to meet them and compare different opinions. I think that in that sense, it's an addition to the knowledge that we have of things; a chance to have a better judgement of the difficulties we will encounter and our capacity to convince and persuade. That being said, it's completely incidental to political decision-making, it's a means of support in order to make something a success. It's not the network which does politics. The network can help us achieve the objectives we have undertaken.

III. The personality of Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa

[François Klein] On a more personal level, could you tell us a few words about Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa as a person?

[Étienne Davignon] He was a man of conviction, and that's very important because he didn't simply perform a function, he was convinced of the need to continue with European integration efforts, and his career really ties in with this context — as we said earlier, this non-distinction between national and European interests: if Europe works, the state will work better; if Europe works well, it will take into account the specific characteristics of the states, and so forth. So the first thing which was striking was this conviction which he expressed serenely. He certainly wasn't one to make ex cathedra declarations. But it isn't necessary to speak loudly to be heard. He had this trait of speaking quietly, but based on his conviction we knew that what he was saying carried weight and was important. He was also a kind man. So we can imagine that in the roles which he performed early on in his career, he could have considered himself superior. But he didn't. He was highly convinced that he had things to say and contributions to make, so he had no false modesty when he said, 'I, who know nothing', etc., but on the contrary he tried to understand what was said to him with great tranquillity and much kindness; he had the power to persuade his negotiating partners if they weren't convinced from the start; and he had a great deal of tenacity, which is crucial in European affairs since they don't necessarily progress quickly and can't necessarily be settled at the first try. So one of his personality traits was that he was able to combine patience and ambition. He was also an amusing man with a good sense of humour and a certain sense of derision, so beyond all else he was a good friend.

[François Klein] Going back to Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, are there perhaps other moments of his

career that you would like to mention?

[Étienne Davignon] I think that, as you can see, his career was very linear in a certain way. He was an Italian senior official, a European senior official, he returned to the Bank of Italy — he didn't become Governor of the Bank of Italy, he went back to his international career ... When his international career was over, he quite naturally found that he had the time to continue being an inspirer of ideas, and this was when he took over the presidency of Notre Europe, of which he was a board member. So there's a great degree of linearity in the characteristics of his life, and he found time beyond that ... he liked the good life, he liked the arts, he liked many things. He was not at all a stiff technocratic official.

[François Klein] Thank you very much, Mr Davignon.