

# Transcription of the interview with Willy Claes (Hasselt, 21 October 2010)


**Caption:** Transcription of the interview with Willy Claes, Belgian Minister for Economic Affairs from 1973 to 1974, from 1977 to 1982 and from 1988 to 1992, Foreign Minister from 1992 to 1994 and Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) from 1994 to 1995, carried out by the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (CVCE) on 21 October 2010 at Willy Claes's home in Hasselt. The interview was conducted by Étienne Deschamps, a Researcher at the CVCE, and particularly focuses on the following subjects: the origins of his European commitment, the oil crisis of the 1970s and the Davignon Plan for industry, the organisation of European affairs in Belgium, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Party of European Socialists, European defence and NATO.

**Source:** Interview de Willy Claes / WILLY CLAES, Étienne Deschamps, prise de vue : Alexandre Germain.- Paris: CVCE [Prod.], 21.10.2010. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (03:32:30, Couleur, Son original).

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**URL:**  
[http://www.cvce.eu/obj/transcription\\_of\\_the\\_interview\\_with\\_willy\\_claes\\_hasselt\\_21\\_october\\_2010-en-fa3bef17-3b82-4360-8558-23dc1663ebd5.html](http://www.cvce.eu/obj/transcription_of_the_interview_with_willy_claes_hasselt_21_october_2010-en-fa3bef17-3b82-4360-8558-23dc1663ebd5.html)

**Last updated:** 04/07/2016



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### 1. The origins of his commitment to Europe

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Hello Mr Claes. Thank you very much for welcoming us today to your home in Hasselt to talk about your memories — the memories that you have of your time in politics and in particular your work to further European integration. I should like, if you'll allow me, to start this interview with a question about your youth and the origins of your interest in and commitment to European integration. How did that come about?

[**Willy Claes**] I had already been attracted by the European federalist movement at school at the Athénée Royal in Hasselt. For the following reason. My Dutch teacher — that is, my mother-tongue teacher — told me that the federalist movement had organised a public-speaking competition on the subject of European integration and asked me if I would take part on behalf of the Athénée. As a result I had to study the existing literature, especially the literature distributed by the federalist movement. I won the provincial competition and then took part in the national final where I came in equal second place, I think, with another contestant. I was genuinely interested in Europe and the problems of integration from then on, and, to be honest, it was from that time that I was won over by the federalists' arguments. That was the starting point.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] In the second half of the 1950s, between 1956 and 1960, you were a student at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the Free University of Brussels, studying political and administrative sciences. At the same time — as we know — the agreements that would lead to the Rome Treaties, the Common Market and Euratom were being negotiated in Brussels, at Val Duchesse. As a student, were you particularly interested in those negotiations and the issues that lay ahead?

[**Willy Claes**] Indeed. We followed the discussions and negotiations quite closely, especially as some of the lecturers at the Free University regularly gave lectures on the subject. I remember, for instance,

Pierre Vermeulen, who regularly came to talk about it. There was obviously Paul-Henri Spaak, but he didn't come very often because he had other irons in the fire. He was naturally our preferred speaker, but it was difficult to get hold of him. While we followed those negotiations closely, discussions at the Free University were dominated at that time by other international political problems. First of all, the notorious Algerian war where the Algerians were fighting for independence. Then there was the Soviet occupation of Budapest. As students, we tended to talk more about those than about European integration.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You mentioned Paul-Henri Spaak. I don't think I'm wrong in saying that he is someone who occupies a very special place in your personal pantheon. Do you remember the circumstances in which you met him? What memories do you have of that meeting?

**[Willy Claes]** Certainly, yes. At a general meeting of my party, I gave a speech in which I argued in favour of an understanding transcending the language barrier and against any confederalist or similar theories. That was a speech that went down well at the time and was, moreover, bilingual — we spoke in both languages. A politician who had been keeping a close eye on me, Antoine Spinoy, former Minister for Economic Affairs and before that Minister for Defence, drew Paul-Henri Spaak's attention to this young lad who was giving a lesson to the grandees at this general meeting. Paul-Henri Spaak then invited me to his office. He explained, very courteously and patiently, how the department and the office ran and the way in which he was trying, as the representative of a small country, to play an important role. He went on to give me a little lesson in how to work. He told me: 'If a serious problem crops up, you should never react immediately. You need to take your time and think about it.' He went on: 'It is for that reason that I look at everything here in my office and decide what is urgent and what is very urgent. If, in a week's time, I re-open that file it is because I no longer have anything urgent to deal with. Take the time to think before you take a position on serious problems.' Those are my memories of our first meeting.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** I can see that you admired Spaak as an important and brilliant man. Why was that?

**[Willy Claes]** Spaak was a visionary. There can be no doubt about that. First, he understood that we were moving inexorably towards a cold war entailing very serious risks of communist domination. Second, that the best way of defending ourselves against those risks and at the same time against excessive US domination was to integrate within Europe. Spaak was certainly not anti-American, far from it. He was in favour of solidarity between the Allies but, even so, integration was necessary if Europe was to strengthen its position. Spaak was a visionary and was also a brilliant speaker. He could turn an entire congress around ... I remember discussions of NATO within the party. He was obviously in favour of NATO whereas his fellow Senator, Professor Rollin, who was also a judge at the International Court in The Hague, was not. While those were really fascinating debates, Spaak's eloquence also meant that his ideas won out even at a socialist congress where the tone was often anti-military and anti-militaristic.

## 2. The oil crisis in the 1970s and the Davignon Plan for industry

[**Étienne Deschamps**] You became Minister for Economic Affairs at a particularly difficult time, just as the oil crisis was starting and OPEC was taking its stance. To what extent was Belgium affected by the oil and energy crisis, and how did the Leburton government, of which you were a member, try to resolve the problems that had arisen?

[**Willy Claes**] Belgium was doubly affected. First by the energy crisis that was down to the attitude of the Arab producer countries in general, and then by a speech given by the Dutch Foreign Minister which was very clearly pro-Israeli. The producer countries reacted immediately: ‘If that is the case, not one more drop of oil for the Dutch!’ He had forgotten —or perhaps he didn’t care, I don’t know — that half of Belgium’s supplies were piped in from Rotterdam to Antwerp. We were therefore doubly affected. Obviously, we tried to explain to the ministers, especially the Saudis, that we did not deserve to be punished in such a way because of a speech given by a Dutch colleague.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Benelux was no use at all there ...

[**Willy Claes**] No use at all. We suffered terribly at that time and I was forced not just to take measures which were, let us say, on the symbolic side, such as ‘black-out’ Sundays, but also very strict rationing measures. Those were reactive measures. In terms of proactive measures, I myself was not involved at the outset, but the Prime Minister, Edmond Leburton, together with the Chairman of the Liberal Party, Pierre Descamps, had had contacts in Iran with the Shah with a view to building, by public economic initiative, an oil refinery in Belgium which would draw largely on supplies from Iran. It has to be said that the way in which this agreement was drawn up was not very transparent. At the time at which I was sworn in as Minister for Economic Affairs, I was not at all familiar with the case. It was only after details of a small company responsible for developing this initiative were published in *Le Moniteur* that I became aware of it. A whole press scandal ensued. The refinery initiative was one of the reasons for the subsequent fall of the Leburton government. That was nevertheless a proactive measure. We have to shoulder our responsibilities for securing our energy supplies. Those are, in a nutshell, the two ways in which we can do so.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Leaving aside the unilateral stance taken by the Dutch, were there, among the nine members of the Community, and especially at the Energy Councils set up precisely for that reason, concrete initiatives at Community level to try to adopt a common position, a common strategy?

[**Willy Claes**] It may be going too far to talk about a strategy as, to be honest, the meetings of the Economic Ministers who were also responsible for energy policy were my first major disappointment. I may well have been a bit naive when I came into discussions within the Council. I told myself: ‘We have the resources to defend ourselves. The British have oil. BP is still a public company. The government can decide from one day to the next to supply oil, on whatever terms it may decide, to



countries suffering because they have no oil.’ Yes, that was really very, very naive. Their trading policy mirrored that of the large companies, Esso and the like, the major multinationals, and also of the Arab production companies. They said: ‘There is a lot of money to be made here and we are not going to change our production plans and our contracts for reasons of European order.’ Knocking on London’s door therefore turned out to be pointless ... And that was a real disappointment for me because I had to accept that the much-vaunted solidarity among the Nine did not really exist.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** So that was a first real test as the British had not been members for very long.

**[Willy Claes]** Indeed, but after that we took measures — that may be overstating the case — but we nevertheless drew up a set of guidelines, developed an economic and an energy policy, etc. From the production point of view, however, no, there was very little solidarity. Very little ...

**[Étienne Deschamps]** So, the oil crisis at the beginning of the 1970s. You took up your post at the Ministry of Economic Affairs just as the European Commission was trying to take its first steps towards a common European industrial policy. What is your recollection of the debates surrounding those first steps towards European industrial planning?

**[Willy Claes]** Indeed, those were steps that Economic Affairs in Belgium fully supported. First from a federalising point of view. Far-reaching and large-scale policies had to be applied. We needed them because we were still in the period of planned economies and so on. In that respect, public sector intervention also had to be stimulated. We were already aware, moreover, from what was happening in our coal and iron and steel industries, that cooperation beyond our borders was a must. Steps really had to be taken at European level. We therefore gave our full support to the Commission’s proposals. I put proposals on this new industrial policy to the Belgian Parliament in 1978 and 1979. It has to be said, however, that among the leaders of the main Member States, there were — and I am choosing my words carefully here — very serious misgivings. The Commission did not therefore receive the weapons that it needed to develop a genuinely proactive industrial policy. The European Commission was unfortunately reined in — very politely, mind you — but was definitely reined in.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** Soon after that came the beginning of the 1980s, with the Davignon Plan and the restructuring of Europe’s iron and steel industry. What issues did the iron and steel crisis and the proposals put forward by the Commission raise for Belgium and the Belgian economy?

**[Willy Claes]** First of all, the crisis was genuinely international. Almost all the iron and steel centres in Europe had been hit by the crisis both financially — and therefore socially — and in some countries structurally as well. From the point of view of Belgium, there was a further aspect as well: the community aspect. How did matters stand? In the south — in the French-speaking part of the country — there were several major historic iron and steel centres where ageing equipment was becoming a problem, whereas, in the north, the completely new Sigmar plant was being built in Ghent; and that led to a domestic debate. Because Sigmar had the resources to keep itself afloat. Its

output was very modern. It was therefore able to withstand any kind of competition from Japan, whereas, in the south, equipment urgently needed to be rationalised and modernised, but the centre's finances were a stumbling block. Without massive intervention by the state, the resources were just not there. And that is what happened, although Davignon had grasped the problem completely. If governments were left to their own devices in the various Member States of the Community, it would not be possible to achieve an initial objective which was absolutely essential: reducing production capacity. Production equipment had proliferated to such an extent that production capacity had become genuinely unsustainable. There had to be rationalisation. That, in turn, required some kind of supranational authority. Ultimately, Stevie Davignon invoked an article — one that nobody had really heard of — in the treaty and declared a state of crisis in the Community. From then onwards, he had — if I can put it this way — special powers which enabled him to take drastic action. In Belgium, where the structure of Belgian iron and steel had been studied in detail by McKenzie and other specialist companies, we managed to fit in with this European policy. That was obviously painful, with savage job cuts. However, we also drew up social support measures which were ultimately accepted by the unions. The expenditure involved would put the Belgian budget to a severe test for many years. That was a very complex and very hard period, especially as we had to explain to the working world in Wallonia that rationalisation was essential and that thousands of jobs had to go. I can assure you that that was no easy matter. People understood, however, that European intervention was the only way out. That was also very clear.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Am I wrong in thinking that the European scale of the problem to some extent helped Belgian political leaders, whoever they were, with their argument as they could say: 'Listen, we have to do it even though it is a European initiative'? Was it to some extent useful to be able to say: 'It is a European initiative'?

[**Willy Claes**] Yes, but I myself never took that line in television and radio discussions: 'I'm not keen myself, but the people at the Commission ...'. No, I always said: 'Listen, the iron and steel industry is ageing and has to be modernised.' At the same time, there were other very modern and very powerful competitors such as Japan and the like. We had to adapt, there was no other way. First of all, therefore, rationalisation, modernisation, together with social support measures, and at the same time a new industrial policy. Through that policy, jobs had to be created to replace the jobs lost because of the waves of rationalisation. That was the stance that I took.

### **3. Policy and organisation in European affairs in Belgium**

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Your interest in and enthusiasm for European and Community issues came at an early stage. If we want to look at a rather unique aspect of European integration, Benelux comes to mind — here we are in a frontier region, Limburg. Many have said that Benelux was Europe's laboratory. Is this an opinion that you share, as someone who has had experience of Benelux at parliamentary and ministerial level?

[**Willy Claes**] Yes and no. We undoubtedly developed a certain know-how, a working method, even areas in which integration was useful. So, yes, we were the forerunners who were able to show larger countries such as France, and then Italy, that it was possible. However, my experience as a minister in the Benelux Parliament should not be overstated. Nor should the importance of the debates in that Parliament. At the Council of Ministers level, we certainly worked on agendas, but they were relatively technical. It certainly wasn't the case that you could draw up grand plans there and achieve them. So we shouldn't overstate the case but rather recognise that these three small countries pointed the way towards integration rather than ordinary cooperation between several neighbouring countries. That set an example from which, in my view, others drew their inspiration.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Did you see Benelux cooperation decline as European integration increased?

[**Willy Claes**] Yes, without the slightest doubt, as Europe was taking the initiative in a range of fields. Duplicating those efforts was entirely unnecessary. It also has to be said that, especially in the ECSC period, and with all due respect to Hallstein and others, our three small countries played a very important role. Those small countries, which generally also had outstanding representatives, provided the Six with a great deal of expertise.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] In 1973 you became Minister for Economic Affairs. Were you aware at that time of the role of your predecessors — I'm thinking of people such as Duvieusart, Jean Rey, Gaston Eyskens and Jean-Charles Snoy et d'Oppuers when they were Secretary-General?

[**Willy Claes**] Jean d'Oppuers certainly, because he, incidentally, wrote the Treaty of Rome. That was down to him.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Were you aware of that in 1973? Did you try to follow that tradition?

[**Willy Claes**] We were perfectly aware of it, but it has to be said that when I arrived at Economic Affairs, in 1973, Foreign Affairs had already become the central focus of Belgian policy on Europe. Subsequently, 16 Rue de la Loi, and therefore the Prime Minister, started to take an increasing interest in European matters and tried to shift foreign affairs powers to the Prime Minister's office and department. So, at the time when I arrived at Square de Meeûs, where the Economic Affairs office and department were housed, the central focus was no longer there. There is no doubt about that.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] For practically 20 years, between 1973 and the early 1990s — 1992 — you were Minister for Economic Affairs on several occasions in governments led by — as we said previously — Edmond Leburton, Leo Tindemans, Marc Eyskens and Wilfried Martens. Do you think that, during that period, the broad brush strokes of Belgium's policy on Europe changed?

[**Willy Claes**] I have no hesitation in answering your question with a no. That, I think, is something of

which we can be proud. The Belgians, from the outset, championed the need for further European integration, led, with our full support, by the European Commission. That was our fundamental stance. Nowadays, I sometimes feel that, even in Belgium, that stance has to some extent been disregarded. Not during that period, however. It was a constant. We supported the Commission and the development policy that it drew up. We took a constant line throughout that whole period and never deviated from it.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** During that period and throughout your ministerial experience, how were government decisions taken on foreign and especially European policy? I have in mind a little-known body, the Ministerial Foreign Policy Committee. How did that work? Who acted as arbitrator when arbitration was necessary? Lastly, how were areas of work distributed and decisions taken?

**[Willy Claes]** We didn't really discuss European policy in government for a long time. That was an area reserved for the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and in some cases the Ministers for Finance and Economic Affairs. The others didn't discuss it and were not in the loop ... Obviously, as the influence and importance of the European Community grew, the other ministers also began to be involved. That led to the creation of this Ministerial Foreign Policy Committee, where European matters were on the agenda. To be honest, though, I don't recall many disagreements or differences of views. As I said a few moments ago, throughout the various governments, our constant line was to support the Commission's policy. The importance of the role played by the Foreign Policy Committee throughout that period should not be overstated. It was only after that time — when, from a budgetary point of view in particular, things turned sour in Belgium and it was quite difficult to defend the Treaty of Maastricht and to prepare for Belgium's entry into monetary union — that the Ministerial Committee became really important.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You have explained in detail the line traditionally taken by Belgium and by Belgian diplomacy. In some cases, were there not, however, differences of opinion about that line between French speakers and Dutch speakers or between the supporters of public intervention — for instance the Socialist Party — and the Christian socialists and liberals, or was there an ongoing consensus there as well?

**[Willy Claes]** There were obviously such differences which tended, if I can put it that way, to be ideological, but the European Commission — it has to be said — never put forward major proposals geared towards developing public economic initiatives. In that respect, the European Commission, as regards the costs of such measures, had put forward proposals four years earlier that, without meaning to sound pejorative, were rather liberal in their approach. That was always accepted, that was accepted by Belgian governments, in some cases with some reluctance by the socialists, but I do not remember any real upheavals or major clashes in that area.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** For close on 20 years your experience with European policy was in the economic area in particular, but in 1992 you became Minister for Foreign Affairs in Jean-Luc Dehaene's first government. What led you to be appointed to that office?

[**Willy Claes**] We had again experienced some serious community-related problems. Martens, who had already led I don't know how many governments by then, felt that the time had now come to find someone else to undertake this thankless task. His friend, and the former head of his office, Jean-Luc Dehaene, then took up the baton. Dehaene felt that the time had come for a bit of reshuffle. As I got on well with Dehaene, and with Martens in his time, he offered me the foreign affairs portfolio. To be perfectly honest, after spending more than ten years at Economic Affairs, I said to myself: 'Good, I'm ready for a change.' I was very interested in foreign affairs and international and especially European policy. So I accepted the portfolio with no hesitation.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] When you arrived at the head of the Foreign Affairs Department, you took over from Marc Eyskens. Did you try ... did you take the same line or did you try to make your own mark?

[**Willy Claes**] The same line on Europe. The same line, just as Eyskens had taken the traditional Belgian line. The same line, therefore. Moreover, as you said, it was 1992 and we had to get on with the preparations for our Presidency, which was scheduled for the second half of 1993. We had to throw ourselves into that immediately, and that is what we did.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] In Dehaene's first government, you, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, were not the only person involved with European issues, as Robert Urbain had been appointed as Minister for Foreign Trade and European Affairs, a post which was nevertheless subordinate to you as Minister for Foreign Affairs. Do you remember why it was felt necessary, in 1990–1992, to create that post and appoint Robert Urbain to it? Second, how was work organised and tasks split between your office and his?

[**Willy Claes**] The explanation is, I think, very simple. Even though the French-speaking community had a good deal of confidence in me, it was nevertheless felt that there was a need for someone who could, on a day-to-day basis, keep an eye on what was happening in Europe and how the Belgian Government was reacting to European policy. That was the only reason. I never had any problems with Robert Urbain, a real friend. He buckled down to foreign trade in particular. As you know, a Minister for Foreign Trade also travels a lot. Robert was often away from his department, and unable to keep a close eye on his work, so we agreed a kind of protocol. A representative of the minister was always in attendance in both offices and was responsible for coordination: information, coordination, decision-making, the whole thing ... I never had the slightest problem with Urbain, especially as he had my full support. I was a national minister and that is why I argued that Wallonia, and the province of Hainaut in particular, should receive funding from the Structural Funds, which led to several billion Belgian francs for the province. I know that my support for Hainaut attracted quite a lot of criticism in the north of the country, but as a national minister, I never hesitated to shoulder my responsibilities. The results that I achieved for Wallonia, and for Hainaut in particular, led my Walloon colleagues and my French-speaking colleagues in general to say: 'We can trust Foreign Affairs as they are doing their job properly.'

**[Étienne Deschamps]** That was also a time — even though I’m sure you had met him on many occasions before then — when you had regular meetings with King Baudouin. Did he, in your opinion, have a particular view on Belgium’s diplomatic policy and therefore its decisions on European issues? I ask this question because I sometimes wonder whether the King was afraid that the country would lose some of its sovereignty.

**[Willy Claes]** No, not at all. The King, being young, had received a European education which included all the notions that we discussed just now. Europe had to be developed and deepened not just structurally but politically as well. Europe was the only way of standing up to all the challenges facing us across the Atlantic, in Asia, and so on. I never heard King Baudouin talk about any loss of our powers or prerogatives, no. He was also a committed European who regularly pointed out that Belgium, and Brussels in particular, had to be defended as the capital of Europe. No, there is no doubt that he always firmly supported our work to develop Europe.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You have just mentioned Brussels. As a former Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, then Secretary General of NATO, how important was it, and is it, in your view, for Belgium, for Brussels to be the seat of international institutions?

**[Willy Claes]** I don’t think I’m exaggerating if I say that if Brussels was not the seat of the European institutions and NATO, it would be a small capital with very little influence in the world. Nowadays, however, Brussels is a city which, from a diplomatic point of view, hosts the largest number of diplomats in the world, after Washington! It also goes without saying that Brussels, as the capital of Europe, is very important from an economic point of view. I hope that the current political generation will never forget that fact, which, in my view, is unquestionable. Hosting the European institutions has been and is a godsend for Brussels and for Belgium in terms of political influence and from a socio-economic and even cultural point of view. No doubt about that.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You have been a parliamentarian for a long time. You have been the rapporteur or co-rapporteur for very important European treaties. How interested are Belgian political circles in general, and Belgian MPs in particular, in European issues, which are often technical, and how well do they understand them?

**[Willy Claes]** It is difficult to give a general answer to that question. My experiences with Belgian MPs on the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee have been very positive. There were people on the various political parties’ benches who were genuinely interested and specialists in the issues. As minister, I could not therefore turn up to the committee without having done the necessary preparation. Beyond that committee, I think that there was not a great deal of interest in international policy. I am treading carefully here when I say that the public debate on the Treaty of Maastricht was in practice no more than a re-run of the debate that had already taken place in the committee. The same players, putting forward more or less the same arguments and the same views. I wonder,



moreover, whether the same is true of most of Europe's parliaments. There are people who specialise in such issues and others who are interested by problems of justice, defence, etc. I think that issues are so specialised these days that people are often forced to choose. Otherwise they cannot keep up with and play a real part in debates. Nevertheless, my experiences in the Belgian Parliament were fairly positive.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** In 1992, you became Minister for Foreign Affairs and had to start preparing, as you said, for the forthcoming Presidency in the second half of 1993. Before that, however, you had to face a serious problem for Europe: the negative outcome of the Danish referendum on the Treaty of Maastricht. What was the Belgian diplomatic reaction to this political event in Denmark and how did you then try to overcome this problem at Community level?

**[Willy Claes]** First of all, let me tell you an anecdote about that which is rather symbolic. On the evening on which the result of the referendum was to be announced I was having a meeting at the Egmont Palace with my Portuguese colleague, who was also preparing for the Portuguese Presidency. We were chatting ... he had various matters to discuss, and every now and then a colleague from my office came to the door to signal to me that the results were not yet in. The weather outside was very bad. A storm was raging. Then at about 9.30 p.m., I think, my colleague came to the door and signalled to me that we had lost. At that very moment, as it was raining very heavily, water started to gush into the room from a hole somewhere in the ceiling. That was really symbolic. My Portuguese colleague, very disappointed, closed his file and said: 'What am I to do? I'll now have to revise my entire programme ...' That is the anecdote. That was also the argument that I used to persuade my colleagues to give me a bit more of a budget to repair and modernise the Egmont Palace *[Laughter]*. That, however, is another story. How did we react? We all followed the tactics that had been decided at European level. How were the Danes to be convinced? Some derogations, as few as possible, had to be written into the treaty to persuade them to hold a second referendum and make sure that the treaty was then accepted. For our part, we always insisted that that these derogations should be as limited as possible, as we had learnt a lesson from Mrs Thatcher's 'I want my money back' victory at Maastricht. We did not care much for these exceptional circumstances. Nevertheless, we accepted, as did others, that certain derogations had to be written into the treaty if the Danes were to be persuaded to toe the line.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You mention Margaret Thatcher. Do you have particular memories of confrontations, even clashes during negotiations at the highest level, at summits, between the British Conservatives, especially Mrs Thatcher, and the other European partners?

**[Willy Claes]** I obviously didn't attend Councils, as those were for Presidents and Prime Ministers, where it seems that there were clashes, but I do have another very clear memory of Mrs Thatcher as an authoritarian leader who would brook no opposition. She had come to Bruges to give a major speech at the anti-European college. She had invited Martens, Tindemans and myself to lunch at the British Embassy that day. First, she was very late, but that ... What surprised me, however, is that she knocked back several stiff whiskies. Then we started our discussion. I say discussion, but it wasn't really because it was almost impossible to get a word in edgeways. She interrupted Tindemans,



Martens and myself in a really very authoritarian way. The upshot was that she spoke for two of the two and a half hours of discussion and we, the 'lesser' ministers, for 30 minutes. She would not listen to any pro-European arguments. She didn't listen, she imposed her point of view. That is an anecdote that is still very fresh in my mind.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** Do you feel that you had very different dealings on European matters with the Germans, with your German, French, Italian, Dutch and other partners?

**[Willy Claes]** Very different and very harmonious. You could have constructive and normal discussions with them. With Thatcher, and subsequently with Major, that was not easy.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** In the early 1990s the prospects of an economic and monetary union were taking increasing shape. During that period, however, Belgium was so heavily indebted that many people said that Belgium's debt would preclude its entry into such a union. What are your views on Belgium's inclusion and what memories do you have of that period when a start had to be made on preparations for entry into Economic and Monetary Union?

**[Willy Claes]** First of all, I entirely agree with your analysis. I saw those times as something of a tragedy. I had very important structural matters to deal with at Economic Affairs. I turned up to discuss those matters but there was no time to discuss them in any great depth because, yet again, there was a problem with some small school where French or Dutch wasn't being spoken. I am really not exaggerating. These local community matters dominated politics and hence also cabinet meetings. It was enough for there to be a demonstration involving the police somewhere in the Fours for days to go by before I could say to my colleagues: 'Have you got time to listen now? Because I have some serious matters to discuss with you.' Budgetary matters were the same. They were not a priority and yet the streamlining of 'national' industries in sectors such as coal mining, iron and steel, textiles, etc., had generated major budgetary costs. There is no escaping the fact that we managed to amass a debt amounting to more than 100 % of gross national product as well as deficits of over 10 % of GNP. Untenable. The upshot was that the major democrat/Christian/socialist coalitions were paralysed by community-related matters in particular. That led Martens to change coalition and try to make savage budget cuts by asking parliament for and obtaining special powers. Looking at the following period, even after five or six years of democrat/liberal Christian coalition, the situation had not really improved. It was only after that, under Dehaene's governments, that we really managed to return to figures that were 'acceptable'. Returning to your question, however, there is no doubt that some politicians — including me — were very concerned and said: 'We are going to miss the boat, Maastricht is in place. Monetary union is on the horizon. If we are going to be part of the euro family we have to satisfy certain very formal conditions not just from the point of view of inflation, and so on, but also from the point of view of our annual deficit level. Our debt cannot go on as it is.' The upshot, as I said, was a change of coalition and as a result I was not directly involved in the re-alignment under Martens-Gol. You can see from the parliamentary documents, however, that I took a very careful line during this period of opposition. I never put up any major opposition to the government because I felt that the situation had to be improved at all costs. I made only one major opposition speech. That was at the time when the Belgian currency was being devalued without having sought Luxembourg's opinion when, for decades, we had been linked by a currency agreement

under which the Luxembourgers had played a much more important role than the demographic balance of power might lead you to assume. That was the only occasion on which I spoke out, apart perhaps from the debate on the coal mines. That had to do with the country's energy policy, however. That is all I can really say on the matter. You are quite right to say that the political climate was heavily influenced by the approaching ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht and the launch of monetary union. There is no doubt about that.

#### 4. The Belgian Presidency of the EC Council (1993)

[**Étienne Deschamps**] As we said, the second half of 1993 saw the Belgian Presidency, the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Communities, as it was still called at that time, and the implementation of the Treaty of Maastricht. What were the main issues with which the Belgian Presidency had to deal?

[**Willy Claes**] There were quite a few. Generally speaking, observers felt that we had little chance of getting anywhere with these issues. There were the Structural Funds with billions and billions under lock and key. Then there was the Uruguay Round. I shall come back to that straight away as the French were talking about the possibility of adopting the empty chair strategy, as de Gaulle had done in his time. That was therefore a second matter. Then there was the whole question of the seats of the institutions. Plenty to be getting on with. There were other matters such as Delors' grand plan for job creation and investment in major infrastructure, etc., as well as relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. There was therefore a whole raft of matters on the agenda — and I haven't even included the tragedy taking place in the former Yugoslavia, about which the Twelve were unable to reach agreement. Plenty of matters on the agenda, therefore, but what really worried me before the start of the Belgian Presidency was the French attitude to the Uruguay Round. What was the problem? Several Member States supported the argument — as well as the USA and others — that anything connected with culture had to be treated as a commodity and subject to the same rules that were to be negotiated in the Uruguay Round, to which the French said: 'No way! Culture is the very foundation of our society, of respect for mankind. We therefore want — and this is the term they used at the time — a cultural exception.' Within the Commission, the British Vice-President, Leon Brittan, was formally opposed to any derogations and would have no truck with the French argument, saying: 'I have competence here. The Commission has the competence to decide, and the French ...' He told me: 'Listen, ultimately they will be forced to come in with us as they would never dare to bring about the failure of global negotiations on the future of trade.' I wasn't so convinced and, before the Presidency started, I organised a dinner with my French colleague, Alain Juppé, after a ministerial meeting in Luxembourg. We discussed the problem at length and I left him thinking that we would be back to the empty chair if no consensus could be found. The European institutions would be paralysed again. I explained this to my British colleague, who said: 'Listen. Don't let yourself be impressed by the minister of a large country. I know what I am talking about. Carry on as though nothing has happened ...' I replied: 'Even so, I'd like to set up an opportunity for us to talk about it.' He said: 'Don't do that, because once you have got caught up in it, that's it. That's what the French want.' I thought about this at length. I talked about it with the Prime Minister, who was not really au fait with

this issue, and he said: ‘Listen, draw up your plan and stick to it.’ In August I said to myself: ‘This is an item for the agenda of an informal Council rather than a Council and in that way we can return to the discussion in an informal way at every monthly meeting.’ I got in touch with my British colleague, who was on an official visit to India. He was not very happy, but, as the democrat that he was, accepted that the Presidency had competence. He said: ‘You have decided, though my advice to you has been exactly the opposite, so you will have to bear the consequences!’ It was in the September that there was a first informal Council. It was tough, especially as Vice-President Brittan continued to intervene in the matter. Jacques Delors, however, very swiftly understood that I had been right. He advised me to carry on, step by step, bilaterally and then multilaterally, and the outcome was that in December, at the very last minute, literally past midnight and not five to midnight, we managed to reach a compromise and telephone Geneva, where they were waiting for news of the European position and decision. We called and said: ‘Go ahead! OK with us.’ That was a real game of poker that we fortunately managed to win.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** We will obviously look in detail at the major issues facing that Presidency and the particular — and practical — role of the Belgian Presidency as well as your own role. Before that, however, I should like to return to a point, which may be anecdotal, but which, I think, is a good illustration of the climate as well as the scale of the issues: in July 1993, at the very beginning of the Presidency, you made a speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in which you humorously explained to the MEPs present — and these are your words — ‘whom the gods would destroy they first offer the Presidency of the Council of the European Communities’. What practical and logistical problems does a rotating Presidency raise for a small country such as Belgium, and what opportunities does it create?

**[Willy Claes]** A Presidency certainly raises enormous logistical problems. You have to keep abreast of, and more or less lead, all the various Councils which are nowadays active in all fields. No easy matter. Then there is the whole diplomatic apparatus. We decided to spare no effort. We didn’t think twice about recalling a number of diplomats and bringing them into our European apparatus. It was also decided to organise monthly diplomatic information meetings for diplomats abroad. For instance, our Ambassador in Moscow met his colleagues at least once a month to tell them about the Presidency’s line, what was going on, etc. That was repeated throughout the world. Even at the UN. Even at the UN, our Ambassador organised information, advisory, and, where possible, consultation meetings with his European colleagues. He also had to keep the Americans, Russians and so on up to speed. The logistical challenge, therefore, is quite something. Fortunately, Belgium has a wealth of experience of European matters. We therefore had the expertise, but as I have said we spared no effort and cut down on our bilateral representation here and there. Some ambassadors were not very happy when I started recalling embassy secretaries, attachés and so on. The Presidency had to take priority, however, and the overall challenge had to be met. So we spared no effort. It was Jacques Delors, and not me, who said that Belgium’s Presidency was one of the two best that he experienced throughout his time as President of the European Commission. That, in my view, was a real compliment.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** When you are Foreign Minister during the six months of the Presidency, do you have time to focus on anything but European matters?

[**Willy Claes**] Not really. I wouldn't say that I neglected the Rwandan problem, for instance, but I just could not travel to Africa during those six months. I went there immediately afterwards, in January or February, but during those six months I was permanently needed in my office and in the Community buildings and that was in no way because of a lack of skill on the part of our diplomats. I should like to mention one name, our Permanent Representative, Mr de Schoutheete, a sterling man who did a great deal to make the Presidency successful. I could give a whole list of other Belgian diplomats who distinguished themselves during that period.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Looking at the more recent period, and bearing in mind what you have said about the problems that a six-month Council Presidency raises for countries, especially small countries, what are your views on the establishment of a permanent and stable Council and, indirectly, on the appointment, almost a year ago now, of Herman Van Rompuy?

[**Willy Claes**] A godsend, in my view. No more than logical. First of all, as we were saying a few minutes ago, a Presidency is a very onerous and very difficult task for small Member States. It raises problems even for larger Member States. In addition, six months, after all, is too short a period to impose any real continuity on policy in all its various fields. An alternative solution has to be found because each Presidency obviously has different priorities and that runs counter to any continuity. My view is therefore that the appointment of a President of the Council for two and a half years is a step forward, although matters have been further complicated by retaining a rotating six-month Presidency. I don't think that is very sensible. I hope that steps will be taken in future to get rid of the six-monthly Presidency by a Member State. In my view, the function of the permanent Presidency needs to be further enhanced. My personal view is that Van Rompuy is very carefully trying to prepare the Union for such a change. He is now coming forward with proposals concerning economic policy, all tending towards a deepening of that policy, which obviously again requires greater continuity. It is in that sense that Van Rompuy is, in my view, about to do us a service by strengthening and deepening that institution.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] You mentioned the name of Philippe de Schoutheete, who acted as Belgium's Permanent Representative to the Communities. During those six months and even before and after, during that period and the period of preparation for the Presidency, how was decision-making on European matters organised in the Belgian administrative apparatus: Prime Minister's office, Foreign Affairs, the technical ministries and, obviously, a link, that I assume was permanent, with the Permanent Representation?

[**Willy Claes**] First of all, and this is very important, I think, there was no difference of opinion between the Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs. There was no competition to play solo in either the media or the European Community. There was, and I'm not overplaying this, permanent contact between the head of my office, responsible for the Presidency, and the head of the Prime Minister's office. Permanent. And when necessary contact with the head of the Minister for Finance's office, because Philippe Maystadt also had an important role to play. In some cases the head

of the office of the Head of State, the King, was also brought into this working method. That was therefore a very important point. No competition, harmonious opinions and action, which had not always been the case in Belgium. The Martens–Tindemans period, for instance, had been rather difficult, if I can put it that way. Second, there were small cores of diplomats representing the various offices which worked together more or less permanently to prepare for the main Councils. I held meetings ... because these Councils were generally held on a Monday. On the preceding Sunday afternoon and evening I held meetings first with the Belgians and obviously Philippe de Schoutheete and others, and then with the representatives, the Secretary-General of the Council and the Secretary-General of the Commission, to make sure that any problems were ironed out before the start of the Council. It was really tough, we worked seven days a week, but that was something we had to do if the Presidency was to be successful.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** Unlike the Danish Presidency that preceded the Belgian Presidency, you preferred, how shall I put it, to abandon the practice of almost total media transparency in order to keep the negotiations and discussions discreet, if not secret. Twenty years down the line, do you still feel that international negotiations should to some extent be confidential?

**[Willy Claes]** It is not just a matter of confidentiality. I've nothing against transparent decision-making, certainly decision-making, but the way in which the Council of Ministers' meeting rooms have been opened up to the media, especially television — I'm sorry but that can take a comic turn. The TV people made it clear to us that we had one hour. Fair enough. However, all the ministers obviously wanted to appear. That hour had to be split between the Commission, all the ministers ... each reading their little speech, some obviously exceeding the agreed speaking times, etc. There was nothing natural or effective about that. I'm sorry, it was no more than show business. So I said to myself that I wouldn't have any truck with it. I'm sorry, yes to transparency, but not in that way. The Council of Ministers needs to work and that is impossible in front of the cameras.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** In the early 1990s, and during the 1993 Presidency in particular, federalisation was on the advance and that was not without an impact on Belgium's internal structure. As President ... as Foreign Minister of the country holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Communities, did you have to take account of the opinion of the federal entities, and did that create problems? In Belgium, this was, I recall, directly after the Saint-Michel agreements.

**[Willy Claes]** Fortunately, at that time, I didn't have the same problems as we're seeing today. But yes, the agreements had been reached and the upshot was, in the Agriculture Council for instance, that representatives of the regions sat round the table and there were massive problems when the time came to vote. The compromise that was reached was not brilliant, along the lines of 'if we must', but ultimately we abstained if we disagreed. So, if there were differences of opinion between French and Dutch speakers, Belgium immediately had no opinion. A rather Belgian arrangement, I know, but I was not in favour of it because I had advocated that the federal government should decide in such cases. No question of that, however, as its powers had been transferred and were not to be taken back 'on the sly'. I therefore failed to persuade my colleagues to adopt my method. What we had was the negative method: if there was a difference of opinion, we did not vote and abstained.



[**Étienne Deschamps**] Did that work out? Was it successful?

[**Willy Claes**] As far as I am concerned, no. We did manage to play a genuine part in the voting on every occasion, however. Fortunately, as there were not too many votes, we avoided any clashes. I admit, however, that the negotiations that I had with the regional representatives on that matter were not always very encouraging.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] One matter which did not help the negotiations and the drawing up of a decision and a common policy, at the time when you held the Presidency in 1993, was, for instance, when you included continuing accession negotiations with countries such as Austria, Sweden, Finland and Norway on the Belgian Presidency's agenda. At that time, did you think that countries which wanted to join the European Communities could retain their neutral status?

[**Willy Claes**] Hmm ... A question that was both important and tricky, because we shouldn't forget that, meanwhile, at the Copenhagen Summit, which was also in 1993, we had decided on enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe. I can tell you straight away that I was in favour of that enlargement, because I felt, as did my colleagues, that it was our historic duty to help all those countries which had been in the thrall of the communist dictatorship in Moscow for 50 years. They had to be helped to install democracy, develop a modern economy, etc. Incidentally, we set a number of conditions for entry into the Union: a democratic system, respect for human rights and for the rights of minorities, development of a free-trade economic system and so on. We had also said that enlargement had to go together with deepening. That condition was — and this is my personal opinion — disregarded in a scandalous way. That aspect was completely disregarded even though it was a structural and fundamental aspect of the problem. How could enlargement take place with the same institutional framework that had been set up for the original Six? It is that that caused the real crisis and is nowadays still at the root of major differences of opinion about the ultimate goal. Where do we want to end up with this Europe? That said, as we had decided on enlargement to Central and even Eastern Europe, it was very difficult to refuse to take the candidature of the Nordic countries and Austria seriously. Even though that raised the problem of their 'neutrality'. Why was it so difficult not to take seriously ... Because we already knew, if Poland were to accede, that we would be forced to accept a pro-American element in our foreign policy that was much more pronounced than before. We therefore needed to strike some kind of balance. It is for that reason that I personally did everything I could, together with my German colleague Kinkel, to complete the enlargement procedure. We only just missed winding it up during the Belgian Presidency. Kinkel and myself continued to press on with our Greek colleague Pangelos. I think it was as early as February that we managed to reach a very delicate compromise, especially with the Swedes, as regards the policy of neutrality. From a purely political point of view, I would say that it was a retrograde step, because we were in some ways mortgaging our future radius of diplomatic action, but as we had the major enlargement to the East in our sights, there was not really any way in which we could not accept those countries.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] During the Presidency, you had to lead negotiations which I think were

difficult — and you can tell me whether I am right on that — with the European Parliament on the Communities' financial perspective. Do you remember the discussions that you had on that matter, with the assistance of Ambassador de Schoutheete, with Parliament's Committee on Budgets and, I think, with a German Member called Detlev Samland?

[**Willy Claes**] Yes, I remember the name.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Do you still remember those negotiations and the issues they involved, the problems they raised and the general climate surrounding them?

[**Willy Claes**] To be honest, I don't remember very much about the technical side of this matter, which was very complex. I did understand, however, that failing to reach a settlement with Parliament could permanently block many other matters. I didn't just involve Philippe de Schoutheete, however, but a whole army of budgetary and financial experts. I made sure that I was present on every occasion, thus demonstrating — and I was not putting it on — my respect for Parliament as one of the pillars of our plan for European integration. We had quite a few meetings in Strasbourg, Luxembourg and Brussels with, among others, the German MEP who had made the matter his own and wanted his name to be linked to it. To be honest, I played a very small part in the discussions as I was no specialist in this field. When it came, however, to arguing for a compromise and for recognition of the competence and the place of the Commission in all that, and here I'm speaking more about the Commission than the Council, I spoke up. We reached an agreement, the actual content of which I don't, to be honest, remember in great detail. That agreement was nevertheless a *sine qua non* if a whole raft of other matters were to be unblocked and a much more positive atmosphere created. Up to a certain time, Parliament took a very dim view of the other institutions. That had to be brought to a halt. And that is what we managed to do, I think.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] There was another matter which you have already mentioned, the negotiations on the Structural Funds. You mentioned the particular case of Hainaut; do you remember the climate in which those negotiations took place and the problems raised by — in my view — relations between the Commission, certain Member States and the Presidency that you held? Did you have to try to find compromises?

[**Willy Claes**] Goodness, I remember the final discussions as though it were yesterday. Most of the ministers turned up saying: 'Good, we're starting at 2 p.m., we can get on our planes around 5 or 6 p.m. and sort it out later.' I had already said to Jacques Delors: 'That isn't good enough. We need decisions.' The first main problem was that the Irish Prime Minister had cited a figure, which I no longer remember, in a statement to the Irish Parliament: 'That is the amount we need from those funds as we cannot manage without it.' Other countries obviously reacted. Greece and Portugal, as far as I can remember: 'If that is the case, we also have ceilings below which ...' The whole thing was becoming impossible. So I said to those who were hoping to catch their planes at 5 or 6 p.m.: 'You go, but I'm carrying on. I've already ordered refreshments, so we are carrying on.' They weren't very happy, but ... I interrupted the Council several times for bilateral talks, a kind of confessional system.



To be honest, I couldn't seem to open up any prospect for a solution. Jacques Delors was suffering from a bout of flu, but I contacted him, saying: 'Jacques, with the greatest respect for your Commissioner, we're never going to get anywhere with him ...' As far as I can remember, he was also Irish. He wouldn't budge on the figures. He wouldn't discuss anything: how a compromise could be reached, nothing at all. Jacques Delors, even though he was quite ill, turned up. And then ... I did something that you won't quite believe, but I finally managed to divest the competent Commissioner of this matter; he was out and would take no further part in the discussions. Jacques Delors took over and Jacques obviously had a very good knowledge of the budget and saw that if a concession was made in one place by adding so many millions, they could be taken from another place, and so on. That took until 5 or 6 a.m. Bilateral talks. Some countries — which I won't mention — tried at the last minute to indulge in a bit of blackmail: 'If I don't get this or that in addition, you won't have a consensus.' Ultimately, however, we stood up to that.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** Were the bilateral talks really head to head?

**[Willy Claes]** Yes, head to head.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You and ...

**[Willy Claes]** There was Jacques Delors.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** So, three-way talks ...

**[Willy Claes]** Jacques Delors, myself and the minister in question. No technicians, nobody else. Everyone else stayed outside. At around 6 a.m., various people telephoned their capitals and so on to tell them that the outcome was not too bad and, to the great surprise of all the experts, the Structural Funds were adopted. That was nevertheless a very long day and a very long night. It was because of Jacques Delors that the Structural Funds were adopted against all the odds.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** Yes, because that kind of negotiation only really works if there is trust, a personal connection between those involved, in this case between yourself, as the representative of the Presidency, and the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors.

**[Willy Claes]** Indeed. The Belgian Presidency — Jean-Luc Dehaene, Maystadt, myself and others — and Jacques Delors and his office, we understood one another. I have already told you that our working method included permanent contact with the Commission, the Secretariat-General of the Commission, etc. Personally there was also a spark between Jacques Delors and the Belgians. Perhaps because he took such an interest in Belgian football — I don't know — but the whole thing worked marvellously.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Had you known Jacques Delors before he became President of the Commission?

[**Willy Claes**] Yes, I had met him several times at international political meetings — the Socialist International and especially the Confederation of Socialist Parties in Europe. So I knew him. If you want my opinion, he was one of the prime movers of Europe's development.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Another point that we mentioned just now is the issue of the seat of the Community institutions. How did Belgium manage to mediate and ultimately obtain, in some cases against all the odds, a compromise and find a solution to this long-standing question?

[**Willy Claes**] When it comes to negotiating compromises, we Belgians are the champions! We therefore started at an advantage. There were quite a few seats to be handed out — perhaps the wrong way of putting it — and it was a fairly impressive list. There was therefore something for everyone. A balance obviously had to be struck. Jean-Luc Dehaene in particular played an important part by entrusting me with a very delicate task: the seat of Parliament. He said to me: 'My dear chap, you know your pal Mitterrand well, draw up your plan, but don't make too many concessions because I'm under pressure within my party ... Martens has publically said that the seat of Parliament should be in Brussels. Be careful.' For my part, I had several meetings with the President of the French Republic, François Mitterrand. Mitterrand was aware that he couldn't get Strasbourg as a matter of course. It was he who ultimately made me a proposal that I felt to be acceptable: that Parliament should meet once a month in Strasbourg and the budgetary session should be held in Strasbourg. I was well aware of the symbolism of this last proposal. Otherwise, he was willing to accept Brussels, not just for the plenary sessions, but also for meetings of the committees. I told him that I was willing to support his argument. To which he immediately replied: 'Can I have that in writing?' I told him, however, that I wouldn't put it in writing because it would be all over *Le Monde* or some other paper the following day and that was a risk I wasn't prepared to take. I discussed it with Dehaene who felt that the compromise was sound. It may not be very efficient, on the contrary. The permanent travel that it involves costs a lot of money, but ... a solution had been found to a very tricky problem and Chancellor Kohl immediately accepted it once I had explained what I was trying to achieve. He said: 'If François agrees, so be it.' As you said, therefore, against all the odds, we managed to find an overall solution during the Belgian Presidency which, in order to underscore its importance for Brussels, was as follows: Parliament would also have a seat in Brussels, and the Commission and the Council would have their seats in Brussels. There can therefore be no doubt that the Belgians did well in negotiating that compromise.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] You have just mentioned a couple of important names that we have not as yet discussed: François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl. Can you give us a brief portrait of those two leaders and the role which you feel they played in European integration?

[**Willy Claes**] An unforgettable duo, certainly. I'd prefer, however, to talk about a trio. If major problems cropped up within the Council, everything was smoothed out when Kohl, Mitterrand and Delors got involved. Despite the British opposition, work went on. They were people who were genuinely aware of their European vocation. To serve their countries, Europe had to be developed. Neglecting Europe was not in the interest of the countries that they represented. From the point of view of the solution, if I can put it that way, to the major problems that Germany faced after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was again that trio that shaped the final solution to the problem. Mitterrand was known to have very serious reservations. Delors, for his part, immediately came out in favour of unification. Kohl, aware of the massive wrongs that Germany had committed before and during the Second World War, was also aware of the importance of Mitterrand's objections and reservations. And that is why Germany's unification went together with a very important German concession: the creation of a monetary union in which the Germans would abandon their Deutschmark, something of a massive step. The Germans even agreed to include a common foreign and security policy in the Treaty of Maastricht to avoid any risk of a repeat of Germany's past diplomacy in *Mitteleuropa*. One of Helmut Kohl's main merits was that he had a very clear vision of the future of the European continent and also of relations between Europe and Moscow. There as well, we should not underestimate everything that Helmut Kohl did to try to consolidate and strengthen the position of Gorbachev, sadly with no result. That is another story. However, to come back to your question, they were a key duo and I have no hesitation in saying that a consensus between Berlin and Paris is a very important factor if we really want to deepen Europe. If that does not exist, then I'm afraid that very little progress will be made. Moreover, and with all due respect to the current President of the Commission, I hope that we can find a President of the Commission of the stature of Jacques Delors, because it is down to him and his committed Europeanism that any progress was made at all.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] What you say mirrors those who consider that the personal role of men and women, leaders and statesmen, is as crucial as the structures, the technical, institutional and administrative machinery.

[**Willy Claes**] I couldn't agree with you more, as decisions are often not taken around the official Council table. It is often through personal and informal contacts in the office of one delegation or another that decisions are made. I have every respect for the modern technologies which make it easier for people to keep in touch, but they cannot replace the direct and physical contact between statesmen that is so important in creating a climate of trust and cooperation. In the case of tricky problems, I don't think it is easy to reach an agreement by videoconferencing where you can see your colleague only on the screen. Direct contact is essential.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] You told us that in the negotiations on the final seat of the Community institutions, Prime Minister Dehaene told you that he had to keep in mind the position of his party, the CVP, and in particular Wilfried Martens. As Foreign Minister, and during the Presidency in particular, did you also have to keep in mind the foreign policy positions of the Flemish Socialist Party?

[**Willy Claes**] I've always tried to listen to my party. However, and I said it on several occasions at the congress, the party is one thing and the country is another. By taking up a ministerial post, I

placed myself above the party. I wanted to listen and try to take account of party views, but what really matters in a coalition government is a consensus and that is more important than the party you represent. It is in that way, I think, that we should nowadays try to solve problems. If we carry on listening solely to what is happening in the party, we won't get anywhere.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** In a Presidency, in a country, and in particular in a small country, how can the common interest, the European interest, the Community interest be furthered while also — quite rightly — defending national interests? How do you, and did you in your own experience, strike a balance between the common interest and specifically Belgian interests?

**[Willy Claes]** What I am about to say may be a bit simplistic, but if small countries have no say in the major socio-economic, financial and diplomatic issues, if it is not possible to find a solution in a wider context, then forget it, no solution will be found. For small countries, international structures are a dream solution because it is possible to put something of your own into them. If you have to do it individually, even though I have every respect for the independence, sovereignty and so on of nation states, you won't get anywhere. I think that the large Member States must increasingly realise that they are now faced with the same problems. In a globalised world, where even the USA — an economic, technological, military and diplomatic superpower — is having to take account of the new giants that are making such progress, such as China, India, Brazil and others, in such a world, the Member States of the Union have little chance of putting forward their point of view and having it accepted unless they manage to speak with one voice in the name of 500 million citizens. Incidentally, in comparison with that 500 million, China has 1.3 billion. And in a few years India will have more people than China. Even with 500 million, success is not therefore guaranteed. As I said to a Belgo-British conference, it is not the number of Member States that will define the influence of the European Union, it is not the number — 27, 28, 30, 35 ... If Lady Ashton can genuinely speak in the name of that community, people will be forced to listen and take account of the solutions that we bring to the table. If we continue, however, to give a public image of a divided union, we won't succeed. Coming back to your question, however, especially for the small countries which no longer have the resources to find a solution — certainly not — international institutions such as the European Union are a godsend from the point of view of getting your voice heard on the main monetary, trade and other issues. That is the only way of taking part in the decision-making process.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** The Structural Funds, the seat of the institutions, the financial perspective, all successes — which nobody disputes — of the Belgian Presidency in 1993. Do you now think or did you think at the time that your appointment a few months later as Secretary General of NATO followed on from the success of the Belgian Presidency?

**[Willy Claes]** It is obviously difficult to know exactly what reasons led my colleagues to put me forward for the post of NATO Secretary General, but there is no doubt at all that the Presidency played a role. That was obviously supplemented by another issue, which sadly occupied much of our time during the Presidency: the Balkan question and the tragedy being played out in the former Yugoslavia. The debate about missiles, medium-range missiles, was another factor. I took positions which were not always in line with my party. I think that that also played a part with the Americans.

What I'm now saying is no more than conjecture because, afterwards, nobody told me why they put me forward. I nevertheless think that a range of factors were involved, including the success of the Belgian Presidency. I can't say that I was the main player in all that, because we worked as a real team. A really close-knit team which worked for much longer than six months to make sure that a whole range of issues on the table were successfully dealt with. Yes, the Presidency probably played its part.

## 5. On various Belgian figures

[**Étienne Deschamps**] You have told us to what extent you admired Jacques Delors' work for Europe. Jacques Delors who, in 1995, stood down as President of the Commission after ten years in the post and two successive terms. Steps to find his successor and appoint a new President started in 1994 — and I'm thinking here of the Corfu Summit in June 1994. What do you remember — as you were there — about the discussions of the possible appointment of Ruud Lubbers, the Dutch candidate, or Jean-Luc Dehaene, the Belgian candidate?

[**Willy Claes**] First let me say that Jean-Luc Dehaene's candidature was also the result of the very successful Belgian Presidency in 1993. Everyone admired the skill of our Prime Minister and his in-depth knowledge of the issues. Lubbers' candidature was a surprise in my opinion. There were actually three candidates because there was also — and I've mentioned him already — Leon Brittan, the Commission Vice-President, who was put forward by the United Kingdom. The Corfu Summit was chaired by the Greek Prime Minister, Papandreou, who was very frail after a serious heart operation and was obviously not in control of the situation. This was a rather special situation because two of the three candidates were Prime Ministers who would normally attend the Council meeting but who, as interested parties, could not be present. The moral of that story is that it was down to the Foreign Ministers to represent and support them. A strange situation because two Christian democrat candidates were being supported by two socialist ministers: Wim Kok and **Willy Claes**. Another rather strange factor was that if I managed to win the battle, I would rule out any chance of my best friend, Karel Van Miert, becoming a Commissioner. In any case, before the summit started, I met Wim Kok and we agreed: 'We have no choice as ministers. We have to support our Prime Ministers. We'll continue to be good friends, but that is what we have to do. Fair play between ourselves, but we have no other choice.' When we started in the afternoon, Papandreou very cautiously said 'Who wishes to speak on this item?' Wim Kok said: 'Listen, do we know enough about the candidates? Should we not get them in for questioning?' Kohl replied: 'I'm not bothered by any kind of hearing. Let's get on ...' 'OK,' said Papandreou, 'if we don't feel we need to have a conversation with the candidates, we can press on with the secret ballot and I'll hand out the voting slips.' He then handed out the voting slips. Mitterrand immediately said: 'What is all this? I've written down my choice, Mr Dehaene, so why don't we just tell each other.' Mitterrand was immediately supported by Kohl. Kohl had bones to pick with Lubbers who, at the time of the discussions about reunification, had taken a very tough stance against the Germans. Felipe González, the Spanish Prime Minister, observing that a large majority was emerging for Jean-Luc Dehaene, said: 'Listen, in the first round I shall be voting for Lubbers because I promised him I would. That doesn't mean, however, that I can't switch my vote in the second round.' That discussion went on for hours. Papandreou had had enough

and around 9 p.m., 9.30 p.m. I think it was, he brought the meeting to a close, saying: 'We'll carry on tomorrow.' Then he left. The French Prime Minister immediately came up to me and said: 'You realise what is going on here? If we leave this lot to their own devices, it will be in the press tomorrow and there will be nothing we can do about it. We have to carry on.' I went to see Pangalos, the Foreign Minister, and said: 'My apologies to Papandreou, but we must carry on,' and after a good deal of chaos, we managed — a miracle indeed — to get the twelve players back. The discussion continued but this time with much more incisive German and French interventions and, around 4 a.m., Wim Kok said that, if necessary, he would be willing to join the consensus. In other words: 'I give up, Dehaene has won.' At that point, I had eleven of the twelve votes as the British still had their candidate who was supported by nobody but London. Major then came up to me and said: 'Listen, I need to consult London, because I can't just change tack like that. Shall we meet tomorrow at 8 a.m.?' So we closed the meeting without making any statement. No statement at all. At 8 a.m., I saw John Major on his own and he said: 'Listen, you're a politician like me, so you'll understand what I'm saying. If I say yes to Dehaene, the Conservative Party will have my head and the UK will be in political crisis. The answer is therefore no.' I said to him: 'So you are effectively applying a veto?'. He said: 'Yes, it is a no for Dehaene!' I got in touch with Jean-Luc and obviously told him about the night and the eleven out of twelve votes but that, as unanimity was required, it was very doubtful that he would get enough support. Jean-Luc was prepared for failure. Afterwards, however, when he had taken it all in, it was a different matter. The atmosphere at the Sunday meeting, which was also attended by the Finance Ministers, was awful. Awful. The Chancellor was beside himself and said: 'Listen, I now have to take over the Presidency from the Greeks. If you think you are going to leave me without a President of the Commission and paralyse my Presidency, you are mistaken! Get your diaries out. There will be another summit in August in Brussels!' That is how Santer came to be a candidate: directly because of Kohl who saw that he had no chance if he continued to support Jean-Luc Dehaene. The atmosphere on that Sunday was really awful. That is an image of Europe that we can really do without.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] So, some weeks later, Jacques Santer, Prime Minister of Luxembourg, was appointed with no discussion? Or was there ...

[**Willy Claes**] No, there were, I think, I don't know but I suppose, bilateral contacts between Berlin and London. As for the price that Kohl paid to pacify the British, I don't know. What the British really didn't want was the federalist — what's in a word — Dehaene. No doubt about that.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] During the years in which you were at the cutting edge in politics and diplomacy, many Belgians played important roles in European institutions, especially in transnational parties. You mentioned Guy Spitaels, and yourself, in the Party of European Socialists, Willy De Clercq and Annemie Neyts in the liberal political family, Guy Verhofstadt again with the liberals, and Leo Tindemans and Wilfried Martens in the European People's Party. That surely cannot be just by chance. What is the reason for such a situation, exceptional when you bear in mind Belgium's size, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, do you think that small countries have a particular vocation for European integration?



[**Willy Claes**] As you say, it is certainly not by chance. Belgium was obviously one of the countries that took the initiative. First with Benelux and then with the ECSC, the Europe of Six, right from the start, not just, I think, for opportunistic reasons, but for very realistic reasons, Belgium opted for an integrated Europe and even, if possible, a supranational Europe. That was taught at school, on the political parties' training courses, and throughout the social movements. That, I think, explains the emergence of people genuinely imbued with such ideas. We have mentioned Willy De Clercq, Guy Verhofstadt, Martens and Tindemans. Before them there was Paul-Henri Spaak, who was one of Europe's founding fathers. The State Secretary at the Department of Economic Affairs, Snoy et d'Oppuers, was the author of the Treaty of Rome. There is no doubt that Belgium played a major part in the development of the European Union right from the outset. I only hope that Belgium's younger politicians are ready to take up the baton and continue along that path which seems to me to be the only possible path. A small country has the advantage, you see, that it does not give larger Member States any cause for misgivings: 'What are they hiding from us?' and so on. A small country can't do a great deal of damage in that respect ... A small country has a particular role to play, especially when major problems have to be resolved. We talked about the Uruguay Round, and it was only because Belgium is a small country that people did not feel that we were pursuing our own interests or some kind of hidden agenda ... It was because we are small that we could allow ourselves the luxury of taking a different path from the United Kingdom, or from Germany or France. Small countries therefore have an important role to play in future in the whole process of European integration.

## 6. The fall of the Berlin Wall

[**Étienne Deschamps**] A point which we have not yet touched upon in this interview is your personal reaction — and this is obviously going back a bit in time — to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Your whole political career had been shaped by and had taken place until then against the backdrop of the Cold War. What was your personal reaction to the fall of the wall?

[**Willy Claes**] To be honest, the fall of the wall took me by surprise. Reading the memoirs of several of my colleagues, they claim that they foresaw this historic event. Maybe. For my part, I didn't see it coming. At the outset I shared the reservations that Mrs Thatcher and François Mitterrand brought to the European table, and I said to myself: 'It is good that communism is on the way out, but what about the balance of power on the European continent? Could a unified Germany revert to the historic role that has caused us so much tragedy in the past?' That was also a question that I raised in our Foreign Policy Committee. How, in God's name, were we to cope with the economic and financial repercussions of that whole process? We very quickly realised that we could cope with it precisely because of two institutions: NATO and the European Union. It is because of the European Union that it was in practice possible to manage the process and to achieve a positive outcome as well. There is no doubt that peace holds sway on our continent and democratic regimes have been installed more or less everywhere. The internal economic market has been substantially extended with positive results as well. We could go on listing positive results, but we obviously have to accept that opinions on the final result that we want to obtain with the European Union are increasingly diverse. We no longer really know what direction we want to take. A purely confederal direction, where the stress is on



economic aspects in particular, or a genuinely federal direction, through which Europe, sooner rather than later, will speak with one voice and thus gain the place that it deserves in the multi-polar structure that is forming in the globalised world? That is a fundamental question to which there has not so far been an answer. Not even in the Treaty of Lisbon.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You say that the actual fall of the wall came as a complete surprise to you and that you had not foreseen what would happen in the winter of 1989. As a socialist leader holding important offices at Socialist Party level, did you, once the wall had fallen, immediately go out of your way to seek, and did you manage to forge, links with your counterparts in the former GDR?

**[Willy Claes]** Not in the former GDR, no. In the other countries of Central Europe, yes. It was very easy for us to forge contacts for the simple reason that we had them already. We had them. Obviously, maintaining relations during the communist era was no easy matter, but we already had good contacts and links in all those countries both within the Socialist International and the Confederation of European Socialist Parties. That wasn't the problem. The problem was, once Moscow had withdrawn, how were we to set up new instruments and get them up and running? That was an immense challenge. I haven't yet touched on the huge problem raised by the structure of the armed forces in those countries, which was a problem with which NATO was immediately faced. That was a massive challenge.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** Faced with this need to organise the continent in a new way, you said that, in your view, it is scandalous that the adaptation of the Community structures was so badly handled or even disregarded. Why, in your view, was this key aspect of the matter neglected?

**[Willy Claes]** I don't think it was expressly neglected, but rather that a lack of consensus within the European Community led to the failure to modernise and adapt the institutions. There are, to be honest, some Member States which are not in favour of deepening and which consider further enlargement to be a very good way of diluting the European Union. As for London, it is clear that the British are not keen on deeper integration: 'The internal market, a great idea, but count us out as far as anything else is concerned, especially foreign and security policy. As the descendants of a vast colonial empire in the past, we are perfectly able to look after ourselves.' My view is that the British are completely wrong, that in the global context the voice of the British will not be heard, and nor will the voices of the French or even the Germans. The only solution is a representative Europe, speaking and acting with one voice, which will be able to play its part in meeting the major challenges that are taking shape, alongside the USA, China, India and others. Believing that you can make your voice heard on your own and shape the destiny of future generations, there I have to say, with all due respect to Jean-Luc Dehaene, that I am pessimistic.

## 7. The Party of European Socialists

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Mr Claes, I wonder if we could move away from Belgian national policy and also from the Presidency as such — the Council Presidency in 1993 — and talk now about the role of the European political parties. That is a matter about which you know a great deal and which you followed closely, as, in November 1992, you attended the Hague Congress, with Karel Van Miert in particular, at the end of which the Party of European Socialists, the PES, was created with you as its first President. In the early 1990s, what were the problems facing the socialist parties in each of the Community's Member States?

[**Willy Claes**] Prior to the Hague Congress, there was already a loosely structured organisation — that is another matter — known as the Confederation of European Socialist Parties, which was chaired for some time by the former Dutch Prime Minister Joop den Uyl and then by a Belgian, Guy Spitaels. I was involved in the committee dealing with economic problems in particular. That was one of the only committees, incidentally, that managed to agree the text of an election manifesto, as there were such differing views in other committees, which bears out the fact that at that time the parties — especially the socialists — were focusing on internal questions, internal situations and internal policies and were not very inclined, therefore, to enter into compromises and find common ground. That was true of the British Labour Party, and the Scandinavians who were also members of that confederation. There was also, and in particular, an ongoing clash between North and South, where there were very different approaches. There is no doubt that the Christian democrats were more advanced. They had already set up a European party. The liberals had as well, which led myself and Karel Van Miert to say: 'Look, we can't go on like this. Europe is taking giant steps forward and they are going with it.' The whole of the socialist community in Europe had to shoulder its responsibilities and organise itself into parties, especially as at that time — at the initiative of the Christian democrats, I think — there was already talk of a financing system for such organisations. That led to The Hague, where the party was set up in line with the structure of the parliamentary group. I was elected as its first President, as you said, and my first goal was to give a face to this party while trying at the same time to force the leaders to take a common position. That led to my initiative to hold pre-summits before any European summit. The socialist leaders needed to meet. The main problem was that leaders who were in government were not very keen to meet those who were in opposition. Their views often differed, although I never really accepted that. Europe was a reality and differences of opinion therefore had to be discussed. I even managed, after some reluctance on the part of several parties, to get the real leaders, Prime Ministers, party leaders, etc., presidents of parties, to attend ... So at the outset I think that we managed to lay the foundations of a party that worked largely, as I have said, because it drew on the existing machinery of the parliamentary group. The secretariat worked, especially in the parliamentary group. I wasn't President for long, as I left shortly afterwards for NATO. That was a beginning, however, although I would say that the European socialist movement has to some extent missed its opportunity in Europe because there were times when the majority of the Member States were led by socialist governments or coalitions including the socialists. It was at those times that common measures needed to be taken with a view, in particular, to consolidating our position. We missed our chance, there is no doubt. Nowadays, it has to be said, the socialists are in something of a minority position and cannot now be expected to move things forward. Others have to take on that task, because they have the resources to do so, being in government in the Member States. That may be a matter for regret, and I regret it, but I did what I could before The Hague, through my involvement in the committee dealing with economic questions and thereafter as the first President.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You mentioned the role played by the Christian democrats, the European People's Party, in gaining recognition for transnational parties and federations of parties in the treaties, and in setting up a system of funding: legal status and public funding. How did the functioning of the European parties change when they had public funding and were recognised in the treaties?

**[Willy Claes]** I think that that was a driving force in increasing the importance of Parliament itself as an institution. You have to bear in mind that the political parties, receiving substantial financing, were able to set up research services and provide those responsible for negotiating and applying the treaties with substantive arguments. Nowadays, as the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon shows, Parliament is a factor that has to be reckoned with. There was a time when Parliament had a 'consultative' role. I'm exaggerating slightly but the fact that the codecision procedure has now been extended to a whole raft of competences and matters means that even the Council grandees have to take account of Parliament's views. I think that the role of the political parties is also underpinned by the structures that that financing was used to create, structures which have played an important role.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** Could and did the summits or pre-summits, as you said, which took place between the socialist leaders at European level — the same goes for the EPP, the European liberal party and I assume the greens — play a part in your experience in the decisions that were then taken at Community level, purely in terms of decision-making, leaving aside the aspects of personal and human relations between people who were meeting and getting to know one another better?

**[Willy Claes]** I think so. I think so because on a number of occasions at the pre-summits, I saw Prime Ministers who had turned up with a very firm view on the various agenda items modify their position after they had listened to colleagues from other countries, saying: 'We really need to take account of that aspect, that argument. We should try to reach a common position before we turn up to the summit.' Without wishing to generalise, however, I think that these pre-summits helped to some extent to make the parties more consistent and to make decision-making at the summits easier. Yes, I think so.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** I'm sure you are aware that, in public opinion or at least in those circles which keep a close eye on European and Community questions, a fairly common criticism levelled against the Party of European Socialists and the European People's Party in Parliament is the fact that their numerical size means in practice that they share power and all the important posts. Is this a criticism that you understand?

**[Willy Claes]** Yes, I fully understand such a criticism. We have to be realistic, however, and realise that what is involved is a power struggle. If you add together the seats of these parties, that comes to a substantial proportion of Parliament. I understand the criticism because agreements are reached which are sometimes not in the interest of Parliament itself. A President of Parliament is needed ... The

candidatures are first negotiated in the groups and there is already a power struggle there. It also has to be said that it is not always the most capable or representative candidate who wins out. From the point of view of the institution's continuity, it also has to be said that it is no easy matter to change halfway through a Presidency. That is a result of the balance of power which voters really decide to some extent.

## 8. European defence and NATO

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You obviously came face to face with the CFSP — the common foreign and security policy. Do you agree with those critical of the declaratory character of the CFSP, both at the time and now?

**[Willy Claes]** Yes. More than ever, I agree with those critical of today's method of action. To be honest, and I'm simplifying somewhat, even under the new Treaty of Lisbon, which made provision for the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Lady Ashton, who will have an impressive diplomatic apparatus. Even so, I still fear that Europe will not be able to take clear and firm positions on the major problems thrown up by today's globalised world, for the simple reason that the Treaty of Lisbon requires us to reach a consensus. In the past, with just the Twelve, we were unable to reach a consensus on the Yugoslav question. With just the Twelve. You can't tell me that it will now be easier with today's 27 or 28 and tomorrow's 30 or 35. If we don't manage to speak with one voice and to act as one, I'm very afraid that Europe will go on being seen as a non-political player despite its major influence in economic, research and other matters. I wish Lady Ashton every success, but I'm afraid that, on the main issues, she will be like Offenbach's policemen who always arrive too late. That is what happened with the former Yugoslavia. Am I overstating the case? Am I being too pessimistic? Dehaene often tells me off for taking too bleak a view. I don't think so. You just have to look at what happened some months ago in Copenhagen at the major conference on climate matters, where the US and Chinese Presidents ultimately decided to write the concluding statement without involving the huge European delegation. I hope that the Europeans are willing to learn the lessons of that episode which did Europe no good at all.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** For many observers, then as now, the Europe of defence is still on the drawing board. Do you agree?

**[Willy Claes]** Yes. There is no real or realistic defence community. There is no doubt that, in a federalist vision of Europe, that is a necessary element. In my view, however, we are nowhere near. It is first and foremost a question of culture. US citizens are patriots. They acknowledge that they vote Democrat or Republican so that their government can spend close on a billion and a half dollars per day on defence — which obviously includes scientific research — but, even so, that is a tidy sum! Most Europeans have very different preferences. They have socio-economic or even cultural priorities. I don't see any country which is prepared at present to increase its military budget in order to create a European military force able to stand up to a real military challenge. So, yes, there is no

defence community, even though its headquarters have meanwhile been set up. With all due respect, I am very afraid that we run the risk of becoming like a Mexican army, with many generals but no troops or resources. My view is that it would be better to step up the European wing within NATO. That is where I stand.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** So, instead of looking to a Europe of defence, do you think that we could envisage a Europe of armaments?

**[Willy Claes]** Look, even though most citizens are not very keen, Europe has arms and armament producers. It has to be said that, in general, those producers are more willing to compete than to cooperate. That often gives an advantage — with major economic repercussions — to our US competitors, who win sizeable contracts even though the European Union possesses the know-how and production resources. If there is one area within defence that is ripe for integration in the short term, it is that one, although it has to be said that the experience of past decades has also left us with a whole raft of disappointments. That doesn't mean, however, that integration through concerted action and cooperation is not a necessity.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You have pointed to the different mentalities and circumstances of the USA and the countries of Europe. Budgetary reasons also play a part, undoubtedly, but do you think that the neutral status of some EU Member States is also having an adverse impact because it stands in the way of a Europe of defence?

**[Willy Claes]** Certainly, those countries which, because of their neutral status, reject any debate as to whether Europe should also draw up a defence policy with its own resources are a further problem. That is why I think that, certainly in that field, the development of a multi-speed Europe will be inevitable. We had to accept it in monetary matters, and I don't see why we can't do the same in military matters. Again I stress, especially after the facilities for the Europeans introduced at the NATO Summit in Berlin, that it would be wise to forge a structural link between the European Union and NATO, while giving the Europeans much wider opportunities and margins for manoeuvre within NATO, in return for which the Europeans must obviously be willing to shoulder a larger share of responsibility.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You're referring to the 2003 'Berlin Plus' agreements. In what way did those agreements make it possible, if I can put it this way, to clarify the rules of the game and relations between NATO and the European Union as regards security and defence issues?

**[Willy Claes]** To be honest, it has to be said that the 'Berlin Plus' conclusions have not really been put into practice. I suppose for various reasons, but if I understand the 'Berlin Plus' decisions properly, in practical terms, if the Europeans face a future challenge, they are now entitled to and can decide on the action to be taken with assistance from NATO in terms of infrastructure, know-how, and so on, without having to turn to their US allies. In theory, that is possible and is quite something, in

my view.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] You have spoken of the need, as regards a Europe of defence, to envisage a multi-speed or variable-geometry Europe. In your mind is this an unavoidable concession to your federalist ideal or is it, on the contrary, the direct application of a subsidiarity-based federalism?

[**Willy Claes**] Hmm ... That is not an easy question to answer. However — and this may seem a bit naïve — I no longer feel that we will achieve a federal Europe with 27 Member States, possibly 30 or 35 in future, because the fundamental goals of the Member States are so different, even contradictory at times. Consequently, if we want to further this deepening of the European Union, in my view the only solution is to develop at different speeds. How do I see this panning out? We could, I think, make a start by forming a core of ten or so countries. The six that started the whole thing, together with Spain, Portugal and perhaps one or two Member States willing to transfer further powers to the supranational level. That group of nine or ten would obviously remain open to any new candidates willing to join under the same conditions, that goes without saying. I'm well aware that such a step could be seen as retrograde. Fresh differences would be created between us. At the outset, that wouldn't give a very good image in the wider world, especially among the major powers. I believe, however, that a fairly large number of Member States would very swiftly see the advantages of this structural step forward by nine or ten countries. The group would therefore fairly rapidly expand, thereby making it possible to develop a genuinely integrated economic policy and a common foreign and security policy as well. I can see no other option.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] How would it then be possible to continue to manage, to coordinate, from Brussels, a group with enhanced cooperation on defence matters and a further group, perhaps containing different Member States, with enhanced cooperation on economic matters and a third group, which may or may not contain the same Member States, on monetary matters? That becomes a succession of sub-groups. How could an overall line be maintained?

[**Willy Claes**] I accept that it will not be an easy matter. I didn't say that it was an ideal solution, but I can't see any other option. Time is passing and Beijing, New Delhi, Washington and others are not waiting for the Europeans. I don't see any alternative. I have the feeling, moreover, that some would like to use any forthcoming enlargement — because there are still some of the Balkan countries and in particular Turkey, leaving aside the Russian 'near-abroad', Ukraine, Georgia and so on — as an instrument of dilution. Not only to delay, but to weaken the chances of deepening, and if we are to counter that in a practical, effective and clear-cut way, multi-speed development seems to be the only option.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] As the former Secretary General of NATO, of which Turkey was a founding state, do you now see the prospects of Turkey's accession to the European Union in a different way?

[**Willy Claes**] Yes, I see the problem quite differently now. Turkey is hugely important, in geostrategic



terms as well, if you also take account of its relations, albeit tense, with a substantial proportion of the Islamic world. From that point of view, I now have a better understanding of the arguments put forward — largely in Washington — in support of enlargement to Turkey. However, as we speak, that country of between 70 and 80 million inhabitants is not ready in various respects; account also has to be taken of the fact that opposition within the Union is strong. Political opposition as well, as the speeches of the French President, the German Chancellor, and so on, show. Not enough attention is being paid to that, especially in London, and more attention should be paid to what the man in the street is saying. Any enlargement which is now put to Europeans is met with questions that should not be disregarded. What about our security, what about migration? Will these people take our jobs, etc.? Even if we were able to sign an agreement with Turkey tomorrow, there is little doubt that the ratification of such a treaty would be rejected in a number of countries, whether by referendum or parliamentary vote. Democratically speaking, therefore, Europe is not ready for such enlargements.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** In your view, is that reaction being fuelled specifically because it is Turkey that is involved or because the latest enlargements have been put in a rather non-negotiable way to public opinion in the countries which are already members of the European Union?

**[Willy Claes]** Both aspects are involved in my view. Undoubtedly, some of the enlargements that we have had in recent times [...], we didn't hesitate to bring in a package of ten states at one stroke even though we knew that some of them weren't ready, leaving aside the subsequent enlargement to Romania and Bulgaria. You should hear what the people of Antwerp have to say about the number of Albanians in their city. Albania is nevertheless one of the candidates. That is an important factor. Second — and even though I really don't like such reactions from the man in the street — it has to be said that culture and religion also play a part. That is another reason for the negative attitude of a number of people in the European Union. I am very concerned that the problem of migration, increasingly uncontrolled, to be honest, will weaken our democratic regimes. That can be seen from the outcome of parliamentary and other elections. The most recent ballot in the city of Vienna, and the elections in Sweden, are very important pointers that we must take very seriously. That can lead to only one conclusion. Great care must be taken with enlargements as policies within the Union need to be developed before we venture into any further enlargements.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** You mentioned the President of the French Republic, Nicolas Sarkozy, who in spring 2009 announced, 43 years after the unilateral decision by General de Gaulle, that France would return to NATO's integrated military command. How did you react to that decision, and what are or will be the practical consequences of such a step?

**[Willy Claes]** First of all, I wasn't surprised by that decision. In practice, President Sarkozy's decision did little more than consolidate the situation that had existed under President Chirac. Chirac had already, carefully and step by step, returned to the fold. Obviously, however, not on an official footing. Decisions still had to be made here and there but I think that President Sarkozy in some ways merely endorsed a return which had been set in motion under President Chirac in particular.



[**Étienne Deschamps**] Can you explain why? Why this return?

[**Willy Claes**] There are various reasons in my view. First, I think that the French were aware that large-scale action was impossible without NATO and that it was therefore in the interests of Paris to keep a close eye on what was happening in the military command. That is one reason. Second, when they returned, they obviously tried to get some benefits as well: command posts, etc. They set their ambitions a bit too high, however, by thinking that they could take control of the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, yes, that was a bit much, I think. They nevertheless made gains in various areas. And of course, all that clearly facilitates NATO's operations.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] I should like your opinion on the decision — announced in March 2010 — to wind up WEU in June 2011, in a few months' time. In retrospect, what do think about the work of Western European Union in developing and introducing a European defence architecture?

[**Willy Claes**] I don't think that WEU's political role should be underestimated. It made it possible to lay the foundations for a certain notion of European defence policy. From a military point of view, with all due respect to all those who worked for decades for WEU, from a military point of view, they were faced with the failings about which I have already spoken, with a lack of real military power in most of our armies in Europe.

## **9. NATO, the European Union and the conflict in the former Yugoslavia**

[**Étienne Deschamps**] You spoke just now about the crisis in the former Yugoslavia and its direct repercussions for Europe. The European Union was obviously not the only institution or organisation faced with this major crisis. As Secretary General of NATO, how did you try to coordinate NATO's action with the United Nations, led at that time by Boutros Boutros-Ghali?

[**Willy Claes**] It wasn't easy because Boutros-Ghali always saw things in terms of his African continent, and said: 'What you are doing in Yugoslavia is the war of the rich. You manage to find many billions to finance your action, when there are no more than crumbs for Africa.' Boutros was also faced with a Security Council which was strangely divided on the matter of whether it was possible to do more than send blue berets for ridiculously limited periods of time. In that respect, it was very difficult indeed to convince Boutros-Ghali that an end had to be brought to the ongoing scandal that people saw every day on their television screens, the people of Sarajevo who had to go long distances to find a drop of water, the children unable to play in the streets, unable to go to school, and so on. Leaving aside the bloody clashes between the Serbs, Bosnians, and so on. If we did manage to step up our mandate, it is because the Americans, at a certain point, when they decided to intervene within NATO, did so wholeheartedly. Prior to that, it was very difficult for Boutros-Ghali because the Security Council was not moving in the direction of a stronger mandate.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** The US did not intervene immediately because public opinion was not in favour of such a move. Again as Secretary General of NATO, how did you try and how did you manage to persuade the Democrat administration, and the Republican opposition, effectively to commit the country to restoring peace in the former Yugoslavia?

**[Willy Claes]** That was very difficult to pull off. I very swiftly came to the conclusion — not rocket science after all — that the Europeans could not undertake major military operations in the former Yugoslavia on their own. They needed NATO, and they needed the Americans in particular. When I spoke to President Clinton about it, he kept saying: ‘Look, I’m ready to do it. I’m even willing to put my future at risk, as the presidential elections are 15 months away and if, in the meantime, soldiers are sent back in body bags, I may lose.’ Because, he said: ‘My probable opponent is the leader of the Republicans in the Senate and he is completely opposed. Much as I like you, “go to the Hill and convince the Republicans.”’ Which I did. I visited the US Parliament, especially the Senate, on various occasions to speak with the Republicans and in particular Mr Dole, who was a presidential candidate. I explained the situation and Dole attacked me very viciously. At one point, he said: ‘What you are telling my Senators is not the truth. To put it bluntly, you are a liar.’ I said: ‘If that is the case, I invite you to come and speak to NATO’s chiefs in Brussels. Please come. I’ll place the Council institutions at your disposal.’ He came. I shall never forget that one morning there was a confrontation with all the ambassadors. All the ambassadors were telling him that the situation had become untenable and that military action by NATO was the only option. Dole thought differently, however, and said: ‘The embargo imposed by the Security Council needs to be lifted. Let them have the arms and let them fight one another and the strongest will win.’ Primitive though it may be, that was his line of argument. He came to Brussels and we went round the ambassadors, with him hoping that, ultimately, the Turkish Ambassador would say that his argument was right. That was a misunderstanding of the situation as the Turks, also members of the Islamic family, considered that intervention was the only option. He was therefore faced by unanimity among all the ambassadors. He was really furious. He left us, saying: ‘I thought we had friends in Europe, but I see that we don’t. I’ll draw my own conclusions from that.’ And he left. He left for London but ultimately, via the ambassadors, I managed to calm him down, perhaps because he had seen that unanimity, I don’t know. He sensibly changed his tune and it was that, among other things, that helped Clinton then to give the green light and say: ‘OK with us.’ That was not the end of the decision-making problems, but getting the Americans to agree was certainly the most important step.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** Because in that affair you had taken a number of risks: you had opted for intervention in the field without any real Council approval.

**[Willy Claes]** Indeed.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** Why did you take such a decision?

**[Willy Claes]** There was also pressure from public opinion, which no longer felt that the ongoing scandal down there could be left to drag on, bearing in mind the brutality of what was going on.

NATO's credibility was also at stake as it could not just sit there watching from the sidelines. Meanwhile there had also been the Srebrenica atrocity. As in the European Union, NATO also needed consensus, unanimity, and I saw that every country, in some cases via its ambassador, wanted to look at every detail of the military intervention plan even though the Military Committee had already given its opinion which the Supreme Allied Commander, the real military chief, had presented in his overall plan, etc. No progress was being made. After a while, I decided that we should go there and I therefore took a major personal risk, saying: 'We're going!' I picked up the telephone and informed each of the ambassadors personally. There was surprise in some capitals. Ultimately, however, that did the trick.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** In the wake of all those decisions, do you remember different approaches and different views among the Westerners as to the recognition of the new countries emerging from the former Yugoslavia?

**[Willy Claes]** Yes, there were differences, that goes without saying; our failure to agree within the Twelve was down to very different sensibilities. That obviously changed as the drama, military and otherwise, unfolded. At the outset, for instance, it was clear that the Germans were taking a position supporting the Croats, while the French, for historic reasons, were much closer to Milošević and the Serbs, and those various affinities were in play for a long time, even throughout the process, and were again important when it later came to recognising the various new states. Yes, views certainly differed.

## **10. NATO and openness to the East**

**[Étienne Deschamps]** In January 1994, the NATO leaders, meeting in Brussels, adopted the Partnership for Peace.

**[Willy Claes]** Yes.

**[Étienne Deschamps]** As its members included the old members of the Alliance and the countries of Central Europe in the Balkans and even in the former USSR, what was the precise purpose of this programme and what problems, in your view, did its practical application raise?

**[Willy Claes]** There were undoubted parallels there with the European Union's decision in Copenhagen on enlargement. The same line was taken as it was necessary at all costs to encourage and then to consolidate these fledgling democracies and new economic regimes. Ongoing bureaucratic and communist mentalities within the armies were a problem which weighed heavily on the process of democratisation, because the generals in all these countries had learnt to take no account of the decisions of their governments, but only of their party. In other words, these armies were to some extent placing a serious obstacle, or worse, in the way of this process of

democratisation. Matters therefore also had to be shaken up from a military point of view. That led to the Partnership for Peace, the real aim of which was to appoint young soldiers, young generals, young officers to the top posts after they had been re-educated. First of all, they were taught English because no one could understand one another; they were also given lessons on democratisation: 'Your real chief is the government and Parliament. The parties are another matter.' There were obviously also problems with the harmonisation of weapons, etc. That was a side issue, however. The motives were primarily political. Steps had to be made first towards democratisation and then towards enlargement. As the European Union was working from the political and economic point of view, we had to take steps from a military point of view. That is why the Partnership for Peace had to be seen as the first step towards such an enlargement. Obviously, we couldn't be too exclusive about it. That is why a raft of other countries which had emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union were also invited to take part in the Partnership for Peace. We were well aware, however, that we shouldn't create any illusions about NATO's actual enlargement.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Again in the wake of this Partnership for Peace, a few months later, in September 1995, NATO published a study on its enlargement and set out the principles underlying the Alliance's open attitude to new member countries — that is, associated with the Partnership for Peace. Nowadays, with 15 years' hindsight, what is your view of the geopolitical repercussions of this eastern enlargement of NATO which now has, I believe, 28 members?

[**Willy Claes**] I think that we can say that we managed to stabilise the situation except perhaps in a small part of the former Yugoslavia — I'm thinking of Kosovo and so on. Europe is peaceful. There is no doubt that the democratisation process was something of a success. That leaves the whole problem of relations between NATO and Russia. A final settlement has yet to be reached there. Very important overtures have been made, I think, to Moscow. They have been invited to become a partner of NATO. We have also set up a Council+, which Russia attends and where it can give its opinion, before any decision is made within the NATO Council. Obviously, we have always ruled out any veto on the part of Russia — that goes without saying — but for any important strategic decision, Russia is invited to give its opinion. Russia has, moreover, its own Ambassador to NATO, etc. That is a first point. Security relations between the Alliance and Russia are also yet to be settled. There is no doubt that the sovereignty of the new states such as Ukraine, Georgia and so on conflicts with Moscow's conception of security, that is that it is entitled to a zone of influence around its borders upon which NATO and even the European Union must not encroach. To put it briefly: 'Don't set your sights on Ukraine or sparks will fly, etc.' Russia is keen to carry on controlling all the important decisions, not only from a military point of view, but also from an energy point of view, in various countries. That is borne out by Ukraine, where the tap has been turned off on a number of occasions, and by the military action in Georgia, and so on. I now learn that the French President and the German Chancellor have decided to negotiate a new security pact. As far as I know, that wasn't discussed in detail within the European Union. As far as I know, NATO wasn't consulted. Once again, no unity of views, no unity of action, and I don't think that is at all wise. I don't mean that I am not in favour of a definitive settlement of security relations between Moscow and Brussels. That is a must if peace is to be consolidated, and as we are now talking about anti-missile systems and so on, why not try to get the Russians to cooperate? If all that can be settled in a more global context, that would be great. However, we need to bear in mind that before we sit round a table with Putin and his colleague Medvedev, we again need

to ensure that we speak with one voice so that there is no chance — and I must say that tactically they are very clever — of us being divided again.

## 11. Conclusions

[**Étienne Deschamps**] You have held — as we have seen — top posts in the European Council and in NATO. In hindsight, what you think about the methods by which these two organisations operate and their respective ability to forge and reach political compromises and therefore make clear choices?

[**Willy Claes**] Without going into detail, these two organisations have managed to achieve a great deal over the last 50 to 60 years. The result is more than respectable. If I have to draw up a balance sheet, there are major assets. From the point of view of liabilities, however, I have to include a lack of decision-making power because of the infamous consensus rule. Without wishing to repeat myself, a great deal of time is wasted in both the European Union and NATO. In some cases, it is necessary to put together artificial compromises, which is unfortunate, as real compromises are both useful and necessary. I really believe that in the near future, we need to find a way of replacing the unanimity rule by a rule which is perhaps even more complex, that of a special majority. Two thirds of votes, possibly three quarters of votes, but in any case continuing with a consensus system, as I have said — and I'll say it again — if we stick to that rule we will often arrive too late, like Offenbach's policemen.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] For over 40 years, you have been directly concerned by and involved in international and European issues. What do you think — and you have already answered this question in part — of the development of the European Union, Europe's place in the world and the place of Belgium in all that — Belgium's ability to stand up for its rights, its legitimate position, and its unique circumstances?

[**Willy Claes**] My assessment of the European Union, when I look closely at the progress that has been made, is certainly positive. As it is for the man in the street. He can get in his car and set off for Paris or Barcelona, without needing his passport. Nothing at all. In the euro zone, no problems with currencies, no more exchange risks, and so on. And I could go on. Europe is a major economic and technological power, although I would call for further efforts in the research field because we are starting to lag behind if we compare what we are doing with what Beijing is now doing, leaving aside the Americans, Japan, etc. From the point of view of technology, Europe means something. Our education system, from primary school right up to university, is a very good system. What we are doing for the countries of the developing world is more than respectable. Nobody can teach us anything there. We are also among the leaders in terms of humanitarian aid. I could carry on giving a very positive assessment. There is just one problem. We do not speak with one voice in the major political debates. There we are a dwarf. Without going into the Copenhagen disaster, let me give another example: the whole problem of the relations between Israelis and Palestinians. This is an issue which we brought to the table. For years. It is the Americans who are now negotiating. That is not

right, not how it should be. Europe has to shoulder its responsibilities but that requires a unified view. In practice, it requires some transfer of powers to a supranational level. To sum up, any formula other than a federal formula is impossible, I think. That is my conclusion on the European Union. It has to continue along the path of integration, there can be no doubt. Both economically and in terms of international policy. From the point of view of Belgium, I believe that Belgium has a great deal to gain from this European integration. The country is too small to enable it to impose solutions to the main issues which are international in nature. In this globalised world. Those who claim that this globalised world is an argument for dividing the country and for saying that the regions should now replace the federal state — that seems very artificial to me. That is an argument that won't do. I am aware that there is a Europe of the Regions. We have even set up institutions, but we know from experience that the other Member States — as can be seen from work at the Councils — are not keen to focus on the regions. On the contrary, there, there is a movement towards recentralisation. Genuinely believing that by dividing the country into two, three or more ... No. If Belgium is still playing a respectable role in the European Union, as it obviously does as a founding country that has remained true to its real doctrine of integration, it is because it still has a role to play and is still listened to. Countries such as Denmark, which, like Flanders, have six million inhabitants, have much less chance. That I can confirm in the light of my own experience. Those who believe that in the near future Flanders with its six million inhabitants could replace Belgium, and receive the same level of attention and respect, are quite wrong. My view, therefore, is that Europe should continue along the path of integration and deepening, with Belgium as a Member State.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Mr Claes, I'm keen to end this interview on a personal note with a few portraits of some of the personalities you have met, who have left you with particular memories, because over 40 years you have had the opportunity to meet many foreign political figures, both in Europe and beyond. If some names are particularly fresh in your memory, who would they be and why have they left such a mark in your mind?

[**Willy Claes**] Without the slightest hesitation, the top of the list has to be Willy Brandt. The former Chancellor who did so much to further the rapprochement between East and West — consolidating peace, understanding between peoples. He was the real prime mover of Germany's re-unification. Also, the action that he took to pacify the Russians ... Yes, Willy Brandt is undoubtedly a historic figure. I also knew him very well personally when he was President of the Socialist International. He was a real humanist whose policy took account first of the human side of things and then figures and other matters. For me, therefore, Willy Brandt is an exceptional person. Incidentally, he was one of the first to moot the idea of a multi-speed Europe. It was Willy Brandt who came up with that idea. Then, returning to what I said earlier, there was the François Mitterrand–Helmut Kohl duo. They also deserve to be ranked very high in any list because of what they did, first to develop the European Union and then for the rapprochement between West and East which was also very important. I should immediately add Jacques Delors, as I have already spoken about the trio. I think that he really deserves to be ranked very highly. Obviously, I had a chance to work within my political family with a highly representative generation. I knew Olof Palme, Kreisky in Austria, González, Mario Soares, Jürgen [...], that was really a great generation which, I think, worked within the European Union towards a degree of deepening. That generation, I think, stands above the present generation. That is history, however. Let us hope that there will very soon be some major personalities able to imbue



Europe with their ideas on integration, as it is not just the institutions which shape our future and our destiny. It is in particular personalities who, through their direct contact, create a climate of trust in which various ideas and plans can be nurtured.

[**Étienne Deschamps**] Mr Claes, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview and for giving up so much of your time.