

Transcription of the interview with Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb (Sanem, 2 June 2010)


Caption: Transcription of the interview with Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb, Belgian Foreign Minister from 1980 to 1981 and President of the Chamber of Representatives from 1979 to 1980 and from 1988 to 1995, carried out by the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (CVCE) on 8 June 2010 on the CVCE's premises at the Château de Sanem. Conducted by Hervé Bribosia, Research Coordinator at the CVCE, this interview complements the one conducted on 9 July 2002 and 2 June 2010 and particularly focuses on Pierre Werner, a former Prime Minister, Finance Minister and Foreign Minister of Luxembourg and one of the key figures behind Economic and Monetary Union.

Source: Interview de Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb / CHARLES-FERDINAND NOTHOMB, Hervé Bribosia, prise de vue : Nicolas Donnerup.- Sanem: CVCE [Prod.], 08.06.2010. CVCE, Sanem. - FILM (00:44:05, Couleur, Son original).

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1. Pierre Werner, the 1979 European elections and his time in opposition

[Hervé Bribosia] Mr Nothomb, thank you for agreeing to share with us your reminiscences about Pierre Werner, the man and his work. You got to know Pierre Werner well not only during your political and ministerial career in Belgium, but also as a neighbour in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, because you live in the southern part of the Belgian province of Luxembourg, which is where your ties and your roots are. When did you meet Pierre Werner for the first time? What was your first experience of working with him?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Obviously, Pierre Werner was a man of great international prestige when I was still a young man. At the beginning, I was acquainted with him, I met him at some meeting or other, but he was the Prime Minister of the Grand Duchy, and I was a young MP or even lesser mortal from the province of Luxembourg. So the real encounter, when we got to talk to each other, because we were on an equal footing for a moment, was during the electoral campaign for the first European elections in 1979. At that point in time, it was the brief period when he was not Prime Minister of the Grand Duchy, he was a CSV (Christian Social People’s Party) candidate for the European elections, and, as luck would have it, I was the leader of the Christian Social Party in Belgium and the main candidate for the Christian Social Party in southern Belgium. We decided to hold meetings devoted to European matters and we met in Arlon, where he came to express his support for the European ideal, and again in Pétange, on his return trip, so to speak. It was in Pétange that we said to one another, seeing that the electoral campaign was drawing to a close: ‘We should continue this collaboration. After all, we are both European, we are both from Luxembourg, we live 40 km apart. Perhaps we could discuss European issues and regional issues, in the geographical sense of the term, and continue to work together.’ That was when we founded the European Club ‘Perspectives et réalités frontalières’, with Werner as President and various notables such as Jacques Santer, Jean-Claude Juncker and other Luxembourg ministers, and friends, as members. We called it the ‘Cercle Pierre Werner’, and I was the Vice-President throughout that time and very happy to be Pierre Werner’s second-in-command. He had stature, and he had even returned to power in the

meantime, but he always nurtured this desire to collaborate at a European level, but more especially at a regional level with Luxembourg's neighbours. It was the idea of the two Luxembourgs.

[Hervé Bribosia] What was the reason for Pierre Werner's decision to take part in those elections? Was he really motivated? After all, we know that he never sat as a Member of the European Parliament.

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Yes, I think that it was perfectly natural for Pierre Werner, who was the political leader of the Christian Socialists in Luxembourg but not in government, to put himself forward and become the leading candidate for the European elections. Not just because of that, but because of who he was, the man who had proposed monetary union and who was the leading proponent of the idea. He enjoyed the highest prestige in his political family and was the great advocate of the European theme in the Grand Duchy at the time, and indeed far beyond. If it had been possible, we would have adopted him as a candidate in Belgium as well, because he had that image. So I think that these were the two reasons why he was without doubt the ideal candidate at the time that he stood for the European elections. That was what added quality to our encounter on the common theme of the European elections which were part of a common procedure.

[Hervé Bribosia] Right. So it was at the end of his time in opposition — he was in opposition for five years, as you said. There was a five-year period during which he was not the leader of his government. Did he talk to you about that period? Was it a period that particularly affected him? Did he already see himself as part of a European future or did he expect to take up the reins again in Luxembourg?

I think that everyone — at least all those of my acquaintance who were observing the Luxembourg political scene from the outside — thought that it was just an interregnum, and that logic, custom and tradition demanded that the Luxembourg Prime Minister be a member of the CSV. So we regarded him more as the once and future Prime Minister of the Grand Duchy than as someone who was head of the Opposition in the Chamber of Deputies. His European stature remained. It wasn't because he was no longer the Luxembourg Prime Minister that he was not Mr Werner of the Werner Plan.

2. Relations between Belgium and Luxembourg

[Hervé Bribosia] I would like to return to an important juncture in relations between Belgium and Luxembourg. This was the devaluation of the Belgian franc, announced by the Belgian Government in February 1982. At that time, you were Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Interior, and it seems that the Luxembourg authorities were more or less presented with a fait accompli, although in the context of the Belgium–Luxembourg Economic Union and particularly monetary union, Luxembourg was using the same currency. How exactly did that

come about? Do you remember the reactions of the Luxembourg Government, particularly those of Pierre Werner?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Yes, I do indeed remember. That period of devaluation in Belgium was a major political event, something that had not happened since the war. I remember that the Government was not quite sure how to proceed. They devalued the franc in support of an economic and social plan involving wage restraint, etc. The two aspects, if you like — the social element and the monetary pact — were interlinked. In the purely Belgian domestic context, the social pact, the negotiations with the trade unions, the beginning of a period when the Government had special powers in order to apply its economic and social policy, were the prime concerns in relation to the monetary operation, which we knew would take place swiftly, once decided. Internal negotiations took place between the National Bank, which was radically opposed to the devaluation, and ourselves, and we knew that we needed an austerity and reform plan in order to restore Belgium's creditworthiness. That explains, if not excuses, the fact that the monetary event was not taken to be the priority in terms of procedure. We did not want any leaks, so that everything could be announced at once. So that led the Belgian Government — I was no longer Minister for Foreign Affairs or Minister for Finance, otherwise I might have thought of it — we failed to give the Luxembourg Government proper warning of our intentions. So when they announced it — devaluation is brutal: one morning it is announced, and that is that — the Luxembourg Government was beside itself. On a political, international level, I think it was justified. We were in a monetary union, which involved a whole series of procedures and consultations, which obviously included consultations on devaluation because the Luxembourg franc, which still existed alongside the Belgian franc, although the money supply was different, had been devalued. It had been devalued at the same time as the Belgian franc. Their reaction could well have been even more radical; they could have said: 'Well, we are not going to devalue.' We would then have had a monetary disparity between Luxembourg and Belgium, which did happen with some devaluations during the period between the two World Wars, when the two francs drifted apart. We did not quite reach that point, but the anger expressed was particularly vehement. The Belgian Prime Minister and the Minister for Finance went to Luxembourg immediately to explain themselves to their partners.

[Hervé Bribosia] So they quickly ironed it out.

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] I think that the Belgian Government ... I don't know whether it apologised.

[Hervé Bribosia] What I mean is, they didn't particularly continue to hold it against the Belgian Government?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] No, because we did not dispute the fact that we should have held consultations beforehand. Certainly, they explained: 'You know, for us, the problem of the economic and social situation in Belgium and the tensions with the National Bank were such that the Belgian Government was taking every precaution in terms of communications.'

[Hervé Bribosia] The early 1980s were also marked by the iron and steel crisis, followed by a synergy between Belgium and Luxembourg. Did you have the opportunity to talk about that subject with Pierre Werner?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Yes, frequently. Obviously, in that respect, there were national interests for which the governments were responsible, there were regional aspects, because Belgium was also diverse in terms of its steel regions, and there were industrial restructuring aspects: all that was mixed up because Luxembourg companies had holdings in Belgian companies and vice versa. The huge investment of ARBED in Belgium was transferred to Sidmar, which was itself a cause of imbalance in the Belgian iron and steel industry between the old-style Walloon iron and steel industry and the modern industry near the coast. Clearly, things were intertwined. That naturally prompted talks between businessmen, politicians and politicians from the regions. At a particular point, there was a need for frank speaking, even though I knew that there were three elements to his position. Certainly, at that time, the confidence that I had built up with Pierre Werner as a result of collaboration on other matters was very useful. I remember a meeting at a crucial time between two decisions by the Belgian Government, when we got together to discuss what was in the best interests of both Belgium and Luxembourg, and also the Luxembourg region of Belgium, which was deeply embroiled with its iron and steel industry affairs in Belgian territory and its iron and steel industry in Luxembourg territory as a result of the large number of cross-border workers. You can see that matters were complex and that trustworthy contacts with a statesman who was familiar with all those aspects were useful.

[Hervé Bribosia] On that issue, is it true to say that you acted as a kind of intermediary between the Belgian Government and the Luxembourg Government, and Pierre Werner in particular?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] I took the initiative and Mr Werner agreed and said: ‘We need to talk, one to one.’ And we did speak at length, person to person. That was the inspiration for my positions within the Belgian Government, and I think that our talks inspired his positions within the Luxembourg Government.

[Hervé Bribosia] What, in Pierre Werner’s view, was the importance of the Belgium–Luxembourg Economic Union — we have talked about monetary union, but in more general terms — and of Benelux cooperation?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] I think that Pierre Werner felt an attachment — more than just as Prime Minister of a neighbouring country — an attachment for Belgium. He was very familiar with Belgium and its diversities. If I remember correctly, he was born in Lille. He knew our society well and was obviously very well received there. I know that he was worried — because there were already institutional problems in Belgium — he was concerned, and he said: ‘I hope that that is going to work out, because we greatly value the solidity of our partner.’ It was not just the interest of Luxembourg in having a solid partner, it was concern for a democratic, friendly country. This is an interesting, amusing and perhaps anecdotal fact, but the two series of negotiations with a view to collaboration which took place during our generation between Belgium and Luxembourg, took place between Belgian and Luxembourg ministers

who were both from Luxembourg. In other words, at the time of the Benelux negotiations, negotiated in London, the Belgian Prime Minister was Hubert Pierlot, who was an elected Senator for the province of Luxembourg. It was he who negotiated, with Joseph Bech in particular, the Benelux Treaty. When we renewed the Belgium–Luxembourg Economic Union after 50 years, in other words in 1981 — 50 or 60 years later because the Union had been in place since 1921 — I was the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, and I negotiated that with Gaston Thorn or Colette Flesch, but wearing the hat, under the paternal influence of Pierre Werner. That is how it came about that, in the Treaty renewing the Belgium–Luxembourg Economic Union, there was a whole chapter on cross-border issues that was not in the earlier Treaty, because we said: ‘There are also neighbourhood issues as well as nation-to-nation and state-to-state issues.’

[Hervé Bribosia] Another question, which concerned Belgium as well as Luxembourg, which was equally important for both, was the matter of the seats of the institutions. Did you have any opportunity to discuss this question with Pierre Werner, particularly in terms of the European Parliament’s seat and the potential rivalry between Brussels and Luxembourg?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] I discussed that problem directly — obviously, I had my own feelings about it. As parliamentary representative for Arlon, I always said to the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs: ‘Listen, don’t dispute the location too much ... If you attack Luxembourg as the location of the capital of the European Union, you are attacking me directly because my electorate, my little town already lives in the cross-border ambiance surrounding the European institutions. So this is important to me, from a sub-regional Belgian standpoint.’ When I became Minister for Foreign Affairs, my point of view had to change — I had to defend the interests of Belgium as a whole — but the feelings that I had when I was merely a parliamentary representative for the province of Luxembourg remained. I indicated to my colleague from Luxembourg that he shouldn’t worry too much and that I would not undermine him with any underhand manoeuvres to promote a transfer of anything to Brussels, which obviously contrasted with a certain — I was going to say peevishness — but an uptight edginess from the French camp in relation to anything concerning the Parliament in Strasbourg, which had its Secretariat in Luxembourg and held its working meetings in Brussels. There was a contrast, but I don’t think there was a problem. Of course, there was the perennial problem, which unfortunately still exists even today, in 2010: ‘Why is it that Belgium doesn’t ensure faster links between Brussels and Luxembourg?’

[Hervé Bribosia] Is there a reason for that? Why does the train go so slowly between Brussels and Luxembourg and between Luxembourg and Strasbourg?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] That is a purely Belgian question. In so far as 90–95 % of the population lives between the Sambre–Meuse valley in the South and the coast or Netherlands border in the North, that is to say in a restricted area, the priorities lie in that populated region. The unpopulated area is huge: that is the South-East of Belgium, with the whole of the Ardennes which are thinly populated. So, from our point of view, it was always a contentious issue for us to have to explain: ‘Yes, but our infrastructure is not just for the 200 000 Belgians

who live in the province of Luxembourg, it is also for other people who live in Luxembourg, Strasbourg or Lorraine.’ It was also ...

[Hervé Bribosia] To link the three European capitals.

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] ... a European justification — to link the three capitals of Europe — a justification for the Greater Region supporting the claims of the small region of Belgian Luxembourg, because funds are needed to do it. No one in Belgium is against having a TGV between Luxembourg and Brussels, but the experts will say to you: ‘There is no traffic, it is uneconomic.’ There are also a number of small hills, called the Ardennes, with deep valleys, which slow everything up. It is not as easy as going from Brussels to Amsterdam or Brussels to Paris. From one five-year plan to the next, the project has always been put back. It is still a great source of irritation for those living in Belgian Luxembourg as it is for those living in the Grand Duchy to see that train going so slowly.

[Hervé Bribosia] But also for those living in Brussels and Strasbourg? European civil servants in any case.

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Yes, of course. But irrespective of those who travel, it is clearly an anomaly that the train goes slower from Brussels to Luxembourg than from Brussels to Paris.

3. Regional and cross-border cooperation

[Hervé Bribosia] What role did Pierre Werner play in the development of the Institute of the Greater Region, originally the Intra-Community Regional Institute, the IRI? Was he President of the Institute himself, as I think you were?

Certainly he was. The Intra-Community Regional Institute came into being over 50 years ago in Otzenhausen, in the Saar, as a result of the special status of the Saar in Franco-German relations; an institute still exists there today under the name of the European Academy of Otzenhausen. Residents of the Saar were very keen on that Franco-German cooperation which gave them a special status in Germany and also in the regional cooperation with their neighbour, the Grand Duchy, and later with Belgium, which was at least indirectly concerned. At a particular point, the IRI ran into difficulties — I can’t say exactly what they were — in the Saar, particularly regarding its funding and its Secretariat, and it was then that Pierre Werner, Prime Minister of Luxembourg, intervened, saying: ‘We will take the Institute under our wing.’ That is when the seat of the Institute moved from the Saar to Luxembourg, where it remains to this day.

[Hervé Bribosia] What year was that?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Oh, about 30 years ago, I think, so it must have been in the 1980s. The seat was established in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, at the Chateau de Munsbach where it is still located. At the time, there was political will, and Werner said: ‘It is necessary.’ So he did it; he had the power to do it, and the Luxembourg Government followed

him. It was also the policy of his successors. Jacques Santer himself put great efforts into this interregional cooperation, as did Jean-Claude Juncker later. So Werner was the first of the Luxembourg Prime Ministers, and he carried forward the strong tradition of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg of encouraging cooperation in the Greater Region — across the borders of the Grand Duchy. I think his spirit continues to hover over it all. This is why, when we organised the Cercle Werner in 1979 for the purpose of cooperating mostly on regional affairs between the two Luxembourgs, we were part of a larger cooperation network — it was not always easier, because it was more diversified — but that was always the general spirit.

[Hervé Bribosia] So the Institute of the Greater Region is about cooperation on a larger scale. Why was Pierre Werner particularly interested in this type of regional cooperation?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Listen, he was European in spirit, and he wanted European integration. At the same time, he was Prime Minister of a country which was not the largest in the Community, with borders all around, and I think he wanted to set an example. He was very keen on the idea of setting an example of cooperation at the time of the Intra-Community Regional Institute. ‘Intra-community regional’ meant: ‘Given the regional development of Europe, we are going to establish a region.’ To some extent, he had the idea of a coherent cross-border region, alongside Bavaria and the large French regions, which would be a region that was already integrated: it would set an example for cooperation. I think that was well ahead of the reality. It is clear that the Grand Duchy, due to its increasing prosperity as a result of the prestige of the banks and finances carved out by Pierre Werner, and the development of the audiovisual sector and satellites — what I might refer to as Pierre Werner’s ‘babies’ — started to attract an increasing number of people. That caused an influx of cross-border workers, which means that, when people say now that there are 200 000 commuters coming into Luxembourg, that is a considerable number for the Luxembourg state to cope with. Both the hundreds of thousands of people and the number of square kilometres lacking in the Grand Duchy for any expansion were elements of that interregional cooperation. It seemed to me to be logical from his point of view, and we followed him — we who were on the border followed — saying to ourselves: ‘It is in our interest too, this Greater Region cooperation.’

[Hervé Bribosia] You mentioned the Cercle Pierre Werner — that was your name for it: I think that is what the Belgians call it — its actual name being the ‘Cercle européen: Perspectives et réalités frontalières’, as you also mentioned at the beginning of the interview. The club was founded by Pierre Werner in 1987. He was its President until his death, and then you took over the presidency of the club and are still its President. What was the rationale for the club, and more specifically, how did the European dimension — ‘Cercle européen’ — fit in with the cross-border dimension — ‘réalités frontalières’ — because both elements are present in the name of the club? What was the reason for creating the club, and how did the two dimensions fit together?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] I must admit that, when I proposed the creation of that club in the wake of the European elections, we were in a European context. We found that we were talking about the same things — generally Luxembourg and Belgium speak about the same things — and we were part of the same political family. So we said: ‘We must continue

together.’ For my part, it was obviously in my interest to cling onto the intellectual coat-tails of Pierre Werner, with all his experience, and to express general ideas together, hence with more authority. I think that they thought about this on the Luxembourg side, and so, when we got down to formalities and signatures, we changed the name: for me, it was a European club — Pierre Werner’s role was to provide the idea. So we called it ‘Perspectives et réalités frontalières’, which meant that we would also consider cross-border issues. That was also an interest of mine because, two years later, I insisted that the Belgium–Luxembourg Economic Union should incorporate cross-border matters. So there were the two dimensions, as I have just explained.

[Hervé Bribosia] Which borders are we talking about exactly?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] We are talking about the border between the two Luxembourgs. We would say: ‘Within the Greater Region or within the Belgium–Luxembourg Economic Union, two entities which are bigger than us, the small-scale cooperation between two entities of the same size, namely the state of Luxembourg and the province of Luxembourg, which both bear the same name, is essential. We therefore emphasised that aspect. But the cooperation was always within the other entities. We never said that we would not cooperate with the Saar or Lorraine just because the two Luxembourgs were going to cooperate. We never said that it wasn’t for the Belgium–Luxembourg Economic Union, we never said that it wasn’t for Europe. Everything was intertwined with the same spirit of cooperation.

[Hervé Bribosia] What type of events did the Cercle Pierre Werner, to use the shorter name, organise back then or does it still organise?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] The club sought to act as a forum for meetings between the governing elite, the ‘establishment’ of the two Luxembourgs, who did not necessarily meet unless it was part of an organised structure. So we organised talks, two or three a year sometimes, on all sorts of subjects: on very specific matters, which required cooperation, or on cultural issues — we worked on French language literature in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and in Belgian Luxembourg. That enabled writers to get to know each other and the cultural public to realise that there were writers on the other side. We held meetings on justice in Luxembourg. That enabled both sides to set out their problems and enabled magistrates, the judicial police and public prosecutors, who would not normally meet for operational reasons, simply to talk to each other about the reforms that each one envisaged. I think that this facilitated a huge amount of interaction. On our 10th anniversary, we made a list of all the talks we had organised, and we should have made a list of all those who attended and said to them: ‘We brought the establishment together on a single topic for a single day, that ought to have had an outcome somewhere.’ But we were not aiming to dictate to them, it was not like a think-tank or an official meeting place.

[Hervé Bribosia] Two years after the foundation of that club, in 1989, I think you commemorated the 150th anniversary of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, or rather of the separation, and hence the two Luxembourgs.

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Precisely. It was a time — for those who are history buffs, who like Luxembourg, who like the two Luxembourgs — it was a time which could have given rise to friction or sensitivities in terms of expression. In the words or in the mind of many citizens or leaders in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, 1839 meant that the province of Luxembourg had been taken from the Grand Duchy and given to Belgium. Similarly, if you were a Belgian, you thought that, due to the action of the King of the Netherlands, who had laid claim to his Grand Duchy, the Grand Duchy was separated from us. It was the same reality, but it could be perceived from the two perspectives. What is interesting is that the perception of the event was one of regret on both sides, with both sides saying: ‘It was you who caused it.’ People could have been more ... territorial sensitivities could have been revived ...

[Hervé Bribosia] Nostalgic.

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] There could have been nostalgia on one side, claims on the other. But we avoided that. We celebrated together. At that time, I was already President of the Chamber. I organised a banquet in honour of Pierre Werner, it was my opportunity, to celebrate together the 150th anniversary of the separation. One doesn’t usually celebrate a sad separation with a banquet, but we did. It enabled everyone to express themselves — I think that the personality of Pierre Werner and the good links that we had established facilitated this — and all the Belgians were very pleased, including our Prime Minister, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs who was also at the dinner, likewise the Luxembourg European Commissioner, we were very pleased to see that Luxembourgers from both sides were celebrating together a separation that they both mourned.

[Hervé Bribosia] Do you think, though, that the reunification of the two Luxembourgs could come back on the agenda, given that the very survival of Belgium is sometimes questioned? Did Pierre Werner ever envisage such a scenario?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] As you know, I am an active and ardent supporter of Belgian unity, even with all its ups and downs, and I think that Pierre Werner was also in favour of maintaining Belgian unity, for sentimental and also practical reasons: it was not good for the Grand Duchy to have an unstable neighbour. We never talked about this matter, but one day I said to him: ‘You know that I never talk about it, but I am a politician and I have to envisage every possible scenario, including worst-case scenarios, and so I think that in that case a conversation between the two of us would be beneficial.’ So, alluding to this alternative scenario, we talked about what we could talk about if, potentially, against our will, a situation arose ... I greatly appreciated that, the finesse, because I was the one in the weak position: I was talking about my country and saying ‘If this happened, if that happened’, so there was great finesse and great friendship. So that particularly struck me: meaningful human relations of great quality with a man of stature.

4. Luxembourg statesmen and the process of European integration

[Hervé Bribosia] Did you sometimes feel that Pierre Werner had a strong national sentiment?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Yes, yes. I will tell you my impression. I remember having the strong impression that Pierre Werner was a kind, likeable person who liked to iron out problems. I remember — I think it was the for death of Grand Duke [*sic*] Felix: Werner did a television broadcast. He spoke — the occasion was the death of the Grand Duke, the Prince Consort, the husband of Princess Charlotte — and he spoke with such conviction, saying: ‘He understood the Luxembourg sentiment, he clung to it and he lived it.’ To explain, I would say that that man, who came from another princely family, embraced nationalism, the pride of Luxembourgers in their state. That made a big impression on me. On a sentimental level, that is. I also think that, at the time of the celebrations for the 150th anniversary of our separation, there was an awkward moment: the Cercle Werner organised a talk in Luxembourg, in conjunction with the exhibition — I don’t remember the place, but it was the building which housed the exhibition on the history of the Grand Duchy. We organised the talk, about the history, about feelings, but one of the subjects was: How did a Luxembourg nationalistic sentiment develop, does it exist, when did it exist? I remember being very annoyed, because we had invited as our Belgian speaker Prof. Wilquet from the University of Brussels, who was very familiar with the situation in the Grand Duchy, having family roots there which made him both an expert and sensitive. He gave a speech and concluded by saying: ‘It is not possible to say that there is any Luxembourg national sentiment.’ That was a problem for me: how could one follow that? How could a person say, when we were celebrating ... I remember that Pierre Werner had wanted to intervene, and I put my hand on his arm and said ‘No, let me speak first.’ Because I was the one who was annoyed. I praised the Grand Duchy as an independent state, in order to try to counter the impression given by the professor’s speech that I thought was dangerous or contentious. Pierre Werner himself forcibly expressed the same thing. But I was pleased because I had expressed it before he did.

[Hervé Bribosia] Expressed what exactly?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] The fact that a national Luxembourg sentiment obviously did exist. That it had obviously increased over the years, that it had not been — I am saying it as I remember it — that the First World War had not engendered that same feeling, because the international role of the Luxembourg Government, well, it did not take part in the war as it did in the Second World War, but that gave rise to the expression of a desire for independence in the two referenda — on independence and on the monarchy. However, that was still a question of politics. He said: ‘That feeling only became deeply entrenched at all levels of the population during the Second World War, when other people tried to challenge, to suppress our identity.’ He then said it forcefully: ‘There is no problem with the theory of Mr Wilquet from an intellectual point of view; the entire Luxembourg population is unanimous in the defence of its nationality, in its pride at being independent.’

[Hervé Bribosia] You knew Pierre Werner well and I think that you were also on good personal terms with Jacques Santer and Jean-Claude Juncker. Was there a certain legacy from Pierre Werner, especially in terms of European policy but also in terms of what we were talking about just now, interregional and cross-border cooperation?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Yes. I am obviously not a Luxembourger. I look at the succession of great men in the Grand Duchy. First, I notice that they are well prepared, that when someone becomes Prime Minister, he already has all the relevant experience. I think that, in the nature of things — the interests of the Grand Duchy within Europe are very understandable — there was continuity. Because everyone had to cope with the same problems, it was not the largest state in the Community, but it was in the middle, it was trilingual — well, bilingual in French and German — and so it was important to impose one's personal stature, beyond that of the state one was representing. I think that the three men achieved this resoundingly and that, quite naturally, Jacques Santer tried to do as well as Pierre Werner, and the same happened afterwards. It is worth noting that that position was the same in relation to European cooperation, European integration or European policies, but it was also true of Greater Region integration, policies or relations with each of the neighbours. We have talked about relations between Belgium and Luxembourg; there were obviously intense, and very well managed relations, from the Luxembourg point of view, with the French on the one hand and the Germans on the other. In terms of Greater Region cooperation, that sometimes had a negative effect: you need to understand that the people of Lorraine, a region of 3 million inhabitants, at a certain point in their cooperation with their Luxembourg neighbours, who had 350 000 inhabitants a few years back, there is a direct relationship with the President of the Republic in Paris. Whereas the people of Lorraine have to battle within the French system to make their voice heard, the Grand Duchy's voice is heard more readily within the French system, precisely because it is a sovereign state and there is a Prime Minister who enjoys state-to-state relations.

[Hervé Bribosia] Do you remember any other occasions when you met or collaborated with Pierre Werner?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] I am sure that, if I delved into my past, there would be several occasions, because over a long period between 1970 and the death of Pierre Werner, there were many events when our paths would have crossed. I think that you ...

[Hervé Bribosia] I seem to have read that you celebrated your 25th anniversary as a Belgian MP. I expect you met then?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] Yes, it was a great honour for me. In 1993, I celebrated 25 years in the Belgian Parliament, and a party was held in Arlon on the theme of cooperation between Christian Democrats in Europe. I was very pleased because not only did the Belgian Prime Minister come but also Pierre Werner — who was no longer, I think, Prime Minister at that time — anyhow, he was there; for us, there was a statesman from the Grand Duchy and one from our side, the statesman being Pierre Harmel, also a former Belgian Prime Minister and also an intellectual leading light in Christian Democrat circles and in European integration and international relations. So I was very pleased to be there alongside Pierre Werner and Pierre Harmel, in the company moreover — an interesting fact now, in 2010 — of Herman Van Rompuy, who at that time was relatively unknown but also had the same European and Christian Democrat fervour.

[Hervé Bribosia] To end this interview, how would you describe the personality of Pierre Werner, as you perceived it, having been close to him for a period of more than 20 years? What were his sources of inspiration, in your view?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] I think ... we did not talk about it much, but Pierre Werner was a committed Christian, he was driven by his Christian faith. I think that he belonged to various discussion groups on such matters. So he had been involved in thinking on otherworldly questions, and that inspired him in his human relations, it made him very calm, very serene in the face of life's crises. So I would say that he was calm, at ease with his convictions. Calm, not because he was never on edge, but because he had the courage of his convictions ideologically, with regard to his family, as Prime Minister of the Grand Duchy, as a builder of Europe and as a 'promoter' of cooperation in the Greater Region. All that goes together. He was not torn between conflicting viewpoints, as sometimes happens with public figures. That is how I saw him, because he was older than me and already well established before I arrived on the scene and found my place. As far as I am concerned, his position was already established. He had great integrity, and that gave him a serenity, it gave him a kindness that is the trait of great men. He didn't give himself airs — he was Pierre Werner, and that was enough. He did not need to pretend to be something he wasn't, and I benefited from that. And because we thought along the same lines — although he was indubitably my intellectual superior — I was always happy to meet him. I think that that is the attribute of great men, to be great and yet simple and open at the same time.

[Hervé Bribosia] Mr Nothomb, thank you very much for granting us this interview.