

# Wilfried Martens

„WITHOUT THE CDU THE  
EPP WOULD NOT BE WHAT  
THE PARTY IS TODAY“



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Das Interview fand am 31. Mai 2012 in Brüssel statt und wurde geführt von Marcus Gonschor und Hinnerk Meyer.

*Mr President, you were born in Sleidinge in 1936. Could you please tell us something about your origins, your parental home and your time in school?*

I was born on a very small farm in the outskirts of the local community or local commune in Sleidinge. I was born in 1936. I remember the beginning of the war in 1940. I was on a bicycle with a young girl trans-

552 | Pierre Harmel (1911–2009), belgischer Politiker der PSC, 1965/66 Premierminister, 1966–1972 Außenminister seines Landes.

553 | Paul Vanden Boeynants (1919–2001), belgischer Politiker der PSC, 1966–1968 und 1978/79 Premierminister seines Landes.

porting me to the kindergarten. She said to me: "Look in the sky! There are planes." That was the beginning of the war. I have this memory still vivid. After a very rapid battle the German soldiers came to our farm. I remember very well that they were correct. There were no incidents with them. They stayed some two weeks or so on our farm. After the Germans had left Canadian and Polish troops came to our farm in September 1944. I remember also that people came back from working in Germany. During the last year of the war some people had to go to Germany. I have not seen very dramatic scenes during the war. During the liberation there were some actions of Belgians against Belgians who had collaborated with the Germans. In our village it wasn't very intense. I was the oldest of finally five sons. My father died from a disease in 1943. My mother remarried and had another son with her new husband. From the age of four I went to the kindergarten and then in 1944 to the primary school in Sleidinge. I was always the first in the exams. After the seventh class of the primary school I selected humanities in my region, the province of East Flanders at the border to the Dutch province called Zeeland. I started to study Greco-Latin humanities. In 1950 I became very ill and stayed home for 9 months. Following this illness, I had an insufficient aorta. Surgery was required in 1983. Beyond that I remember the rebuilding of the country and the possibility for me in special conditions to continue studying. Of the 30 young students ten of them had more than 90 percent in the exams. I was the only one to start studies in humanities and later to go on to university. To tell you: democratization in education was not yet the case. It was an exception. But I had all possibilities. I was very active during this time in the youth movement named Catholic Action and when I came to Louvain in 1955.

*Did these issues influence you as a politician later on?*

I remember the war very well. These issues influenced me in any case. We were very aware about the importance of what was happening. We were reading and discussing a lot about all the consequences of the war and the postwar period. Evidently, during our studies in humanities our experiences and history were stressed. We went to a College where all professors were priests except one. All! Catholic priests! In the history lessons they gave us details of what happened during the war. But they were not fanatics. The education was very objective.

*You have already mentioned the University of Leuven where you studied law. Have there been influential teachers?*

Yes, there have been. The first year I concentrated on my studies. We had to have a degree. I could study with the help of the state for the first time but after that period you had to have at least 70 percent or a distinction in the exams. So we were obsessed to study and to get this distinction after the first year. I could continue with a scholarship. I studied only in Leuven. At that time my mother was a widow and I was the oldest of five sons. We did not have the necessary means. But thanks to the scholarship I could continue my studies. In the second year I became a member in a house named Universitas around a famous teacher – Prof. Albert Dondeyne.<sup>554</sup> He was a professor of philosophy, a very modern one. I lived there for the next two years with the group of very intellectual students from the student association of Catholic Action. I studied law but also Thomistic Philosophy in the famous institute of Cardinal Mercier.<sup>555</sup> It was very important for me later on. The main influence came from Prof. Dondeyne. He influenced generations of students. My predecessors and also my successors in the Christian Democratic Party studied under him. I was among a younger generation but what I learned in Universitas was as important as to study – more important. So I did not become a nationalist. Dondeyne had a very balanced and modern vision as a professor of Philosophy. He wrote a lot of books about rejuvenating the Catholic Church. This was definitely a very important part of my education.<sup>556</sup>

*Have you already had historical or political models during this time?*

Yes, I had. I studied in Louvain from 1955 until 1960. During that period when I was in the house of Universitas where I had very intellectual and very sceptical co-students there was a very important moment: when Konrad Adenauer came to Louvain and became Doctor honoris causa of the University. I will never forget this because some of my co-students were very sceptical about Adenauer. Others were very progressive. I went to the auditorium where Konrad Adenauer received the honors and made a speech. He was one of the actors or personalities in which I could believe. In comparison to my comrades I wasn't

554 | *Albert Dondeyne (1901–1985), belgischer römisch-katholischer Priester, Theologe und Philosoph, 1933–1971 Professor an der Katholischen Universität Leuven.*

555 | *Désiré-Joseph Mercier (1851–1926), belgischer römisch-katholischer Geistlicher und Kardinal, 1906–1926 Erzbischof von Mecheln.*

556 | *Den Einfluss von Prof. Albert Dondeyne beschreibt er auch in seinen Erinnerungen: Wilfried Martens: De Memoires. Tielt 2006.*

that dubious to what was happening there and also in Germany. Adenauer was in fact a leading figure in Europe and what you could call to be the European education and European perspective. Then soon I became the leader of the student movement. I had stayed two years in Universitas before I became the leader of the association of Flemish students in Louvain, elected at a certain moment to the student parliament. At this moment I was beginning to be active in the Flemish Movement but never became a nationalist. We organized elections for the student parliament in Louvain. In the first election I was largely well known. Besides that I was active in the public scene in the newspapers. During four or five years in Louvain I was not only studying but also very active in the student movement.

*What experiences did you make during your time in the United States in 1968 when you visited Harvard University?*

I stayed in Louvain until I finished my studies in 1960. During the next four years I was extremely active in the Flemish Movement in Belgium. In 1964 I became a member of the Christian Democratic Party, the CVP. I had a lot of contacts. It was a strange move coming from the Flemish Movement and then turning to a traditional political party – the CVP of Mr Tindemans. I became the leader of the youth movement of my party in 1966. I was still President of the youth movement when I was invited to go to the Harvard International Seminar in 1968, the last year that Henry Kissinger was its director. Mr Tindemans also went to Harvard. It was evidently extremely important for me to get to know the US. It was the year of the election of Richard Nixon. I can tell you, Henry Kissinger was very sceptical about Nixon in the beginning. Kissinger was in favor of Rockefeller<sup>557</sup> another Republican candidate. But after the election he became Nixon's advisor. That was amazing for us because he was critical about the candidate Nixon. I maintained my relationship to Henry Kissinger when I became Prime Minister and until now. I recently met him. The EPP has also contacts with the International Republican Institute (IRI). We are visiting the US twice a year. In 1971 I was invited to a two months visit of the State Department. During that time I had the opportunity to make a trip through the US.

557 | *Nelson A. Rockefeller (1908–1979), amerikanischer Politiker der republikanischen Partei, 1974–1977 Vizepräsident seines Landes.*

*When did you first come across the topic "Europe" and its political integration? What was your idea about "Europe" and what it should become in the future?*

Among my lecturers during my last year of humanities in September 1954 I had a professor in Rhetorica who was a very political minded priest. I will never forget that at the beginning of the year in September 1954 he started to tell about the decision in the French parliament under Prime Minister Mendès-France no longer willing to accept the European Defense Community. That was after Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam. Our professor explained to us what the significance was. He was very upset of what had happened in France after the conclusion of the European Steel and Coal Community. The second integration move which was about to create an EDC failed by the decision of the French parliament. It was the first real political conception. For me the process and the evolution to create a European Community became very real also in political terms. But there were also other lecturers who were talking about Europe. In the beginning, we had very European oriented comments during lessons of history. However, not all students were sensible to this subject. But, evidently, the students interested in politics had learned the first important element of what you can call a European conviction.

*In 1957 the Treaty of Rome created the European Economic Community. What did that mean to you personally?*

Combined with my previous answer: in 1956 when I was a student leader in Louvain I participated in a meeting with Adenauer. The actors who had signed the treaty were in the media. I saw the pictures of Adenauer, Paul-Henri Spaak and the other leaders in the newspapers. After the failure of the EDC we imagined that step as a restart of the process of European integration. As you know, the Belgians played a very important role. In the famous castle of Val-Duchesse in Brussels (that we used several times when I was Prime Minister to organize meetings and negotiations regarding the formation of governments) the famous working group that Paul-Henri Spaak presided to prepare the treaty of Rome came together. Spaak was supported by another Belgian politician who was then Secretary General of the Department of Economy: Jean-Charles Snoy et d'Oppuers<sup>558</sup> – although Spaak was

558| *Jean-Charles Snoy et d'Oppuers (1907–1991), belgischer Politiker der PSC, 1957 Unterzeichner der Römischen Verträge, 1968–1971 Finanzminister seines Landes.*

the leading figure. It was the only period in my memory that the Christian Democrats were not in the government. It was a government of Socialists and Liberals under Achille van Acker.<sup>559</sup> Paul-Henri Spaak was Minister of Foreign Relations before he became Secretary General of NATO. He certainly was the leading figure in that government and also during the negotiations of the Treaty of Rome.

*What was your personal view of Spaak?*

I did not know him personally because I was too young to meet him in the political context. I know his daughter very well.<sup>560</sup> Later on, we were colleagues as party presidents. When I was Prime Minister she was President of a francophone party in Brussels, FDF (Front Démocratique des Francophones).

After Paul-Henri Spaak finished as Secretary General of NATO he became Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Relations in the government of my predecessor Théo Lefèvre. At the end of his political life he changed parties and became member of the FDF. His daughter was President of this Brussels, French-speaking party. But I have never had personal contacts with him.

*You have already mentioned that you entered the CVP in 1964. What were your main motives?*

I was not inevitably coming from a family engaged explicitly in the Christian Democratic Party. My mother came from Gent and my father was a small farmer. He was a son in a family of 13 children. He was Flemish and Catholic. But some of his brothers and sisters were members of the Christian Trade Union for textile. We were reading a Christian Democratic newspaper. So in my family I was then linked or involved to the Christian Democratic idea although no one had an official function. My mother was member of an association of farmers that is very well known in Belgium: the *Boerenbond*. We were anchored in the larger Christian Democratic family. I was an activist in the Flemish Movement but I always doubted to go to the nationalist party. For it

559 | Achille van Acker (1898–1975), belgischer Politiker der sozialistischen Partei, 1945/46, 1954–1958 Premierminister seines Landes.

560 | Antoinette Spaak (geb. 1928), belgische Politikerin der FDF, später *Mouvement Réformateur*, 1977–1982 und 1994–1999 Mitglied des EP.

was clear that I would become an activist in a political party, of course, in the Christian Democratic Party. After my active period in the Flemish Movement I made the choice to become a CVP member. During my time in the Flemish Movement I had also a lot of friends among the leaders of the Christian Democratic parties. So I had a lot of contacts. Very quickly I became a member of the cabinet of Prime Minister Pierre Harmel in 1965 and President of the youth movement of the CVP in 1967. I stayed until 1971. One year later I was elected President of the party.

*The CVP of Belgium represented the Flemish voters, while the PSC stood for the French-speaking. What can you tell us about the general relationship between these two wings especially concerning the European Integration progress and process?*

CVP has its voters in Flanders and some in Brussels, while PSC has its French-speaking voters in Wallonia and in Brussels. Previously we were always united in one party. That was no problem. When the party split up during the crisis about the University of Louvain in 1968 in the Flemish speaking CVP and the French-speaking PSC it was also no problem, for instance during the process of creating the EPP. My colleague was Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb.<sup>561</sup> The two of us, we were co-presidents of the CVP/PSC. Even when the party was split in regard to domestic politics we had no serious problems. We had the same objectives. There was no divergence concerning European integration. Even today there is no fundamental or major divergence between the two. So the split was a split in national policy but not vis à vis Europe.

*Did this divergence influence the transnational party cooperation (EUCD, EPP, EDU)?*

No! I remember very well the common leadership of the united party before the problem concerning the University of Louvain that led to the split. As a President of the youth movement, I was member of the leadership. Later on, Nothomb and me, as co-presidents of CVP and PSC, we worked together all the time – for instance, in the formation of the EPP. I was perhaps more active than Nothomb. Hans August Lückner

<sup>561</sup> | *Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb (geb. 1936), belgischer Politiker der PSC, heute Centre Démocrate Humaniste, 1972–1979 Vorsitzender der PSC, 1980/81 Außenminister seines Landes.*

and me were the founders of the EPP. I was a young President of the CVP while Lückner was the leader of our group in the European Parliament. Anyway, the leadership of CVP and PSC always worked together in all questions concerning the European parties.

*In 1965 you became advisor of Prime Minister Pierre Harmel and in 1966 advisor of Prime Minister Paul Vanden Boeynants. How would you characterize those two politicians?*

These two were the only French-speaking Christian Democratic Prime Ministers of Belgium since the 1950s. All the others were Flemish Christian Democrats during this long period. Pierre Harmel stayed only six months as Prime Minister, whereupon he became a famous Foreign Minister. During that time the Harmel Doctrine<sup>562</sup> was well known. I served in his cabinet during these six months. I was a very young man and coming from the Flemish Movement. Harmel had some turbulence about that, also with the French-speaking press. But he maintained me in his cabinet. His successor was Paul Vanden Boeynants, a French-speaking politician from Brussels. He knew Flemish very well. In fact, his parents came from the Flemish region. He was not an intellectual. Harmel was an intellectual, he had been professor at the University of Liège, Liège. He was a fantastic Foreign Minister as he later proved. Vanden Boeynants came from the mid class, and was a very pragmatic and dynamic Prime Minister but only for three years from 1966 until 1968. A second time he became Prime Minister of a transition government after the collapse of the government of Mr Tindemans, just before I was elected Prime Minister in April 1979. Although he was interested in European policy in general he never accepted a leading function in the EPP. Of course, as Prime Minister he participated in the meetings on the European level but he never was that active.

*When did you first come across the topic of Christian Democratic party cooperation in Europe and realize the value of it?*

Practically and very concretely I realized it during the first years when I was President of my party. I was elected President of the CVP in March 1972. In fact, we started in April 1972 when the political committee of

562 | *Der Harmel-Bericht führte bis 1967 zur Umwandlung der NATO-Strategie von der „massiven Vergeltung“ zur „flexiblen Antwort“.*

Christian Democratic parties from member states of the European Community was established. As a matter of fact, this committee was the predecessor of the Political Bureau of the EPP. From that moment, this subject was extremely concrete for me. I engaged myself fully. In fact, the result was that two figures were leading, not only in the drafting of the statutes, but also in developing the first basic program and the planning of the first congress. That was Hans August Lücker and I. Since then, I have been active in the EPP.

*Let's talk about the predecessor organization of the EUCD, the NEI. What kind of image did you have of this formation?*

The Belgians played a very important role in the NEI. The first President of the NEI was Robert Bichet. But there was already a Christian Democratic organization founded before the Second World War, the SIPDIC in the early 1920s. Don Luigi Sturzo who created the first people's party in Italy played a significant role. In 1925 the first meeting of Christian Democratic parties took place in Paris. This organization ceased to exist in 1939. Sturzo, British and Exile politicians founded the International Christian Democratic Union (ICDU) in London in 1944. After the War meetings of Christian Democratic party delegates took place in Lucerne, Switzerland in 1947, but also in South America, in Montevideo, Uruguay. The founding meeting of the NEI was held in Chaudfontaine, Belgium. The secretariat was placed in Brussels and later moved to Paris and then Rome. The successor of Bichet was August de Schryver, one of my predecessors in Gent and the founder and first President of my party. De Schryver served from 1950 until 1959. His successor was also my predecessor in Gent, Théo Lefèvre. He stayed until the end of the NEI because in 1965 the NEI were transformed into the EUCD. Leo Tindemans became the first Secretary General of this EUCD and remained until 1974. In this year he was elected Belgian Prime Minister. In fact, the EPP was founded by the Political Committee that represented the EUCD and our group in the European Parliament.

*You used to work for Leo Tindemans since 1968. How would you characterize Tindemans and his vision of Europe?*

I think the most remarkable document is his famous report of 1975. I think to characterize him I should quote him. In his letter of December 25, 1975, when he transmitted his report to the members of the European Council he said:

„A l’occasion de mes nombreux contacts, j’ai été frappé par une contradiction. D’une part, certains estiment que le moment est d’autant plus mal choisi pour rédiger un rapport sur l’Union Européenne que l’idée européenne traverse une crise et que l’édifice européen, à moitié achevé, vacille. A cela s’ajoute le sentiment que la récession économique a perduré, pendant toute l’année 1975, dans nos Etats membres, sans qu’une action commune de quelque envergure ait été envisagée pour lutter contre la dépression et le chômage. Et pourtant – et ceci est une constatation d’une grande portée – presque tous mes interlocuteurs m’ont affirmé ne pouvoir imaginer un meilleur avenir pour leur pays qu’à travers la construction de l’Europe; ils ne conçoivent la réalisation de cet objectif que dans le renforcement de la Communauté.”<sup>563</sup>

He already used the term “European Union” in this report from 1975. But you can also find the pessimism of Leo Tindemans. He was very radical. Even after the Maastricht Treaty when he was a member of our group in the European Parliament, he was very critical about the second summit of Maastricht, where the Economic and Monetary Union was created. He said, that too many concessions would have to be made. On the other side he was a very convinced European. All the elements included in this report we realized later on: creating the Single Market, the Economic and Monetary Union, the beginning of a Common Foreign and Security Policy, and so on. Most of Tindeman’s political life was dominated by his European conviction. But he was also, in my perception, very pessimistic. He was a perfectionist in European matters, not accepting compromises. What the founders did was sacred for him. In the immediate time after publishing the Tindemans Report nothing really happened. But later on, all these things were realized. For instance, I remember very well that he had a good relation to Jean Monnet. Sometimes he called by phone. Jean Monnet was his ideal.

*The 1975 Tindemans Report, the 1981 Genscher-Colombo-Initiative and the 1983 Stuttgart Solemn Declaration can be seen in a historical continuity. Do you agree?*

563 | *Texte de la lettre adressée par M. Leo Tindemans à ses collègues du Conseil Européen le 29 décembre 1975, in: L’Union Européenne, Rapport de M. Leo Tindemans, Premier Ministre de Belgique au Conseil Européen, in: Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, du Commerce Extérieur et de la Coopération au Développement (Ed.). Collection „Idées et Études”. Bruxelles 1976, S. 1-56, hier S. 3.*

I agree. When Tindemans published his report I was President of my party. I did not participate in the Genscher-Colombo-Initiative in November 1981. Between April and December 1981 I was not in the government for eight months. So I do not have any specific memory about it. But I participated in the Stuttgart Declaration in 1983. Looking at the records today, it is extremely important to have knowledge about the content. I am impressed about the continuity. In 1983 we were living in a period of crises, the Eurosclerosis, after the oil shocks with high inflation and high unemployment. I don't know if we can say that the Tindemans Report has all the elements of the fundamental reforms that came later. But not to forget: the Schengen Agreement. For me, the first common response was the Single Market. I became member of the European Council in April 1979. Until 1985 during all European Councils the Prime Ministers explained their national policy and concerns. In my experience, there was no common response. The first reaction came with Jacques Delors as new President of the European Commission and his proposal to create the Single Market. We stated the objective "Europe 1992". The mentioned declarations are extremely important in the forthcoming of European integration. They are interlinked. The ideas were growing. The real and first common response to the crisis and to end the Eurosclerosis was the Single Market. We discussed the starting of the Single Market on an intergovernmental conference in Milan under the Italian presidency in June 1985. Margaret Thatcher opposed it and then Giulio Andreotti intervened and said: "The decision to organize an intergovernmental conference has to be taken by majority." Bettino Craxi<sup>564</sup> organized the vote and Thatcher was isolated. Only the Danish abstained. The Danish always abstained, in my experience. So the decision was taken. But who prepared the Single Market? The answer is: A British Conservative, Lord Cockfield<sup>565</sup>, Vice President of the European Commission. During the summer of 1985 Thatcher changed her opinion. She negotiated. At the beginning of December 1985 we concluded under Luxembourg presidency the negotiations of the Single Market. Later on, during a meeting I had with Thatcher and George H. W. Bush for a ceremony in Belgium in

564 | *Bettino Craxi (1934–2000), italienischer Politiker der sozialistischen Partei, 1976–1993 Generalsekretär seiner Partei, 1983–1987 Ministerpräsident seines Landes.*

565 | *Francis Arthur Cockfield (1916–2007), britischer Politiker der konservativen Partei, 1985–1989 EU-Kommissar für Binnenmarkt, Steuern und Zollunion und Vizepräsident der Kommission.*

1999, a famous British journalist asked the three of us, who is the most important political personality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thatcher said "Churchill", Bush said "Reagan", and I said "Jean Monnet". I reminded her that she accepted the Single Market and she assumed: "It was the biggest mistake of my political life."

*You mentioned the failure of the EDC and the Eurosclerosis. Would you say that crises in European integration are necessary to get some progress after solving them?*

For a lot of people it is an axiom. My experience as Prime Minister was that it was not possible since 1979 to come to a common approach until 1985 and to end the crisis. Today the global financial crisis started in the US and spreaded to Europe. For us in the EPP it is a trauma since May 2010. We were in Vilnius with the political assembly of our party when we learned about Greece and the Ministers of Finance had a crisis meeting in the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN). This is just two years ago.

The Eurosclerosis after the oil shocks lasted much longer. I remember Helmut Schmidt always criticizing us in Belgium. In 1982 I had to devalue the Belgium Franc and to take very strong measures. He appreciated that step. But the common response came only in 1985 with the proposal of the Single Market. In 1985 there was real enthusiasm for the objective "Europe 1992". I remember not only politicians that were really in favor, but also employers' organizations and trade unions. The trade unions were really enthusiastic because we offered an alternative and we wanted to create jobs.

*Between 1979 and 1992 you were Belgian Prime Minister. How would you evaluate the Belgian-German relations during the time you served as Prime Minister and in a wider historical perspective?*

I think I can tell you that we, the Belgians, first had an early European conviction and European feeling. During the last decades that conviction was extremely strong. Also just after the war, and especially from the moment that Schuman, Adenauer, and De Gasperi acted for reconciliation and cooperation, we had a very adult and objective attitude. This attitude didn't exist in France or in the Netherlands. We were ready for entering a new period, a period of non-violence, of negotiation, dialogue, reconciliation and working together. During all the decades

after the war, also when I became President of my Party and when I was Prime Minister, I will never forget that Helmut Kohl invited me frequently. We both were the presidents of our parties. Together we went to Berlin. He said, he was going there every month. "It is really important for me as the leader of the CDU", he said. But when I became Prime Minister of Belgium Helmut Schmidt was Chancellor. My first visit abroad was to Bonn. There is an anecdote: My spokesman stood next to Schmidt when he was waiting for my arrival in Bonn. Then Schmidt said and my spokesman listened to him: "Wo ist der Bube?" Remember, I was 42 years old! But he called me a "Bube". I have not only enormous respect for Helmut Schmidt but also sympathy – but, of course, also for Helmut Kohl. So, we had excellent relations. I got to know very well the German Christian Democrats, the successors of Helmut Kohl like Wolfgang Schäuble, and also Angela Merkel. I have been working together with her for more than 20 years. We always had excellent relations – with the Christian Democrats, with Schmidt, and the Germans in general. I think I can tell you that we, the Belgians, in general had and have a very honest attitude and also a new mentality oriented on Europe and the future. In all the contacts between diplomats we had a very comprehensive and very respectful cooperation.

*How would you characterize Helmut Kohl?*

The strongest in the economy was Schmidt. But Kohl had the historical view. Based on his conviction that the German unification has to be integrated in the European context, he showed a real historical view. He was very courageous. I had an excellent time working together with him. But he had to trust you. He has an enormous memory. For instance, I will never forget the famous dinner in Strasbourg in December 1989<sup>566</sup> after he announced his ten-point-plan for German reunification. Then he tried to convince all his colleagues during that dinner. Thatcher was strongly opposed to this plan. Andreotti was opposed. Mitterrand was not clearly in favor. Lubbers made the famous mistake asking if history is demonstrating that German unification is a necessity. And Kohl said to Lubbers after the dinner: "I will teach you history!" The three supporting Kohl were González, Santer, and myself. But Kohl never forgets this. All that I did as Prime Minister but especially as President of the EPP was with Kohl's support.

566 | *Der EG-Gipfel fand am 8./9. Dezember 1989 in Straßburg statt.*

He was the first to propose to organize EPP summits of the Prime Ministers of the EPP from 1983. He said: "I will come to Brussels two weeks or maybe ten days before the summit." And he came! And all the others followed him. So it was extremely easy for me as President of the EPP. Today that is no longer possible. The leaders are coming the day of the European Council meeting. You can imagine the enormous difficulty to organize a reasonable discussion and to prepare this European Council when the leaders arrive only some hours before the official meeting is set to begin. Kohl made the effort. I was only able to organize the EPP and enlarge it with his support. His backing was essential.

*Let's come back to the Belgian perspective of transnational party cooperation. How important was this party cooperation in general within the framework of the CVP?*

We have an enormous and strong European profile as a party because of our European commitment and engagement. Mr Tindemans won the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979 with one million votes. As a party we had better results in European elections than in national ones. So we were considered as a European party. The result was enormous. When we invite the highest representatives of the member parties they sent assistants to the meetings of the Political Bureau of the EPP. As President of my party I always was present at the meetings of the EPP. Today on the one side there is not any more such a clear European profile. On the other side we have more populist and nationalist parties. For us, the CVP, the transnational party cooperation was extremely important. Our activists also considered it a necessity. They recognized themselves in this European engagement. I remember these times very well, because then the European and the federal and regional elections were not hold the same day like today. These better results in European elections were due to the fact of our European engagement.

*From your point of view, who were the most active Belgium and foreign protagonists in transnational party cooperation?*

There were a lot. Let's start in the other parties. To give you an example: At a certain moment, the Presidents of the three traditional European parties were Belgians and Flemish. Willy Claes, once Secretary General of the NATO, was President of the European Socialists.

Willy De Clercq –<sup>567</sup> Vice Prime Minister in one of my governments – was President of the European Liberals and I was President of the EPP. Alfred Bertrand was a Minister and later on an eminent member of the European Parliament. For some time he was also the leader of our group in the EP. Leo Tindemans was evidently one of the most active protagonists. A lot of others were very active in the leadership of our party. The whole Benelux was very dynamic, Jacques Santer, for instance, or Jean-Claude Juncker etc. In the Netherlands there were Prime Ministers like Andries van Agt<sup>568</sup> or Ruud Lubbers. Their countryman Piet Bukman was also President of the EPP. Also when you look at the NEI, their first Presidents were Belgians: August de Schryver and Théo Lefèvre. Leo Tindemans was Secretary General of the EUCD. I followed him as his successor in the EPP. Also among the Socialists I give you an example: the French-speaking colleague of Willy Claes, Guy Spitaels, was also President of the European Socialists. There is a long tradition, also in different political parties in Belgium, to be active in European affairs. Evidently, we have an advantage: We are living here in the center, in Brussels. That is an enormous asset. I can tell you: since I am President of the EPP, I am coming to the headquarter of the EPP in Brussels every day if I am not abroad for any visits. When you are not living in Belgium it is extremely difficult to do that. In fact, you have to live in Brussels or in the neighborhood to be active every day. Today, this is a necessity. My former colleague Poul Nyrup Rasmussen,<sup>569</sup> a member of the EP and President of the European Socialists from 2004 to 2011, did not have opportunities to live here and to be present all the time. In the current direction that the European political parties are heading it is required. This has always been an advantage for the Belgians.

*How did you see the founding of the EPP in 1976 and the EDU in 1978?*

You have to read my memoirs about it! I ask you to do that. The latter one was a terrible experience. This event is included in one of the pas-

567 | *Willy De Clercq (1927–2011), belgischer Politiker der liberalen Partei, 1980 stellvertretender Premierminister, 1985–1989 EU-Kommissar für Äußeres und Handel.*

568 | *Andries van Agt (geb. 1931), niederländischer Politiker der KVP, heute CDA, 1977–1982 Ministerpräsident seines Landes.*

569 | *Poul Nyrup Rasmussen (geb. 1943), dänischer Politiker der sozialdemokratischen Partei, 1992–2002 Vorsitzender seiner Partei, 1993–2001 Ministerpräsident seines Landes.*

sages in my memoirs where I am very strong. I said, that was a terrible mistake. The EDU was created two years after the EPP. I said to Hans August Lückner: We need years of efforts to overcome this. The first meeting of the Political Bureau of the party was totally related to the discussion of the fact that our German friends together with others wanted to cooperate with the Conservatives. At that moment there was not only the question of the British Conservatives. The then-President of the EUCD, Kai-Uwe von Hassel, to whom I had an excellent relationship, was a great advocate of EDU. He appreciated my work as President of my party. To create the EDU only a short time after the founding of the EPP was, what we call in our language, a *domper* – a setback of the enthusiasm. You know what finally happened. Ultimately, Helmut Kohl was strongly in favor to merge the EUCD in the EPP and to integrate the EDU in the EPP. We organized meetings with the leaders in Bonn, in the chancellor's bungalow. A lot of people were very angry about Kohl's position. However, we finally did it. We integrated the three parties. But I proposed even after the fall of the Berlin Wall to retain the EUCD under my successor Wim van Velzen to prepare the parties from the new Central European member states. That was, in my opinion, the task of the EUCD. I needed, I guess, one year to convince Helmut Kohl to accept my proposal. But, finally, when he became Doctor honoris causa, like Adenauer in Louvain, and was going to Laeken for an audience with our King he promised me in his car that he agreed.

However, to come back to the beginning and the creating of the EDU only a short time after the creation of the EPP, this step was a failure, although in the end we were able to integrate these three different organizations. Imagine! I did not use the term merge or absorb as certain people do. No, I said, we have to integrate them. But I repeat: It took years until we finalized the integration!

*The first direct elections to the European Parliament came up in 1979. How significant were these elections for your party?*

I have already mentioned that Mr Tindemans won 1 million votes in these elections. It was the most famous victory of our party. He was no longer Prime Minister of Belgium and I had to replace him. Nobody of the older leaders or colleagues in his government were ready to become the new Prime Minister. I have never been Minister before, the King asked me to form the government. It was a long period. The militants of our party were very critical. Also in the public opinion there

was the feeling that something of injustice was committed to Mr Tindemans. So he had an enormous benefit with his European profile and commitment to run for the European Parliament. As I said: Europe was present among the voters. This was a fundamental different situation than today. Europe was a hope. When you have a credible candidate then you can benefit. It was an enormous success for our party primarily due to the fact that Europe represented a credible objective, a credible assurance for the people.

*The Belgian Christian Democrats are known to be sceptical about the British Conservatives although they always promoted the British membership in the EC. What is the reason for this?*

Yes! On the one hand we were and still are in favor of the membership of the UK in the EU. On the other hand we were and are extremely sceptical about the British Conservatives. But there is a difference between the Conservatives and the UK. We should not forget what August de Schryver once told me in regard to the creation of the NEI: the people of the British Labour Party had attempted to become members of the NEI. So the division of Conservatives on the right of the center and Labour on the Left was not that clear at this moment. A lot of members of Labour were possible candidates and possible allies for the NEI during a certain but, of course, limited period. In the attitude today vis-à-vis the British you can be in favor of the UK's membership of the EU but that doesn't automatically mean that you are also in favor of the eurosceptical attitude of the British Conservatives. In the last hour of the negotiations of the Maastricht Treaty, John Major hesitated a long time to accept it. Finally he didn't. If the UK were a member of the Economic and Monetary Union the situation today would be totally different. That is the reason why we are in favor of the UK but still have a lot of problems with the British Conservatives. Especially David Cameron to become the leader of his party paid the price to the Eurosceptics.

*Let's come back to the EPP. How would you describe CDU's role in the EPP? Is the CDU a Primus inter Pares?*

Helmut Kohl had a very reasonable attitude. He said, we have to respect the equal dignity of every member party. For him the President of the EPP had to be a member of a smaller country. He always tried to realize this objective and did so. Normally a German or a member

of a bigger member state is the leader of our group in the EP. He said to me: "As it is in Germany, you have to be President of the party and also the leader of our group in the European Parliament." So I accepted. The CDU is not a *Primus inter Pares*. Angela Merkel and Wolfgang Schäuble also confirm this line. They tried and also realized it: the equal dignity of the different parties. Evidently you have to have candidates to fulfill that function. The CDU was not a dominant force. Kohl had enormous commitment. He was always present. He always participated and came up with ideas and took initiatives. The day when on our right side a party was created by Berlusconi in which the Irish and the British Conservatives participated, he called me immediately and said: "We have to organize something." He was extremely active all the time. In that sense he was *Primus*, but there were also other leaders. He was really concerned and participating all the time. Without the CDU the EPP would not be what the party is today.

*The German Kai-Uwe von Hassel played a significant role in trans-national party cooperation. What was your impression of this man?*

He was a very decent, strong and convinced man but he was really sure that there was only one way for the formation of a party on the European level: Christian Democrats and Conservatives working together. For him that was a necessity. Finally, he was right. The only exception was the incident with the British Conservatives. But the French Gaullists came to us and also other parties. It was possible on the basis of the new basic program that we approved in Athens in 1992. Von Hassel was right on the objective but wrong on the method. He was responsible for the initiative to create the EDU. I think that I later on proved when I was President of the EPP that the enlargement of the EPP with likeminded political parties is possible – but only on the basis of a new basic program. Von Hassel recognized that I was right. Although we did not agree in the beginning, he later understood that the objective was fulfilled. So I think he was wrong on the method. He tried to impose it and he created a strong opposition among the Christian Democrats of the Benelux and Italy. We finally were able to manage it on a sound basis and at a good moment. It took years of conviction. We maintained the three pillars. First we maintained that we are a party of values, a party based on a system of values like freedom and responsibility, solidarity, and human dignity. Second we stand for our European conviction. We are the successors of the founders of the European Community, Schuman, Adenauer and De Gasperi. Our goal is

a federal Europe. Third we are in favor of social market economy. We never abandoned this. Never! We integrated the other parties on the basis of these three pillars. Kai-Uwe von Hassel recognized this at the end seeing that we could realize this.

*In 1983 Thomas Jansen became Secretary General of the EPP and the EUCD. What was your impression of that man?*

Jansen asked me to become President of the EPP. We had a meeting in Pisa.<sup>570</sup> At that time I supposed that he had informed Helmut Kohl about my candidacy. However, he had not. I will tell you this anecdote. In Pisa Helmut Kohl said to me: "What are we doing? Are you a candidate for President of the EPP?" I replied, I thought that he had been informed about my candidacy. Kohl said that he would support me but that he had not been informed. During that period the Secretary General was the essential vehicle of the party. The whole organization was concentrated on the Secretary General. Helmut Kohl asked Thomas Jansen, active in the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation in Rome, in the early 1980s to become Secretary General. I am sure that Thomas Jansen was an excellent Secretary General. It was different from the current situation. It was a real pity that later a conflict developed between Helmut Kohl and Thomas Jansen. Kohl's entourage was able to create an animosity on the side of Kohl against Thomas Jansen. But in the beginning and during a long period he was strongly in favor of Thomas Jansen. He had a political view and tried to attract tremendous candidates to the EPP presidency. Evidently, the day that I accepted to become President of the EPP, I had the advantage coming to the office everyday. From that on we had a new situation. We had an excellent cooperation. But I was the President, and he was the Secretary General. The burden for a Secretary General until that moment was too heavy. Without leadership of the President it is a too heavy burden for a Secretary General. But he did a good job. For instance, when I was elected President in June 1990, he prepared the organization of our congress in Dublin in November on the European Constitution. In that period we had the first real important declaration to create an Economic and Monetary Union under Jansen's inspiration and leadership. Together with me he took the initiative to create a new basic program to give the enlargement of the likeminded parties to the EPP a basis. I repeat: he was an excellent

570 | *Das EVP-Treffen fand am 17. Februar 1990 in Pisa statt.*

Secretary General. When Helmut Kohl wanted a new Secretary General all the parties opposed him. All! But finally after some months, Thomas Jansen had to resign. I went to Bonn and I had to discuss the new candidates. Helmut Kohl said: "Not a German again! That's finished!" I said: "Helmut, the best candidate is a German." He asked: "Who?" I said: "A young man, who worked with me. He's brilliant. It's Klaus Welle." Then Kohl wanted to know, what he was doing. I mentioned, that he was working as an advisor to the CDU/CSU group in the German Bundestag. "You will decide", he stated. So I said: "Then it will be Klaus Welle."

*We have already spoken about Leo Tindemans who was the first President of the EPP. Piet Bukman and Jacques Santer were your predecessors as President. How would you characterize these two in their role as presidents?*

Piet Bukman today is still coming to our meetings. I guess he resigned as President because he became Minister and later Speaker of the Parliament in the Netherlands. He was a very efficient President. Jacques Santer followed him. He was Prime Minister in Luxembourg. It was like in my case when during some months I was Prime Minister and President of the EPP. I always had to make a choice between my duties and my obligations as Prime Minister on the one hand and as President of the EPP on the other hand. It was difficult, although I was in Brussels. I could combine it but it was not an ideal situation. That was also the case with Jacques Santer. He was extremely important for a lot of contacts in the beginning of the enlargement of the EPP. He played a very significant role. But his efforts did not provide a maximum result. In that period while the transformation of the European political parties took place it was a necessity for the President of such a party to be present. After two or three years he was not longer a candidate for the presidency anymore. However, during his presidency he was an ideal and convinced President of the party. But he was in a situation where he could no longer combine to be Prime Minister and President of the EPP at the same time. I was not able to do that either. If I had stayed as Prime Minister I would not have the same results as President of the EPP that I did achieve later on. I needed to be active in the party for 100 percent at the moment of the transformation of the EPP. From then on the presidency was no longer an honoree function. We needed an active President.

*According to the progress and the organization of the transnational party cooperation which interference factors can you mention? Who were the most argumentative and contentious, so to speak the most difficult personalities in Belgium as well as in Europe?*

Concerning the personalities, we had some very exceptional problems. I remember Mr Colombo very well. He was President of the EUCD but he was not very active. His office was then in Rome. During our meetings strong disputes occurred between Mr Colombo and certain members of the political assembly of the EUCD. But this was an exception. Finally, he resigned and during a certain period I replaced him and combined the EUCD with the EPP later on. Normally, there was what we call a consensus – unanimity. We could discuss but there were no major disputes in the EPP or in the EUCD except during the period that Colombo was President of the EUCD and also of the IDC, the *Internationale Démocrate-Chrétienne*. Nevertheless, Colombo was an attractive personality. We had other problems – ones of financial nature. During the ten years of my presidency and before, we organized the party only on the basis of the contributions of the member parties and of the EPP group in the EP. Finally, beginning in 2004 we were recognized on the European level as financially funded by the European Parliament. That was difficult but not impossible. For instance, although the fact that only our member parties and our group in the EP contributed us we could become owner of our building in which the EPP headquarter is located today. Previous to the funding of the European party it has not been easy but difficult although we did it. Today the funding of the party is based for 80 percent on funding of the European Parliament and for 20 percent on member party contributions. In the past, we could live poorly but efficiently. We had five or six collaborators, now 22. We had no think tank. Some years ago, we created the Center of European Studies also funded by the European Parliament. What is the best situation? I am not sure. I am very attentive in regard of the budget of the staff. I always say: do not invest more than 35 percent of the budget in the staff. That is a limit for me. Otherwise there is an enormous danger that you become a bureaucracy. It was a necessity to create the funding but it is also a danger. You have to be very strict in the internal organization to avoid becoming a bureaucracy. So the funding was a problem but we could live with it. Being efficient was possible. In fact, it all depended on the commitment. We were also able to work efficiently when we were poor. Of course, now the financial problem is much easier but we have to be careful in regard to the danger of becoming a bureaucracy.

*Compared to the Socialists, the first efforts of transnational party cooperation among the Christian Democrats in Europe came up later. The Socialist or Communist International was already established in the late 19th century, while the Christian Democrats came together after World War II. How do you explain the historical catch-up process of transnational Christian Democratic Party cooperation?*

The Socialist International is nearly a century older than the early attempts of Christian Democrats to build a party cooperation after the Second World War – the NEI. But there were also some attempts before the war. Don Sturzo was the famous exponent of this movement. But we also have to mention some initiatives in Latin America. Finally, in July 1961, the Christian Democratic World Union (CDWU), was founded in Santiago de Chile. In 1964 its name was changed to Christian Democratic International (CDI). Actually, this was the follow-up to what our predecessors did in Europe. Of course, the international cooperation of the Christian Democrats started much later than that of the Socialists and Liberals. However, the initiatives before and after the war all started in Europe. We are a member of the CDI. Later we also became a member of the International Democratic Union (IDU). That sometimes creates some difficulties. Fundamentally, CDI is an institution with content but with a small organization. IDU is an international organization without content. So I am strongly in favor to merge the two organizations but I doubt that it would be possible. By the way, IDU was created in front of the Berlin Wall between Reagan, Thatcher, and Helmut Kohl. CDI then already existed. Today, the situation is totally different. The Socialist International is not what it has been in the past, for example under strong leaders like Willy Brandt. We sometimes had and still have fundamental difficulties with the SI or the Liberals. Helmut Kohl then said to me: "You have to become President of the CDI!" I replied that my duty was to reorganize EPP. Later on, in his last year as chancellor, he was admitting that such an International is really difficult to lead. In German he said: "Das geht zu weit!" I told him that it was not too far away but the International needed to be managed by someone who was ready to take responsibility for it.

*How significant was this transnational network generally? Quantité négligible or important additional factor?*

In the first place it is supportive and important for European integration. That was the fundamental inspiration of Hans August Lückner. It

was necessary to create a European Christian Democratic party. The party cooperation was extremely essential. Hans August Lücker said, when we go to direct elections of the European Parliament we need an anchor and not only day-to-day politics in our group. You need references, you need values, you need a structure of a European political party on the European level, a party as an anchor. We needed a programmatic basis for the enlargement of the EPP to likeminded parties. That was our basic program of Athens. Though we had and have a pluralistic composition of our party, believers, Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans, Jews, Muslims, Orthodox, and non-believers, all were and are defending the same values. You need a system of values. In 1992 in Athens we proclaimed that we are a party of values. We had another extremely important congress in 2001 in Berlin. Then we said, we confirm our basic program but we need a EU of values. Read Article 2 of the European Treaty and other elements like the notion of social market economy. I don't pretend that these implementations all trace back of our commitment but we worked on it. In that sense, the role and the function of a political movement can be extremely important. We are always telling that we are a political family. This is the hardcore what we are doing. I think it is extremely supportive for the European integration.

*Is there a future perspective of transnational party cooperation and how does it look like?*

In the European context there is certainly a future perspective. The cooperation and the role of the parties will depend upon the fact if the EU will evolve to a Political Union. If that is the case, we will go to a system in which the European parties will play an extremely important role in nominating the candidates for the President of the EU, elected by the parliament or by the people. Of course, the parties also would be responsible for creating Pan-European lists for the European Parliament – not for all the nominees, but, for instance, for maybe ten or 20 percent of it. Then, the European political parties would play a very central role. In the last elections we were responsible for nominating José Manuel Barroso as a candidate for President of the European Commission. In 2014 when the next European elections will take place we will have to follow another method, perhaps primaries to nominate our candidate. In Europe we also have to combine the function of President of the Commission and President of the European Council. I am convinced that once the President of the EU will be elected by the parlia-

ment or by the people. Maybe I will not be able to live to see that. But imagine what such a step would mean in terms of legitimation. Evidently, it would be an enormous step for the heads of state to accept this reform.

*When you became President of the EPP, what goals did you set for yourself and did you accomplish those?*

In my memoirs you can find some more detailed answers to that question. The first thing I was expected to do was to make the EPP again the strongest political force of the EU – especially when I combined my presidency with my function as leader of our group in the EP between 1994 and 1999. When I became a member of the European Parliament and leader of our group we had 153 members. We were the second force. At the end of my term we had 201 members. We had successfully integrated the Portuguese and FI. We won the elections in 1999 and in the upcoming ten years. My colleagues, the leadership, and all heads of governments had expressed their hope that I would be able to accomplish those results in the elections. But they also especially hoped that we create conditions for an enlargement. I did that not for pure pragmatic reasons of *Realpolitik* but on a programmatic basis during these two famous congresses in 1992 and 2001, which I have already mentioned. We will have the next congress in October 2012. What really helped me was the confidence of a lot of governments in several member states of the EU. I remember very well the time when the CDU/CSU was in opposition and we had a EPP summit in Berlin. Then there were only three heads of government. All the others were opposition leaders. But that changed fundamentally in the following years.

Now we have a new period of crises in some countries. We have the leadership of the European Commission and in the European Council. We do have 15 Prime Ministers. We have the majority in the European Commission. And, finally, we have the largest group in the European Parliament. What will be the result of the elections in 2014? That is the big challenge. During 15 years we could present a lot of results and we had the confidence of the relative majority in the EU. My daily concern is that more fundamentally we are confronted with new challenges. We now try to detect those and give answers. As I am telling in my memoirs, the content basis of the party – our European conviction, the belief in values and in the social market economy – was always funda-

mental for me. That was my origin in organizing the party and its enlargement. Our work after the fall of the Berlin Wall in Central Europe was very successful. Although in the beginning our work in Poland was difficult, we now have a fantastic government there today. We also initially had difficulties in the Scandinavian countries, in Sweden and in Finland – today we are successful. We now have contacts, for instance, to the six former Soviet Republics of Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus and Azerbaijan. In four of those six countries we are very strong – due to the fact that we are very active and have relations with all their leaders. These were my goals – but the most important one was to give the party a basic program.

*In 2004 and 2007 the EU was extended to 27 members. What do you think of those eastward enlargements that were the biggest ever happened in the history of the European integration?*

There is a difference to the first periods of enlargements. I remember very well: originally there were six members, then there were nine, then 12, then 15, and then after the fall of the Berlin Wall the EU took the risk to negotiate the admission of ten new members. We, the EPP, did it also. I will never forget: the main promoter in our party was Hans-Gert Pöttering. He was member of the presidency of our group. One day we went to Stockholm where we had a long discussion about the enlargement. In the end, we decided to negotiate with ten and later also with Bulgaria and Romania. This was a risk. It was not that simple as we now see with regard to subjects of independent justice and the fight against corruption in Bulgaria and Romania. But it was also a chance for these countries. Finally, I think we were right. What I am concerned about is how much time it will take to absorb the heritage of the communist system. Even in countries with good democratic governments this is still a factor of mentality. Their remembrance is still present. They are democratic countries but changing the mentality will take time. This problem didn't exist with the UK, Denmark, Ireland or even Spain and Portugal. We were more sceptical about Greece. It is a burden and it will take perhaps two or three generations.

*Where is the EU going? Where do you see the limits or the finality of the EU?*

At the beginning, the preamble of the EPP statutes said that we were in favor of the United States of Europe. We changed that goal during

our EPP congress of 2001 in Berlin because we already had achieved a lot of results: we established the EU, we created the Single Market, we generated the Economic and Monetary Union, and we reached the Schengen Agreement. We were on our way to a Common Foreign and Security Policy. I think, we were reasonable in changing our basic party aim. Since then, we are in favor of a federal Europe, an EU with supra-national decision-making. The United States of America, for example, is different from Europe. We do have other traditions, and we do have an enormous diversity of languages, cultures, and traditions. But we need economic governance, and we need a political union. When we created the Economic and Monetary Union, we were convinced that we would accomplish a Political Union. Angela Merkel told it some months ago in a famous interview in six important European newspapers. That was a fantastic interview. I was amazed, surprised to read this perhaps because of the reaction of other people. I called her to congratulate her. She said that we need to solve the crisis today through economic governance combining fiscal discipline, competitiveness with innovation and reform, for instance, of the labor market and real economic growth to create jobs and not artificial economic growth by printing money. If we cannot fulfill that solution than there is a real risk and danger for the EU. I already mentioned that we are living with a trauma about Greece since May 2010. We have to solve that problem! Otherwise the perspective of Political Union will not be realistic or only after a long period of time. Remember, the Lisbon Treaty allows the repartition of competences. On the basis of that treaty, perhaps, we will have a European President in 2020, we will have a new composition of the European Parliament, and we probably will have a smaller European Commission than today. But the first thing is to find a solution for the current crisis on the basis of the three elements of budgetary consolidation and discipline, competitiveness and real economic growth. We need strong restitution. What can we do confronted with China, India, the US, Brazil and Russia? There is still a too long way in making decisions. We need economic governance! That was already our intention when we negotiated the Maastricht Treaty. But you see the Stability Pact was not respected. The consequences of this lack of discipline and competitiveness are now visible in the current financial crisis that started in the US. The crisis is not finished so far but I really hope that we can overcome it with the Fiscal Pact.

*Mr President, thank you very much!*