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The Meaning of the Tindemans Report

by Gaston Thorn, Luxembourg *

In **INTERECONOMICS** No. 3, 1976, we published an interview with Professor Dr Walter Hallstein, former President of the EEC Commission, on the Belgian Prime Minister's, Leo Tindemans', "Report on the European Union". Meanwhile the Report has been discussed on occasion of the last European Council meeting in Luxembourg whose unfortunate outcome pointed out in a dramatic way the weakness of the political will of the Community. In the following article the President of the Council, Gaston Thorn, explains his views of the significance of the so-called "Tindemans Report".

When back in 1974 the Paris summit agreed to aim at progress towards European Union, it didn't have the first idea what this meant. This background should not be forgotten whenever one attempts an appraisal of the Tindemans Report.

Consequently, the Belgian Prime Minister had to venture into unexplored territory and the strengths and weaknesses of his report derive directly from the exploratory nature of his mission. He was not supposed to present us with the final blueprint of a mature European Union. To do this would have been the surest way to see his report being shelved right from the start. Mr Tindemans was determined to anchor his proposals on a realistic assessment of existing political realities in our countries.

Avoidance of False Expectations

In a sense, the concept of "European Union" remains misleading and Mr Tindemans is extremely cautious referring to it, in order to avoid false expectations that could in no way be honoured for the time being. In this sense, it is interesting to point out that there is a certain parallelism between the reactions of nationalists and ultra-federalists: The Tindemans Report does not go too far to the taste of the former, not far enough to the taste of the latter. From this, the sober observer has to conclude that this is a sound, dispassionate document, covering considerable

ground in the middle reach on which a common denominator, that doesn't necessarily have to be minimal, would have a good chance to come to terms with Europe's needs, challenges and hopes.

The Tindemans Report offers us on the other hand an excellent means to gauge real feelings and intentions about Europe. A document of this quality, drawn up by a highly authoritative personality commands attention and here as in other fields, silence is often more telling than evasive comments. For the first time, we are confronted with an official document that clearly outlines with stringent logic the practical consequences of a course of action that appears to be shared, at least verbally, by all the member governments.

If one claims that one is willing to aim at European Union, one knows now what one is up to. Short of the implementation, of the practical ways and means, the governments that still maintain that they stick to the finality of European Union are bound to lose their face and their credibility. He who wants the end does have to want the means, and it doesn't really matter whether the desired end takes up the eschatological qualities of a perfect union or the more down-to-earth characteristics of a better working and more efficient Community. The pursuit of any of the apparently conflicting aims calls for a series of decisions and actions that fit equally well into the orbit of attraction of either end. It could even be argued that a better working Community is the *conditio sine qua non* of European Union and

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vice versa. But this might be too much for the already strained susceptibilities of nationalists.

Clear Vision of a Working Community

Mr Tindemans didn't go that far and there is really no need to push the point to these extremes. All he is suggesting boils down to the idea that in order to live up to its task, be it self-proclaimed or assigned to by events external to the cosy atmosphere of European diplomacy and summitry and dramatic as they tend to be these days, the Community has to proceed to certain adjustments, changes of habit, institutional innovations in the realms of its decision making, its legitimacy or its stance abroad. Whether these suggestions fall under the heading "European Union" or "increased efficiency" is a matter of secondary importance and is bound to disturb only those who dislike the whole idea of European integration in the first place.

Mr Tindemans has an admirable sense of bringing it all down to fundamentals. Not only has he a clear vision of what he wants the Community — not an ideal Community, but a working Community — to look like. He has an equally strong perception of all the shortcomings of the Community as it is now. In a sense, his report is nothing more than a catalogue of proposals on how to overcome these shortcomings, crowned, it should be acknowledged, by an all-encompassing vision of the unavoidable interdependence of the multiple dimensions that make up the fabric of the life of the Community.

It should be stressed that this interdependence cannot be overlooked and talked away by the blindness of politicians. It is in the nature of things. We better face it and devise an adequate response or else events will dictate their grim and implacable logic on our course of action. The quite serious deterioration of the economic and social situation in the Community, for which the absence of coherent common policies was not the least important cause, should suffice as a warning.

Weakness of Political Will

As far as the Tindemans Report is concerned, the crucial question is not to agree or to disagree with one or all of its proposals. The dividing line will be between those who are able and willing to understand the message and act accordingly and those who don't. One of the most important suggestions of the Tindemans Report aims at reviving the spirit of systematic compromise on

which the major achievements of the early days of the Community were built. This needs some explanation.

First of all, it should be mentioned that contrary to a widely held opinion, things didn't come about during these first years because of the unfolding of an automatic mechanism. They came about because of the presence of an effective political will that owed its strength to the presence of personalities endowed with considerable daring. This is precisely what is lacking nowadays, and the unfortunate outcome of the last European Council meeting in Luxembourg points out in a dramatic way the weakness of the political will of the Community, notably because hardly anybody has anymore an idea of the Europe we are heading for, once the basics of the free trade area and the common agricultural policy are taken for granted.

The future is not paved anymore and one cannot but notice a marked unwillingness to discuss the outlines that would chart it in any definite way. Unfortunately, the future is a dimension that doesn't have its place among the day-by-day preoccupations of governments whose first and foremost concern is their own survival. Of course, all this amounts to a monumental and catastrophic shortsightedness, the due of which will have to be paid for by future generations.

Sterile Debates

All of this is without any doubt the outcome of a series of bad political habits, the most destructive of which consists in the practice of treating each issue that arises strictly on its individual merits. This inevitably leads member governments to concentrate their attention on the effect that each such decision might have on any conceivable national interest. As a result, the Community decision making process is seen less and less as a series of building bricks, each making its contribution towards the ultimate political structure; instead each brick is examined in isolation — and seen to potentially have defects.

The main merit of the Tindemans Report consists in the fact that it restores the cohesiveness and the inner logic of the whole enterprise and that it points out the self-defeating effect of overlooking this. This approach would put back in its right perspective some of the more sterile debates, notably those on Economic and Monetary Union — some governments wanting progress on the one but not on the other or *vice versa* — that have paralysed the Community for the last year. Emphasis is put on the nearly missing link and our efforts should consist in restoring it

again to its full rights. As long as we fail to understand this, every sectoral progress has every chance to amount to a stroke in the water.

Direct Elections – No Panacea

This applies also to the hotly debated issue of direct elections of the European Parliament. I am by all means a supporter of any action along that line. Provided for by the treaties, and therefore nothing new, left unapplied for nearly 20 years, it has now become a real test of the willingness of the governments to move qualitatively towards a united Europe. The value of that decision being taken, or not being taken, vastly exceeds at the present time the intrinsic merits of the case. I am not in fact prepared to think of that issue as the panacea that would restore in its full splendour our faltering enterprise.

For all practical purposes and for some time to come, most of the day-to-day business of governing the peoples of the Community is, and will be conducted by the national governments and

national parliaments. It is in that place and nowhere else that the governments who are responsible for the conduct of the Community affairs must look for their political support. I fail to see in the immediate future a corresponding function for the European Parliament, for the persuasive reason that we have not as yet reached the stage of a federation of states with a central government, as much as I would like we had. Ours is a community of nations that tries to reach collective decisions.

The two major problems of democratic legitimacy and of more efficient decision-making should therefore not be mixed up. They call, at least at this stage, for two different approaches. On all these issues the Tindemans Report, in its sober and well-balanced way, is here to stay with us. It calls for decisions, because it raises the right questions and puts forward some of the right answers. Let us try to make it the voice of our bad conscience, the voice that reminds us that we should have done better to get its message in 1976 and not later, because next year might be already too late.

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