

## Chapter II

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# Conviction and Responsibility



Anyone who examines my career as a politician will probably discover a clear trend running through it: I was a Flemish federalist activist and a student leader, then President of the Christian Democratic youth organisation, Prime Minister of Belgium and after that President of the European People's Party. It seems as if the positions followed each other in easy succession, but in practise these moves were far from obvious. Great resistance had to be overcome with each new step. Chance, personal choices in studies and commitments, power of conviction and changes in the *Zeitgeist* all played an important role in this.

I took my first steps in active politics during the golden sixties. Complex processes of emancipation were taking place all over Europe. Widespread student protests were accelerating social, political and cultural change. Old (power) relations were being broken down, traditional norms and values were being openly questioned. Prominent political figures such as Konrad Adenauer in West Germany and Charles De Gaulle in France disappeared from public view. One had the impression that the end of an era was near.

A similar process was also running its course within Christian Democracy in Belgium. In the latter half of the 1960s a continuity that had been there since the foundation of the party in 1945 came to an end. A change of the guard was at hand, as was the case in other European countries. Old political stalwarts like Prime Ministers Gaston Eyskens and Theo Lefèvre had held a firm grip on the party reins ever since the Second World War. As old men they had reached the end of their careers and, moreover, had fallen behind in the polls. Proof of this was the successive electoral defeats our party had suffered since 1958.

My party not only needed a new generation to replace the old, it also, above all, needed a new image. This had been blighted by issues that had aroused great passion, such as the repression of those who had collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War; the so-called Royal Question (whether or not King Leopold III should step down); and the conflict about the independence and state funding of denominational, mainly Catholic, schools. The party had been weakened internally

through the years because it lacked a clear vision. With respect to the necessary reforms of the country's institutions, it did little more than make lame statements or put forward half-hearted solutions. Slowly but surely, the Christian Democrats were losing touch with the mainstream electorate in Flanders. If the party wished to survive, it desperately needed to come up with a new project. The party leadership slowly began to realise that they would need new blood to take on this task.

## **A New Generation**

In the spring of 1967, I was elected as the sixth national President of the Flemish Christian Democratic youth organisation. I now fully realise that I joined the Flemish Christian Democrats at the right time. The need for commitment from young politicians who could attract voters provided me with the opportunity to break through in the party and to propagate my federalist ideas unhindered. I was part of a new generation of young adults, with a new mindset, who were in favour of radical changes. The word "continuity" was not in my vocabulary. We were the first generation to have been emancipated through education. We lived in more comfortable circumstances than our parents had, and this allowed us to use our creativity in all sorts of ways.

I still clearly remember the first time I met Jean-Luc Dehaene, who would later succeed me as Prime Minister. I was putting together the new executive committee and was looking for energetic people who could take on leadership roles and who were in touch with the youth. His directness of speech and his non-conformity made him the right person for the job. He was soon to gain a reputation within the party for being somewhat of a blunt instrument. He was a non-conformist even in the way he dressed. A far-reaching partnership developed between Dehaene and me immediately after he joined the youth wing of the Flemish Christian Democrats. Both of us contributed considerably to our new project: he wrote numerous tracts and I supported these points of view when addressing others outside the movement. The journey we were to undertake we would share together. For years we formed a close team until political circumstances in that crisis year of 1992 caused us to part ways.

As president of the youth organisation, I set myself the task of carving out an independent space for our movement within the party. In keeping with the spirit of rebellion of the times, I refused to lapse into becoming a well-behaved servant and admirer of the party bosses. One of the first things we did was to challenge the institutional programme of the then unitary Belgian Christian Democratic Party (CVP/PSC) – which did have a Flemish and Walloon section, nonetheless. In the mid-sixties, the party and its doctrine were far removed from federalist thinking. Its programme went no further than the basic principles of decentralisation and a limited amount of cultural autonomy. The principle of a centralised state was in no way questioned.

## Promoting Innovative Ideas

On 10 May 1967, we launched our much-debated “Manifesto on Autonomy” (*Autonomiemanifest*). Even today, I am struck by its resemblance to my speech five years earlier to the Flemish People’s Movement (Vlaamse Volksbeweging). It is proof for me of the fact that despite joining the Christian Democrats, I have always remained faithful to a deep-rooted Flemishness in me – something I continue to cherish.

The circumstances were also in our favour. The confrontation between Flanders and Wallonia about the division of the Catholic University of Louvain into two autonomous universities, one Dutch-speaking, the other French-speaking, had reached another critical stage. Practically all the Flemish parties were behind the idea that it would be advisable to move the French-speaking part to Wallonia in order to combat the influence of French-speaking students and professors in Louvain. Besides, student numbers had increased to such an extent that a new campus was needed to accommodate them anyway. As a result, Louvain-la-Neuve was founded in Walloon Brabant. Deep-rooted differences of opinion on that matter also caused the CVP/PSC to shatter. Since then the Flemish- and French-speaking Christian Democrats have gone their separate ways as autonomous parties.

It was our desire in our manifesto not merely to unleash passionate debate on reforming the state. We were also in search of concrete political results. For the first time in its history, the Flemish Christian Democrats had a faction that put forward federalism as a solution to the problematic issues between Flanders and Wallonia. Our approach was innovative in that we were moving beyond a purely language-oriented policy and taking steps in the direction of a more structural and institutional solution. Because we formed a highly active minority, we did not remain trapped at the margins and could force the party to focus its interest on federal matters.

The elections of 31 March 1968 ended in defeat for the CVP, just as the 1965 elections had done. Once again, language-based parties like the Flemish nationalist People’s Union (Volksunie) and the French extremist Francophone Democratic Front (Front Démocratique des Francophones) made huge gains. The Eyskens government that then took power – this time a coalition of Christian Democrats and Socialists – took up the challenge of seeking a structural solution to the Flemish–Walloon issue.

In that same turbulent year of 1968, the youth organisation of the Flemish Christian Democrats reached a fever pitch in political party terms. We were awash with all sorts of influences and were in the grips of the widespread spirit of rebellion. Many new and interesting experiments were taking off in other countries, such as D’66 in the Netherlands, a party striving for a radical democratisation of society, and also in the Netherlands the Political

Party of Radicals (Politieke Partij Radikalen), which had broken away from the Catholic People's Party (Katholieke Volkspartij). D'66's critique of political vagueness exerted a tremendous attraction for me. They formed a means of escaping from the heavily paternalistic doctrines of our party leaders.

This led to ideas that would see the light of day several months later in our manifesto on the party system in Belgium and on the role of the Flemish Christian Democrats within it. The content of the manifesto, which was issued officially on 11 January 1969, was revolutionary. Our first statement read as follows: "We are of the opinion that our government institutions are in a lamentable state of repair. Not only are the structures in Belgium flawed, party politics is also on the wrong track. It is impossible to pursue innovative politics within the present political divisions".

In order to get beyond the deadlock, we suggested that progressive elements from the various political parties be grouped together to form a "Radical Progressive People's Party", analogous to the Dutch Political Party of Radicals. How could we reach that goal? The first concrete step towards cooperation was that the Christian Democrats would negotiate with the Socialists and reach agreements on electoral policy ahead of the following elections. At the same time, thinking within the CVP had to be radicalised in order to turn it into a party with a genuine programme. In the long term, it would make room for a Radical Progressive People's Party but this development was not to be rushed, and public opinion had to be continuously tested and prepared.

These were daring proposals and were met with clear opposition from the party's central committee, of which I was an elected member. This did not upset me, however. In a speech at the party congress of April 1969, speaking on behalf of the youth organisation, I stressed that "shared religious affiliation was no basis for forming a party and that only a vision for society could meet the need. This vision could only be progressive, as it had to be based on a sincere concern for and commitment to our fellow humans, social justice and peace".

I asked the party for openness towards approaching and working together with progressive Socialists, if that should prove possible or desirable. Much to our surprise, participants at the conference voted in favour of our proposal. The party congress made it a priority that rather than continuing to expand solely on the basis of its prior achievements within Christian Democracy, the CVP should become a programme party whose political action would be based on a progressive vision for society.

On 1 May 1969 – Labour Day – only a few days after the congress, the elderly leader of the Socialists, Leo Collard, issued a striking call to Catholics. He had come to the conclusion that divisions in political opinion along the lines of religious belief were a thing of the past and that all progressive forces

should join in forming a front against obsolete politics in Belgium. The welcome Collard's call received from the executive committee of the Christian Democratic youth organisation was clearly positive. It was completely in harmony with what we had already argued for in our second manifesto. My heart pounding, I subsequently paid two visits to Leo Collard to see what common form of action we could take.

However, it soon became clear that the party leadership was far from pleased with the contacts I had made with the Socialist leader. Though I found him to be an honest partner in conversation, our contacts finally came to nothing. In fact, Collard was quite isolated within his own party and was not powerful enough to move them in the direction of forming a common progressive front. To our great disappointment, we realised with time that the majority of the Socialists were merely opportunistic and only regarded the progressive front as a means of absorbing the Christian Democrats into their own party. The initial idea of forming a tandem of two equal political movements that could maintain their own political identity did not seem feasible at the time.

While our ideas about forming a common progressive front were experiencing nothing but resistance, a third manifesto saw the light in July 1969. The document entitled "A Creative Approach to the Reform of the School Pact" (*Creatieve aanpak bij de herziening van het Schoolpact*) caused a stir almost immediately. In advance of the reform of the Pact in 1970, we formulated a proposal to create a new pluralist type of school, one in which the various religious affiliations and philosophies could flourish side by side. As we saw it, the changes in mentality that had taken place in the late sixties and the strong desire for democratisation meant that we were obliged to create a new critically necessary kind of education, one committed to preparing youth for participation in a modern society. The strict divisions in the field of education and among the various education networks had become obsolete and stood in the way of forming a new, open mindset among students. We wanted to resolve the situation by integrating Catholic and State schools with time into a single network of pluralist, mixed, community schools.

Our proposal for reform of the education system brought more hostile reactions, contempt and mocking than even our second manifesto had. People within the Christian Democratic Party were open to internal discussions on federalism and party reform, but tampering with Catholic education and the Catholic block would remain anathema for the time being. The draft document was rejected out of hand and in the sharpest way possible condemned by the whole Catholic establishment, including the leadership of the Catholic school system, the Catholic press and the Christian Labour Movement.

## Intellectual Roots

Looking back on my four years as chair of the youth organisation of the Flemish Christian Democrats – the executive committee I presided over became known as the “Committee of Stars” (*Wonderbureau*) due to the large number of members that became senior politicians afterwards – I cherish the intellectual heritage that we left behind in the form of three manifestos. Each one of them drew directly on the three waves my party, my generation and I had ridden in on: Flemish autonomy in a federal Belgium, cooperation with progressive non-Catholics, the dissolution of a polarised system and the founding of community schools. These were generous documents written by a generation who experienced the fact that they too could push for innovation within Christian Democracy.

I am still struck with awe at the fact that I was able to bring together and form a close team with so many talented young adults who had such special qualities and gifts. In contrast to today, during the sixties there were a greater number of people who were prepared to commit themselves politically, even though they were not quite prepared for politics. I had always hoped that after 1971 new “Committees of Stars” would spring up and that each would take the party by storm, establishing ideas and ushering in the winds of new and vital change. The chances of the survival of Christian Democracy have always been intricately bound up with the human potential of the youth. But the pool politicians can draw on has become much smaller nowadays. Those young people who do get involved in politics must realise that the ground on which their thoughts will fall is not as fertile as it was in the past. As a result of this and other factors, present-day youth organisations are prevented from becoming “Committees of Stars”.

The central question in all of this is whether a generation of politicians can reach the very centre of political power without betraying their own ideals. In this respect, I was deeply impressed by a Dutch collection of Paul Ricœur’s essays, entitled “Politics and Faith” (*Politiek en Geloof*) that was published in 1968. I read and reread them. I would like to quote Ricœur at length here, because he has had a profound influence on my political activity. In the chapter “Requirements for Political Training”, he considers the relationship between ethics and politics:

As we know this relationship is difficult and deceptive. Allow me to state at once which working model I [Paul Ricœur] am using, a model I keep to, moreover, as a yardstick in my own personal life.

What it involves is an extremely fertile distinction, borrowed from Max Weber, that great German sociologist from the beginning of the twentieth century. In his famous monograph *Politics as a Vocation* (*Politik als Beruf*), he makes a distinction between two levels of moral behaviour: “the ethics of conviction” – *Gesinnungsethik*, *morale de la conviction*, as he calls it – and “the ethics of responsibility” – *Verantwortungsethik*, *morale de la responsabilité*. It is certainly worth noting that in his manuscript Max Weber first wrote of “the ethics of power”.

This specification is of great importance for what follows, for it is my conviction that the welfare of the community ultimately rests on a correct relationship between these two forms of ethics. On the one hand, we have an ethics of conviction which is borne by scientific, cultural and religious associations and communities, including the churches, who have their own contribution to make at this level and not in politics.

On the other hand, we have the ethics of responsibility, which is also an ethics of the practise of power, regulated violence and accountable debt. To my mind, it is vital to maintain the tension between these two in learning politics, for if we conflate the ethics of conviction with the ethics of responsibility, we will relapse into *Realpolitik*, into a form of Machiavellianism that stems from a continual confusion of ends and means. On the other hand, if we allow the ethics of conviction to meddle in the other we will only succumb to the numerous illusions of moralism and clericalism.

I have repeated the above sentences hundreds of times in speeches and in my writings. They became my *Leitmotiv*. In using this quote I continued to assert that a Christian Democratic party should never be a party where nothing else is important except power.

## Leader of the Flemish Christian Democrats

During the 1968 to 1971 parliamentary term, politicians completely overhauled the institutional make-up of the Belgian state. On 18 February 1970, Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens presented reform of the state to the Parliament in the following stirring words: "The unitary state, including its structures and modes of operation, set out as they are in law, has since become obsolete. The communities and the regions have to find their place in the new structures of the state which are better adapted to the current situation particular to our country". This was translated in the French-speaking media as "La Belgique de papa est morte" (The Belgium of my daddy is dead). Prime Minister Eyskens guided Parliament through the various stages of constitutional reform, the first since the proclamation of the Constitution in 1831. Steps were being taken ever so carefully in the direction of a federal state. The emphasis lay on cultural autonomy, which, in order to maintain ideological balances, excluded education. Other changes rendered regional economic decentralisation possible.

Despite the positive results achieved by the Eyskens government, the Flemish Christian Democrats lost the elections in 1971, just as they had done in 1965 and 1968. This made the need for party renewal even more urgent. The CVP went in search of a new party leader at the beginning of 1972. Four names were put forward and, much to my surprise, one of the names mentioned by a group of



fourty-year-olds was mine. The news gave rise to numerous, mainly critical, reactions in political circles. The French-speaking media were openly hostile. Even Manu Ruys, editor of the highly influential Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, wrote, “Does Wilfried Martens still believe in Christian Democracy as a valid formula that occupies the political middle ground between Socialism and Liberalism? At one time he created the impression in his discussions with [Socialist leader] Leo Collard on the formation of a progressive front that he considered the CVP as a transition to such a progressive grouping. Does he still think so? And if he does, will the majority of the party go down that road with him? And if not, what are his views today?”

Because I was aware that these issues were very much on everybody’s minds, I answered him in an interview that “we did wish to form a front but under one important condition, namely that the Socialists had to voice a similar desire for reform. For a long time ‘Collard’s Labour Day call’ gave us the impression that there was something moving in his party. But all that is past tense now. The willingness of the Socialists to negotiate and implement change has completely disappeared since Collard’s departure. All his successors have in mind is to humiliate the CVP and to isolate them. It now seems unlikely that any agreement can be reached with the Socialists in the way Collard intended or in the way stated in our manifesto.”

Herman Deleeck, a well-known Flemish professor and the ideological mentor of the younger generation of Christian Democrat politicians at the time, later stated that

“The scales had fallen from Martens’ eyes and he realised that the daring, theoretically sound positions he had defended along with his team could in no way be achieved and that he could forget about trying to sell them in his own circles. He has foresworn this part of his youth. Others have done so too but far less spectacularly, of course. It is pointless to call his decisions betrayal or calculated. This is the road to adulthood and to taking real responsibilities. The role he has fulfilled since then proves that he knew intuitively which path to take. Martens is not a man of revolution. He will try to push his ideas through, he will even fight for them but he will not needlessly die for them”.

### **“We Can Win Again!”**

During the party congress on 4 March 1972, I was elected President of the Flemish Christian Democrats with a total of 83.6% of the votes. I ended my acceptance speech with the following words:

You have elected me as leader, a man whose parents worked with their bare hands. A man now, but one who, by the age of seven, had lost his father in the middle of a war; whose mother carried the load alone through all those years and



brought up a family of five until she too died even before her children could find a new home. And yet all five of us have had opportunities in this life that were equal to our talents. All were helped by a teacher or a local priest, who showed us the way to further education, through grants that allowed us to study; through the inspiration of an eminent teacher, a chaplain, a union leader or a politician. This is Christian Democracy alive in Flanders.

Today, we have among us the most experienced Prime Minister since the war. We have the finest team of ministers, new young party activists, an active and effective youth movement, and thousands of convinced grassroots activists who are always ready to come to the aid of the party. Let us close ranks. We can win again!

My job as young president of the party was no sinecure. Even though the unitary party had already been split for four years, since the crisis over the Catholic University of Louvain, the whole infrastructure gave the impression – and many continued to cherish the illusion – that this was only a temporary state of affairs and that the two wings of the party would soon begin to work closely together once again: there was still one president for the whole CVP/PSC, Robert Houben, a national secretary, a joint research centre and a national treasurer. They all had staff and secretaries, many of whom looked back nostalgically on the good old unitary days and also stated so loudly. They considered me somehow as the successor of the earlier heads of the party wings. I hardly had anyone to help me carry out my work.

On the Monday after my election as party president I set up office in the Rue des Deux Eglises (Tweekerkenstraat) in Brussels, and from that day on I committed myself to the party 24/7. I had to hand on my legal practise, which had just begun to be successful, to my young colleague. At that time I already had a blueprint in my head for how to run the party well. I set three priorities: training in politics for representatives and staff; modern, scientifically based communication; and the full participation of women in the running of the party. In order to bring this about, we needed to have our own budget to pursue specific policies. However, party financing depended mainly on complex, impenetrable forms of fundraising and allocation. The impression on the Flemish side was that a disproportionate amount of the funding went to the French-speaking Christian Democrats. I carried out some changes to this situation by appointing our own fundraiser. This certainly was not appreciated, and I even had to face a negative publicity campaign as a result.

## **Respect for Life**

Experience and observation had taught me that the strength of a leader lies in the energy and unanimity of the party he is leading. If I did not want to end up as a lame duck at the negotiating table, then the CVP had to become stronger and Christian Democracy had to develop itself as the leading movement in Flanders.

It did not worry me that we could not reach agreement with our French-speaking party members on Brussels or other language issues. On the contrary, this was one of the reasons why the party had split and why each wing could voice their community's standpoint. In other areas like education, social affairs and ethical issues, however, it was important that we saw eye to eye.

One of these ethical issues was abortion. A few months after my election as party president, I organised an open party day on this morally delicate issue. It was time to reach a decision. And we did, all Christian Democrats together during a common press conference. What is remembered from the press conference is that we found the liberalisation of abortion inadequate. But our position contained a number of measures and proposals that were highly progressive in contrast to mainstream thinking in Catholic circles at the time. We must not forget that condoms were still forbidden by the Catholic clergy and that the Bishop of Ghent, Leonce Van Peteghem, stated after our press conference that "under no circumstances could a child be killed to save the mother".

We proposed that clauses prohibiting the use of contraceptives be removed from the criminal code, and we called on family doctors to inform their patients about their use. The statute on children born out of wedlock was also thoroughly revised. We wanted there to be more help from the government for mothers in need: a considerable increase in baby bonuses and children's allowance for mothers heading single-parent families. On the subject of abortion itself we stated the following:

The CVP/PSC holds that the problem of abortion cannot be approached without firstly bearing in mind that fundamental unalterable rule of civilisation, that is, respect for human life. Despite modern methods, abortion is an act whose purpose is to cause psychological and physical harm.... Abortion is, therefore, an unacceptable means of regulating birth. Abortion should no longer be punishable when it is carried out under very serious conditions, namely when continued pregnancy would be of serious consequence to a woman's health. In order to guarantee legal security, the law should be amended accordingly.

To conclude we called for "a calm, wide-ranging debate in Parliament in order to arrive at a policy that would lift the community to a level worthy of humanity. This is why the CVP/PSC considers the liberalisation of abortion as inadequate".

A few months later, when the Socialists had submitted a white paper proposing the far-reaching liberalisation of abortion, I stated in my hometown Ghent that the CVP/PSC would utterly reject this proposal:

When the weaker confronts the stronger, complete freedom leads to oppression; then the law ensures liberation. These principles are so obvious and generally accepted that I am surprised that we Christian Democrats stand alone politically as far as the rights of the child and the mother are concerned. As never before, our society possesses the means to include each human being and to guarantee that all have a dignified human existence.

And now suddenly the willingness to use these means to the fullest is missing. This I cannot accept. A mother in need cannot be abandoned to her fate; no handicapped person can be rejected, the life of each conceived, though yet unborn, child must be respected.

I still stand behind these words. It was an ironic twist of fate, therefore, that in 1990, as Prime Minister, I had to sign an abortion law that I had voted against in Parliament but which had been passed by the majority. The reason for this was that King Baudouin refused to sign the law and so, in order to save the monarchy, the government had to do so. Freedom of conscience and the right to act according to that freedom was not granted to everyone.

Another cause for concern that I wished to raise in the party was care for the environment. Like many politicians of my generation, I was deeply impressed by the report issued by the Club of Rome on the exhaustion of our natural resources and the increase in pollution of the air, water and soil. In my acceptance speech as new party leader I had already warned of the dangers for our children and grandchildren living in a highly polluted world if we were to continue the path we were on. We had to choose either growth resulting in death or balanced survival.

It hurts me to see that such a fundamental aspect of civilisation was ignored for so long, up until the moment that a separate political movement grew out of it, that is, the Greens. The very first open party day that I organised was on the environment. A lot of attention was paid to urban and regional planning. Regional and local authorities needed clear regulations to counter the proliferation of industrial zones and the unregulated expansion in the number of housing estates. This is why regional planning had to be agreed upon as soon as possible. These plans were also advocated in order to stop chaotic forms of urbanisation. Already at that time we drew up plans to control land prices and also pleaded for the transfer of green zones and recreation areas from private to public ownership at a fair price.

It should be noted that these positions were drawn up five years before the arrival of the Greens in 1977. Given their and our concern for the proper management of the earth's resources, the Christian Democrats could also have become an ecological party, without lapsing into a sort of green fundamentalism. Unfortunately, our credibility was sorely undermined by the way these regional plans were bungled, which also involved some policymakers from among the Christian Democrats. It was also the case that because of an economic recession and the slow recovery, our concerns for the ecology were placed on the back burner.

## Leo Tindemans

One of the most delicate tasks a party president has to carry out is not only to guide the party to victory – something I have succeeded in doing on various occasions – but also and more importantly to convert election results into political

power. It has also become the tradition in Belgium that party presidents, and not the *formateur*, or future Prime Minister, play a prominent role in allocating ministerial posts. Of course, they have to take into account regional and other balances but their opinion is of great importance. It is also to this fact that they owe much of their influence and power.

My first negotiations in forming a government, which led ultimately to a short-lived government of national unity (January 1973–January 1974), were a real ordeal for me. As I would say later on in an interview, “I experienced the old Socialist guard as being exceptionally hateful. The unitary Socialist leaders thought that their moment had arrived, that they could bring the (linguistically) divided Christian Democrats to their knees”. We also had another reason for such an exceptional cabinet. The School Pact was to be reviewed. It was very likely that an agreement could be reached only by bringing all the parties who had signed the School Pact into the government.

Leo Tindemans, who had gained considerable power within the various Eyskens governments and who had won the 1971 elections in Antwerp, became the leading figure in the CVP and, therefore, the senior Vice-Premier in the new government. The main argument for this was that Leo Tindemans could lead negotiations on the reform of the School Pact. Our expectations were fulfilled. The only positive result achieved by the government was the reform of the School Pact.

The government experienced a difficult birth and the infant would barely survive the year. The cabinet collapsed and died because of corruption scandals, excessive alcohol consumption and fundamental mistrust among the coalition partners. The country longed for a new leader. As party president, I was convinced that Leo Tindemans would appeal to the electorate, so I launched one of my most successful electoral campaigns ever with the slogan “Things will be different with this man”.

For the first time in sixteen years, the party took a giant leap forward and Tindemans was elected with an unprecedented number of first-preference votes in his constituency. The subsequent negotiations were far from easy, however. During the first round of negotiations it became clear that the Socialists were too divided internally to form a stable government. Despite initial failure, the *formateur* was able to hold on to his job and announced that he was willing to form a government supported by members of the Liberal Party and members of the so-called language parties: the Walloon Rally (Rassemblement Wallon), the Francophone Democratic Front (Front Démocratique des Francophones) and the Flemish People’s Union (Volsunie).

This was a much bigger step for Tindemans than for me. As a federalist, I had no objections to including parties who had campaigned only in one part of the country. Tindemans, however, carried out his task admirably. We, the party presidents, had almost reached an agreement during late-night negotiations when suddenly, in the early hours of the morning, the *Volsunie* leader rather awkwardly

tabled a demand for amnesty for those sentenced for collaboration during the Second World War. The French-speaking negotiators regarded this as sabotage and provocation, and the negotiations grinded to a halt as a result.

On 25 April 1974, Tindemans formed a minority government with the Liberals, which was tolerated by the “language parties”, who promised to abstain for a while from voting in Parliament. A few months later, the Tindemans government was extended to include three ministers from the Walloon Rally. A provisional form of regionalisation was quickly adopted and, as a result, three regional ministerial committees and three regional advisory councils could be formed. This was the first tentative yet certainly visible step in the direction of federalism. The first meetings of the regional councils were held with much pomp and ceremony.

This period was undoubtedly one of the party’s heydays. Because of our very aggressive campaigns against the Socialists, we gained considerable support in Flanders. The local elections of 10 October 1976, which we contested with the slogan, “Because people are important”, were highly successful and proved that the CVP could win again. Our party had enough votes to govern three-quarters of the Flemish boroughs either alone or in a coalition. Unfortunately, the Francophone Democratic Front became the biggest party in almost the whole Brussels area and achieved absolute majorities in five of the capital’s boroughs. This French-speaking party also began to gain ground in the Flemish boroughs around Brussels. Their success would seriously undermine any further attempts at state reform.

The first Tindemans cabinet fell due to the volatility of the Walloon Rally, a party that disintegrated while being part of government. When they refused to vote the budget through in March 1977, Tindemans threw them out of government, which meant that he no longer held a majority in Parliament. The situation proved untenable. To prevent his government from becoming a minority, he proposed to the King that Parliament be dissolved. Early elections were called for the second time in three years.

## Pioneering Work with Lückers

Readers who do not live in my country might get the impression from what has been said so far that I have been involved mainly in trying to maintain order in Belgium, which is after all a small country. Nonetheless, the European dimension has never been absent in my public and political engagement and activities. As President of the CVP, I was given the opportunity in the early 1970s to make my interest in the European integration process more concrete. I was involved in the European People’s Party from its very foundation. Yet I could never have imagined just how much the EPP would dominate and give direction to my political life after my being Prime Minister.

The founding of the EPP was not something that came out of the blue. There had already been a long tradition of international cooperation within Christian Democracy in Europe dating back to the 1920s. A prominent role was played by Flemings, all of whom had an international focus. From 1950 till 1959, the founder and President of the CVP, August-Edmond de Schryver, led the *Nouvelles Équipes Internationales* (New International Teams), as the group of West European Christian Democratic parties were known at the time. Our party president and later Prime Minister, Theo Lefèvre, led the *Equipes* from 1960 till 1965. The *Équipes* were succeeded by the European Union of Christian Democrats (EUCD), which was founded in 1965, with Leo Tindemans its first Secretary-General. He held the position until he became Prime Minister in 1974.

A Christian Democratic group had already been set up within the European Parliament in 1953. Our group wished to found a European political party in view of the first direct elections to be held in 1979. The first real steps in that direction were taken within the Political Committee of the Christian Democratic Parties of the Member States of the European Community (EC). As newly elected President of the CVP, I was a member of the Committee along with my colleague from the PSC, Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb. I never missed a single meeting. A total of eleven parties were represented, from seven Member States of the European Community: the CVP/PSC from Belgium; the Dutch ARP, CHU and KVP, who would later merge to form the Christen Democratisch Appel (CDA) in 1980; the CSV from Luxembourg, represented by their new party president, Jacques Santer; the CDU and CSU from Germany; the Italian Democrazia Cristiana; the French Centre des Démocrates Sociaux, which became part of the UDF from 1978 on; and Fine Gael from Ireland. As they did not have any Christian Democratic parties, Great Britain and Denmark were not represented.

Hans-August Lückner, a member of the CSU from Bavaria and the then head of the EPP Group in the European Parliament and also Vice-President of the EUCD, was very much in favour of long-term planning for Christian Democracy in Europe. To do so, a stable political formation was needed, that is, a party. To work alongside Lückner, a man more than twenty years my senior, who had considerable experience in European affairs, I was appointed *rapporteur* for the ad hoc working group on a “European party” in 1975. The working group met on several occasions between November 1975 and January 1976 to discuss the constitution of a future European party. A draft of the statutes was presented to the Committee during a meeting in Paris, which it then passed during an official meeting on 29 April 1976. This constituted the actual founding of the European People’s Party – Federation of Christian Democratic Parties in the European Community, as our European party was known in full back then. The official foundation took place later, on 8 July 1976, in Luxembourg. Leo Tindemans, who had since become Prime Minister of Belgium, was elected the first President of the party.

Setting up the EPP proved to be a very intense and arduous process. We had to hurry because the Socialists, to whom we had lost the relative majority in the European Parliament since Great Britain's membership, had already founded their Federation of Socialist Parties in the European Community in 1974. The Liberals had also wasted little time in setting up the European Liberal and Democratic Federation in 1976. However, there was considerable discord within our ranks about the scope of a prospective European party. Would it be open to other non-Christian Democratic parties? It was mainly the Germans who insisted on this, as they had maintained good relations with the British Conservatives in the past and thought it unimaginable that such a party would have no representation in one of the largest Member States of the European Community. According to the CDU/CSU, only a permanent coalition of Christian Democrats, Conservatives and Liberals, in keeping with the German model, could offer any form of opposition to Socialist dominance in Western Europe. In the post-May 1968 period Western Europe was predominantly red in colour. Socialist parties were in power in West Germany, Great Britain and the Netherlands, among other countries. The CVP/PSC was the only Christian Democratic party capable of winning parliamentary elections in Europe in the 1970s.

Together with the French, Dutch, Luxembourg and Italian Christian Democrats, we were against forming a front with the (British) Conservatives. Quite to the contrary, many of us were in favour of working with the Socialists in national politics. Because I personally belonged to the latter group and because my colleague Lückner represented the German stance, we formed an ideal team for bringing about a compromise. We both attached great importance to the development of an integrated Europe, the ultimate goal that had always to be kept in view. To a certain extent, the founding of a European party was only a means to that end. But that meant it had to be based on sound ideological foundations and also be sustained by a long-term vision. If Christian Democrats wanted to remain of significance in Europe, then cooperation with like-minded parties could not be excluded, at least not in principle.

## Vision and Initiative

This view was strongly criticised by many, not least many within my own party, particularly when I as EPP President led the negotiations to expand the EPP and include other non-Christian Democratic parties. I was reproached then and am still regularly chided for having made an ideological U-turn. It would appear that at the beginning of my political career, I was in favour of forming a progressive front, whereas towards the end of my career, I have devoted myself within the EPP to developing the "European right". I wish to deny this in the strongest possible terms.



I have always remained true to the basic principles of Christian Democracy: personalism, a social market economy, subsidiarity and European federalism. I have anchored these principles within the EPP and it is only because like-minded people from other parties have subscribed to these principles that they were allowed to join the EPP. Opting to be a small, select, but powerless club of “pure” Christian Democrats, or to be absorbed into a larger formation in which Christian Democrats would form only a minority and hardly be capable of realising their ideas, have never been options I have considered. It is from this point of view and conviction that my commitment to the EPP should be understood. We need a strong, broad-based EPP to continue to strive for a united Europe, next to and along with the Socialists and the Liberals. Our real opponents in the European project are the extreme right and the increasing number of populists and Eurosceptics.

The awareness that “pure” Christian Democrats would lack punch at the European level and the conviction that the strength of Christian Democracy lies in its platform and that its ideas can form the basis for political innovation have always formed the basis for my political action. I have always been filled by this vision, both now as EPP President and at the birth of the EPP, as the following note I wrote in 1975 about the foundation of a European party bears witness:

The formation of a popular front between the Socialists and Communists on the one hand and the far-too-sharply posited polarisation between Socialists and Christian Democrats on the other hand could lead to a political division of Europe which would seriously jeopardise the process of integration, or even render it impossible. Cooperation between all anti-socialist forces is fraught with risk because it is insufficiently founded both ideologically and programmatically. This could be seriously detrimental for the future development of Christian Democracy, which itself relies on political principles, and also for a European party that will need its own ideological principles, if it is to maintain its identity and safeguard its future. The Christian Democratic parties within the European Community will have to take the political initiative to ensure that the political union of Europe rests upon the broadest possible foundations, that Christian Democrats work together in a European political party and that this party keeps open the possibility of working with all democratic parties.

### **A European People's Party**

The combined effect of a deepening and a broadening, the acceptance of Christian Democratic principles by like-minded political parties which at their foundation had no link with Christian Democracy: all of this lay at the

basis of the compromise Lücker and I wished to reach in setting up the EPP. Discussions crystallised around the name and terms of membership of the future party. The matter of the name – whether or not the name should refer to Christian Democracy – was highly sensitive. A plea was made to opt for the name “Democratic Centre”. We could not reach agreement and various suggestions made the rounds: European People's Party, European Christian Democracy, Christian Democratic European People's Party and the European Social Party for Progress.

The matter of the name was not merely incidental. A name always indicates which identity you wish to portray. Those in favour of including the Conservatives would rather avoid the term “Christian Democratic”. On the other hand, those opposed to their joining regarded this term as a guarantee for the maintenance of the Christian Democratic character of the Party. Only at the last minute was consensus achieved regarding the name “European People's Party”, which included a reference to Christian Democracy in the subtitle.

The term “People's Party” met the German demand for openness regarding political orientation and socio-economic class and also referred to the various Christian Democratic people's parties in other countries, like the CVP in Flanders, the KVP in the Netherlands, the CSV in Luxembourg, among others, as well as to the predecessors of the CDS in France and Democrazia Cristiana in Italy.

I have never seen a contradiction between Christian Democracy and a people's party. To the contrary, a Christian Democratic party is a people's party *par excellence*. In retrospect the choice of the name “European People's Party” was visionary. Without this name we could never have broadened the Party.

Unlike the decision regarding the name, the matter of membership was agreed on contrary to the wishes of the Germans. Only Christian Democratic parties from the member states of the European Community at that time could become members of the EPP. As far as the future of the Party was concerned, this was a highly important *Auseinandersetzung*, because it was mainly the Germans and particularly the President of the EUCD, Kai-Uwe von Hassel, who were pushing for an opening up of the Party.

Their position was not followed, however. In fact, parties of other political orientations, like the British and Danish Conservatives, were excluded as well as Christian Democratic parties from non-EC countries like Switzerland and Austria. Because the CDU/CSU nonetheless wished to maintain structural contact with non-Christian Democratic parties both within and outside the European Community, a few months later they set up the European Democratic Union (EDU) in reaction to the founding of the EPP. The EDU was an association of Christian Democratic, Conservative and other non-collectivist parties. Helmut Kohl, the CDU President at the time, Margaret Thatcher, the leader of the British Conservatives, both of whom were then opposition leaders, and Jacques Chirac, the leader of the neo-Gaullists, were the most important figures within the EDU.

In fact, the Germans were taking a huge risk. During the delicate negotiations about the EPP, they had also been preparing to set up the EDU. It is true that the EDU was not a federation of parties and did not form a group within the European Parliament, but its foundation put a damper on the enthusiasm with which the EPP got off the ground. The date of the founding, only one month after the first EPP Congress, was taken as a provocation. During the meeting of the Political Bureau following the congress that had established the EPP, the debate was devoted entirely to the setting up of the EDU. They had created a negative impression of the new EPP and tried to cause internal division. One has no idea today just how strong the divisions were at the time.

The first years of the EPP were years of deadlock. Three associations of Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe – EUCD, EPP and EDU – worked separately and to some degree even against each other. There was no sign or mention of structural cooperation. Mistrust reigned. The inheritance left by Lückner and myself seemed to have dwindled. The means to our goal, that is, the creation of a federal Europe, suffered from a loss of strength at the outset. Moreover, the first direct elections to the European Parliament were won by the Socialists – in terms of seats at least, for the EPP did get more votes. Later the Socialists' advantage would increase also in number of votes.

As Prime Minister I had to let go of my brainchild while it was still under this dark cloud. It was only later, under my EPP presidency, that efforts were made once again to bring about structural cooperation between both Christian Democratic and other like-minded political parties and, to top it all off, the union of the EPP, the EUCD and the EDU to form one organisation.

## Christian Democratic Principles

Next to the statutes that to this day form the basis for the running of the EPP, another important ray of light is the common political programme that was drawn up at the founding of the EPP. Political programmes have played an increasingly important role within the Party. They are the outcome of the common ground shared by the parties, which even since 1976 have continued to differ greatly. It is vital to recognise these differences while at the same time looking for points in common. And that commonality lies in Europe.

Because much stress had been laid from the outset on the programme, a special committee was set up. I was the *rapporteur* along with Lückner. In editing our texts we could rely on the manifestos issued by the EUCD and the Christian Democratic World Union. I also brought in my own party's research centre, which coordinated the contributions of the various research units of the member parties. The 1979 election campaign for the European Parliament was headed by the slogan "Together to a Europe of

Free Peoples". In fact we were setting out the boundaries of the election platform. The Christian Democratic roots were clearly visible from the beginning and would be even more in evidence at the foundation of a European federation:

We, the European People's Party–Federation of Christian Democratic Parties of the European Community, desire a united Europe. With this goal in mind we will continue the successful policies of Christian Democratic statesmen Robert Schuman, Alcide de Gasperi and Konrad Adenauer, who laid the foundations for all the successes realised till now. In following them, we are determined to continue their work and to bring it to completion by founding a European Union, which in political terms will attain its completion in a European Federation as set out by Robert Schuman on 9 May 1950.

This conviction regarding federalism was crucial and an extension of what I had been arguing for in Belgium. It was also what I later discovered in Jean Monnet's writings. I consider Monnet to be the inspiration for my belief in Europe. His biography, which I have read and studied in depth, has also been an important source of inspiration for my political action.

At the very first EPP Congress I laid my cards on the table in outlining my vision for the future of Europe:

For us the unification of Europe should result in a European Federation because a federal structure is the only structure that can bring about and guarantee unity in diversity and diversity in unity. For us a federal structure is best adapted to give form to the principle of subsidiarity: only what we can deal with within the larger entity should be transferred to that entity. In this way the federalist structure fits our pluralist view, one that abhors monopolies. In brief, federalism is our "personalism" in political form.

## Belgium or Europe?

Our political programme was agreed to at the first EPP Congress on 6 and 7 March 1978 in Brussels. With it my work had come to an end for a while. As Prime Minister, I could not follow the day-to-day business and developments within the EPP, except at summit meetings with EPP government leaders in preparation for the European Council. It was not I but Tindemans who became the President of the EPP, at my suggestion. He was elected because of his premiership and his renown in and services to Europe. It was not for nothing that he was called "Mister Europe". The fact that he came from a small country and lived close to Brussels also played a role.

However, at one time, before I knew that I would become Prime Minister, the hands were dealt differently. Lückert asked me to become President of the EPP because all the member parties he had consulted had put my name forward.

Paradoxically, it was only Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb, the other Belgian party president in the running, who was against it. I also wonder whether becoming President of the EPP was the right step to take. Certainly, Belgian politics would have looked different if I had done so. Ultimately, I advised Lückner to put the proposal to Tindemans. Tindemans accepted and became President. Nonetheless, I remained heavily involved in Europe in terms of policy. Moreover, by that time my interests and preferences seemed to be focused for good on Europe. When a Flemish weekly asked me a few months after the EPP Congress whether I would not prefer to be Prime Minister of Belgium rather than dedicate my political career to Europe, my reply was this: “If somebody does not take a risk for Europe, then it will never come to anything. Yes, I do believe that the European dimension reverberates most strongly in me”. I told my friends in the CVP as well that “Tindemans would inspire the party in Belgium and I would mainly concentrate on Europe”.



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