

'Edith Cresson emerges from "hell"' from La Libre Belgique

Caption: On 17 March 1999, Édith Cresson, Member of the European Commission under its President Jacques Santer, speaks to La Libre Belgique about her involvement in the revelations that led to the collective resignation of the Commission two days earlier.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 17.03.1999, n° 76. Bruxelles. "Édith Cresson sort de l'enfer", auteur:Verhest, Sabine , p. 3.

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Edith Cresson emerges from ‘hell’

Though in the dock for months, along with her colleagues who are resigning, she still has to deal with day-to-day affairs.

By Sabine Verhest

Having lived through six months of ‘hell’, Edith Cresson received *La Libre* on Tuesday in her office in Brussels in a relaxed mood, despite the feverish atmosphere which prevailed in the Commission building.

How did the Commission meeting go on Monday evening just before the resignation was announced?

It was very calm. We had had dinner brought to us on a tray, and everyone ate in complete silence. Not a word was said! It was pretty impressive. When everyone had more or less finished, the President proposed that we discuss what action should be taken on the report, and everyone expressed his or her point of view. Those opposed to collective resignation were very much in the minority. There was a very broad consensus straight away.

Did the position of the Socialists in favour of collective resignation influence the deliberations of the Commission?

Pauline Green [Editor’s note: Chairman of the Group of the Party of European Socialists] had announced just before our meeting that the national delegations of the Party were unanimously in favour of collective resignation. She only strengthened the view of those who were already inclined to this course of action. Once the Socialist Group as a whole has reached this conclusion, a motion of no confidence against the Commission is certain to be passed.

Did you sense a certain resentment towards yourself from those Commissioners who were not singled out in the report?

If I had been the only target of criticism, the report would not have resulted in collective resignation ...

What will you take with you from your time in Brussels?

It has been an extremely enriching experience. I have done things which I enjoyed immensely. I have also learned a lot from it, more than I thought I would, especially about how the Community institutions operate.

Yet, back in 1995, people had the impression that your portfolio did not really interest you ...

I have always been interested in education. But I did not know what the Commission could do about it — it has had powers in that field only since the Maastricht Treaty.

You set new records of unpopularity, especially in the press, when you were Prime Minister in France. Now it is happening again. How do you explain that?

That is not for me to say! I often hear it said that I am arrogant. Yet I am not aware of being arrogant, I am still close to my grass roots. But when I think something, I say it, and that can make people uncomfortable. Yet it is at the root of political debate, and that should not mean making enemies. When you disagree, you say so and discuss it. That is what politics is about. When I have proposals to make which I believe in, I defend them. When I have objections, I state them. There is something a bit sneaky and hypocritical in present-day society, and that is just not me.

In recent months you have done nothing but work on your defence against the allegations. Are you going to be able to handle that and deal with day-to-day affairs?

Clearly, I will not be launching any new initiatives. I have launched enough projects, and there is still a lot of work for me to do. But I hope that it will be possible to catch up on the time lost.

What will you do afterwards?

I have been lucky enough — not everyone is — to be able to do things which have interested me, and I shall continue to do so. What those things will be, I cannot say at the moment.