

Interview with Jacques F. Poos: the three pillars of the European Union (Sanem, 16 April 2004)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Let us return briefly to the Maastricht Treaty and a more institutional issue, since, in 1991, during the IGC for Maastricht, the Luxembourg Presidency introduced the notion — one that the general public sometimes finds obscure — of the three pillars of the European Union. At the time, what was the objective pursued by the Luxembourg delegation and by the countries that supported this project?

[Jacques F. Poos] Yes, above all the countries that supported it; it was the idea that the European Economic Community was based on the Community method — the one devised by Jean Monnet, as everyone knows — with a High Authority, the ECSC, now the Commission, which made proposals to the Council and to the European Parliament. Next, after a long process, a decision was taken on this proposal from the Commission. Then, of course, the large countries did not want the Commission to lead the way in the field of foreign policy. They did not want the Commission to lead the way in the fields of immigration or of combating crime or of approximation of penal laws. That is why all these important areas were uncoupled from the Community method. At the time they said: ‘After all, these are important areas; we shall introduce certain rules. We cannot leave it up to the countries to do with it as they wish without our knowing what they will do. We want to have a common policy, but one that is intergovernmental.’ That was the origin of the three pillars. They are in the Treaty, but it is not the same system as the Economic Union.

[Étienne Deschamps] Today, with a little over ten years’ hindsight, are you satisfied with the results of this system?

[Jacques F. Poos] I am not satisfied, but it is better than nothing. On the credit side it has known some successes but, unfortunately, it has become fossilised and I cannot see how we could bring the pillars together again in some future Treaty. The Convention did not manage to do so either and the Intergovernmental Conference will not do any better than the Convention.

[Étienne Deschamps] So we shall have to be content with this rickety system?

[Jacques F. Poos] I am very disappointed by this system and I am sure that it will be overcome in future, in the medium term, because at that point there will be a European Union that will need to be a proper counterpart for China, the United States and Russia, and it will have to set up a mechanism enabling it to speak with one voice. And this cannot be done unanimously.

[Étienne Deschamps] Then the destiny of Europe’s position on the world stage will be gambled via this mechanism — one which is a priori very institutional, but in practice has geopolitical implications...

[Jacques F. Poos] ...that are enormous because we are not taken seriously. Because at any moment someone can break away and destroy a common position. I shall give you a concrete example: we had adopted a common position on the Middle East road map — on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Europeans were agreed. The European Parliament had voted a Resolution with a Spanish rapporteur, approving this road map of the Quartet — the Quartet being the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations. Then Mr Sharon visited the President of the United States, destroyed the road map and received the approval of George Bush for the maintenance of a certain number of illegal colonies on the West Bank. The following day Mr Blair said that it was an innovative plan that he supported. So off he went, just like that, leaving by the back door, abandoning a common position without any prior meeting being held of the Foreign Ministers or of the European Council. A common position had been adopted and someone destroyed it and rejoined the President of the United States. It is quite unacceptable! It shatters any credibility the Union European may possess.

[Étienne Deschamps] And this happened without prior concertation and without consequences at the European level? Without direct consequences?

[Jacques F. Poos] Without consequences... Today, just as we are speaking, quite fortuitously, an informal

meeting of Foreign Ministers is being held in Ireland and I hope that there will be a strong reaction. But what strong reaction, given that the British say that they are backing Sharon? I cannot foresee one. So things will go from bad to worse if we do not manage to abolish this unanimity rule.