Interview with Paul Collowald: Pierre Pflimlin and the budgetary powers of the European Parliament (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In July 1984, Pierre Pflimlin became President of the European Parliament. In what did this post consist?

[Paul Collowald] The role of a President of the President of the European Parliament, as I knew it from the outside, or of the European institutions, is one that I came to know, during my time there, with Pierre Pflimlin. Pierre Pflimlin was President of the European Parliament from June 1984 until January 1987. Since a term of office, during the Parliamentary term taken as a whole, lasts five years, and since this is not officially laid down but a practice, at the half way point, after two and a half years, you will hear: 'Well well, there is a new President.' Therefore in every five-year term, there are two presidents. Pierre Pflimlin was therefore president from 1984 to 1987. The circumstances, as are often the case in life, were at the same time interesting, strange or even touching: Pierre Pflimlin knew me because I had been a young journalist in Strasbourg when he had been an important politician who had, since 1946, been a minister in a whole series of governments. By the way, just to add a remark that links this to Robert Schuman: when Robert Schuman constituted his government, he at once thought of Pierre Pflimlin, whom he knew well given that they were the elected representatives of Lorraine and Alsace and that he had a high regard for Pflimlin's knowledge and expertise in economic matters. He wanted to appoint him Minister for Economics, which is after all regarded as an important ministry. Pierre Pflimlin replied: 'Actually, I should prefer Agriculture.' To which Robert Schuman's response was: 'No, seriously? You are a lawyer, as I am. You know nothing about agriculture.' 'Ah,' said Pflimlin, 'You just mentioned the economy. We are in a post-war period, and it is one of penury. To my mind, agriculture is to play a vital role in a global economy. In order to rebuild it all and overcome this penury, a number of economic and political measures will have to be adopted.' 'Well then,' said Robert Schuman, 'If it is so important to you…'And that is how Pierre Pflimlin, the lawyer, became one of the leading Ministers for Agriculture — for three years, I believe, which was not bad during the Fourth Republic. This is to show that Pierre Pflimlin, whose thesis had been on the economy, who was a lawyer and had been in turn Minister for Agriculture, Minister for the French Overseas Territories, Minister for Finance, Prime Minister — or rather the title was President of the Council during the events of May 1958, with Algeria, and later on the transition from the Fourth Republic to the Fifth Republic — and, one dramatic evening, it was Pierre Pflimlin who handed over to Charles de Gaulle, the General, who later became President of the Fifth Republic. Here is a quiz question for students: 'Who was the last President of the Council during the Fourth Republic?' They will say: 'Pierre Pflimlin.' No, it was General de Gaulle who succeeded Pierre Pflimlin as Prime Minister and afterwards became President of the Republic.

So Pierre Pflimlin, with this wide range of experience that I have summarised very briefly — and I must also recall that he was, for a long time, Mayor of Strasbourg and President of the General Council — with his roots in Alsace, promoting Strasbourg, but bearing heavy responsibilities nationally, became President of the European Parliament. I had been warned about his character. When somebody tells you that, it usually makes you think: 'Yes, he must have a foul temper.' The result was that — without wishing to skip ahead — when I was his Head of Private Office a little later on and I met a friend whom I had not seen from years that had been his Head of Private Office in Paris, in several ministries, he asked me: 'What is he like now?' I replied: 'Look, I know there are the tall stories; that in the past you would hear all sorts of anecdotes…Oh, those wicked journalists! That one day, in a fit of anger, he picked up an ashtray and threw it through the…' So I replied: 'In my experience so far there has been nothing like that. He can get angry because he has a strong personality, but I think that things are going very well now.' So, I bore great respect for his varied career, whether in Alsace, or nationally, or European, and we got down to work and that is how I came to understand the role, one that is discreet yet very important, of a President of the European Parliament. He is elected by his peers in a secret ballot, but afterwards how does it work?

Well, the President of the Parliament has a Bureau, together with the Vice-Presidents. This has changed in the meantime, and under certain circumstances — it was called the Enlarged bureau — the chairmen of the political groups were included. Thus the Vice-Presidents and Chairmen of the political groups constituted a sort of Executive or Board of Governors that met regularly, took important decisions, set the agenda, and organised everything from the inside. When all is said and done, it was then that, for some years at the end

of my European career, I found myself within this institution, which I had known from the outside, having spent 25 years in the Commission, and I realised that under certain circumstances expertise, personality and a thorough knowledge of one or two foreign languages were essential. This is because the President, who does not always take the chair since there are the Vice-Presidents, must be able, first of all, to dominate the debating chamber. That is the first point. There is a whole series of circumstances where there are visiting Heads of State — President Reagan, for example, came and there were demonstrations… He has to handle that. Then, in a more discreet situation, there is the Bureau, with his colleagues and the chairmen of the groups; after that there are the personal relationships to be built up with the different individuals in order to bring matters to a successful conclusion. I saw that it had turned out, as luck would have it, during one part of Pierre Pflimlin's term of office, that the two most important groups within the European Parliament were the Socialist Group, number one, and the Christian Democrat Group, number two. The Socialist Group had happened to appoint a German as Chairman of the Group; the Christian Democrat Group had appointed a German. Pierre Pflimlin had an admirable grasp of German, being almost bilingual. As a result, on occasions, without the presence of an interpreter, eye to eye, he could make progress with the work in hand or steer it in other directions. A President of the Parliament therefore needs to possess a number of human qualities as well as skills in order to earn respect.

It happened that, since Parliament had acquired, among others, budgetary powers which gradually came to be managed jointly with the Council of Ministers over proposals emanating from the Commission — and I can remember one occasion in particular, when there was a sudden realisation even on the part of highly competent journalists that there could be no Community budget without the signature of the President of Parliament, because, throughout those years, I would often come across stereotyped articles employing the refrain: 'The European Parliament… no power, etc.' So that day, with the press and as one of Pierre Pflimlin's staff, I embarked on an operation that might be described as one of information and education regarding the institutions. It took place in Luxembourg because the President sometimes came to Luxembourg, where, when the moment came to sign the budget, Pierre Pflimlin — this must have been in 1985 or 1986 — he signed a budget based on figures from the European Parliament and not those from the Council of Ministers. Ah! He turned to me — I was in his office — saying: 'All right then. Let us go. We had no success during last night's discussions, and with all due fairness to the Council and the Commission,' he said, 'and in all conscience, as President, I believe that Parliament's budgetary proposals are precisely in line with the recent summit decisions — those of the recent European Council and so forth — and that implementation of those guidelines and policy decisions has not been followed by the Finance ministries, which want to tighten the screw, and that ultimately, depending on the power and influence held by the various governments, what the Council of Ministers wants is to cut back a number of credits.' The result lay in the difference between 'I sign' and 'I persist' and it was legally accurate to assert that the dialogue between the Council of Ministers and Parliament was interrupted by the Parliamentary leadership, since the President signed the budget specified by Parliament. So what happened next? Well, the Council of Ministers and various countries, individually, went to the Court of Justice, saying: 'But this is a flagrant violation. Parliament…' 'The President has the right to sign; it is in the Treaty.' 'Oh. Is that so?' This was the sudden discovery: without the signature of a President of the European Parliament, there could be no budget. The provisional twelfths system was then put in place; it was a technique that was already familiar. Next, there was the Court of Justice, and what happened? The Court of Justice condemned Parliament on legal grounds, sustaining that it had interrupted the dialogue unilaterally, but this corresponded, in fact, to reasons originating in former decisions taken at the highest political level, that of the European Councils, etc. The Court of Justice said: 'The dialogue must be resumed.' What happened then? The Council and Parliament sat; the budget that came out from this was, to within a few units, the budget specified in the European Parliament. Pierre Pflimlin told me: 'Listen, Paul, you see how I have been taken to court, at my age. It is the first time in my life. I have been found guilty, but we were right. We were right.'

This was so true that, when I went with him on several occasions on visits to the capitals as his Head of Private Office, I shall always remember a dialogue with Mrs Thatcher in London. You can imagine that where budgets were concerned, dialogue was rather difficult. So, the dialogue between Pflimlin and Mrs Thatcher: I think that the period of limitation is over by now. 'Madam, there is a budget which is at the service of a policy; I was Minister for Finances in my country, the budget is at the service of a policy. The Community's future depends on young people, research and development. The credits have been refused for

Erasmus' — the Erasmus Programme had just begun, started on a proposal from Jacques Delors, by the Delors Commission — 'research and development; the budget will remain an empty shell, the agricultural policy, all that we are dragging on, and what of the future?' No. In the end Pierre Pflimlin said: 'Madam, do you realise what this Europe that we come from represents? I am from Alsace; we have been hereditary enemies, separated by the Rhine. What we are doing now represents a vast political project.' Then Mrs Thatcher's reply: 'Yes, yes… But! Not a penny for the budget.' Later, on returning to the hotel, I saw my President… I said: 'We have an official dinner to attend, we can take a shower', and so on. But I could see that he was angry. 'Is something wrong, Mr President?' He replied: 'I am not happy. I was unable to convince Mrs Thatcher.' I said: 'Look, I don't wish to minimise the importance of this, but no one…' — because Mrs Thatcher was known as the Iron Lady. This is a cliché, but she could be absolutely charming, adorable. There were six people in her office; she was really charming and everything, however, 'but' meant 'no' where the budget was concerned. The British national budget was not there to cover that stuff. 'It is for Europe…' 'Very well, doubtless you are quite right…' That was when I was an observer in various circumstances: that of the budget 'I shall sign that, then we shall see'; then, during the events at the Court of Justice, after that, at the dialogue with Mrs Thatcher, who was not, I dare say, the easiest of people to deal with.