

Interview with Jacques F. Poos: the three places of work of the European Parliament (Sanem, 16 April 2004)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Will you allow me to play the devil's advocate? It is widely known that some people are, to put it mildly, amazed that Parliament works in three different locations: its Secretariat is here in Luxembourg, whereas its meetings, whether plenary or in committee, are sometimes held in Strasbourg and sometimes in Brussels. Do you think that this system is firstly, efficient, and secondly, one that can go on for ever? Do you consider that a solution is desirable and possible?

[Jacques F. Poos] This is a question that comes up again and again, and continues to be discussed at a political level, but I don't think that it should be looked at exclusively from a budgetary perspective. What has never yet been done is to calculate the cost of extreme centralisation, of putting everything in the same place; what some might describe as 'ghettoisation'. At least, with Strasbourg, we now have a different perception of the European Parliament, which everyone finds different from Brussels. People already find it hard to distinguish between the European Council and the Council of Europe, between the General Affairs Council and the Commission. The fact that the European Parliament sits in Strasbourg may be explained historically, and this gives it a measure of independence: the people in Brussels and the people in Strasbourg. I think that we must absolutely maintain this distinction today and in days to come, defending it from those who have not, perhaps, followed European history since the Second World War very closely. I believe that decentralisation in a European Union makes sense. We should not put everything in the same place even if, practically speaking, this were feasible, but it is not feasible. I cannot see where in Brussels we could build the offices to house all the employees who are at present in Luxembourg — all the staff. Certainly not close to the European Parliament, where they are currently building two more wings to host the new MEPs, because we are really at war with the municipality of Ixelles, in Brussels. The municipality wanted to veto the enlargement of the European Parliament in that location because they maintain that it kills all the local life, that there is no night life, there are too many cars ... We know all the arguments. And if we were to put them elsewhere in Brussels, well away from the centre of operations, what is the point of that? It would cost the earth; there would be the transport, uprooting everyone from Luxembourg to replant them in Brussels, and what for? I really think we should say: 'This is the historical situation and it has its price; not an enormous price, not as enormous as all that, and any country that wants to decentralise its institutions has to be ready to pay the price.'

[Étienne Deschamps] I imagine that as quaestor, you were directly involved in the sometimes stormy negotiations with the municipal authorities of Ixelles. What was that like? Did you hold meetings with the residents' committees, or with the inhabitants of Brussels, where they welcomed or rather complained about the building of new offices in the municipality?

[Jacques F. Poos] There were meetings with the local government officials and with the residents' committees. We were inundated with motions, requests and protests, and it was quite clear to us that although the European Parliament was certainly welcomed by the Belgian authorities, it was not accepted by the municipality. It was a foreign body. It is considered as a foreign body. Necessary, certainly. Interesting, too. But an unsettling influence, one that disturbed people's habits, despite there being small businesses and restaurants, hotels, and so forth growing up around it. But it is true that Brussels is not a paragon where urban planning is concerned.

[Étienne Deschamps] And further enlarging the buildings will obviously not help matters?

[Jacques F. Poos] It will not help matters, whereas Strasbourg is a real marvel. The actual home of the European Parliament, the debating chamber and the tower as well, is a real architectural marvel and it deserves its place in this part of Strasbourg, on the Franco-German border. The Kirchberg, too, with its new layout, is an attempt to combine a European official presence with the normal functioning of the area: housing, business, leisure activities (with the swimming-pool, the Coque centre, and so on). I think that as an architectural ensemble it works well, but as for Brussels ... I am not so sure.

[Étienne Deschamps] As Minister for Foreign Affairs, I suppose that you played a part in talks seeking to

keep in Luxembourg what at the time was under threat of being transferred to Brussels, whether for Parliament or for certain Directorates-General. Can you recall any cases where influence was brought to bear, obstacles were set up or disputes occurred with your Belgian counterparts in a bid to hold onto as much as possible?

[Jacques F. Poos] It is a permanent battle, but I must say that our adversary is not so much the Belgian Government. It is not the Belgian Government that wants to grab something. I think it is quite happy with what it has already: the Council and the Commission, which meet in Brussels, and furthermore the future European Councils, for after all, they give it tremendous media visibility, all the European Councils taking place in Brussels. Our adversary is the bureaucracy. It is the bureaucracy that wants to centralise everything for reasons of convenience. It is the bureaucracy, and then I'd say it was the accountants. The CoCoBu [European Parliament Committee on Budgetary Control] of course sees the 50 million euros that could be saved here or there if everything were put in the same place, but without thinking it through. How much would it cost in new buildings, and how much for new investments in transport there?