

Interview with Jacques Santer: British opposition to the nomination of Jean-Luc Dehaene (Sanem, 3 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] How do you explain the British opposition — I am of course thinking of Prime Minister John Major — to the appointment of the then Belgian Prime Minister, Jean-Luc Dehaene, to the Presidency of the European Commission, as successor to Jacques Delors?

[Jacques Santer] It is difficult to say; many of my colleagues at the time, in particular Chancellor Helmut Kohl, have still not understood Mr Major's opposition to Jean-Luc Dehaene's nomination. You know, at the time there were two Benelux candidates and one British candidate. The latter was Leon Brittan, and from the Benelux side we also had Ruud Lubbers, the Dutch Prime Minister, who was seen much more as an Atlanticist. Could that have been the attitude of John Major, who perhaps wanted to push for Ruud Lubbers' nomination at the expense of that of Dehaene? But it was very difficult to explain. One reason that has been much quoted, including in our discussions, was that Major wanted to demonstrate to the general public in his country that Britain was entitled to its say and that the first candidate was unacceptable. Incidentally, they had done much the same thing when Jacques Delors was appointed. Jacques Delors moved up in the same way from second position; the first candidate was Mr Cheysson, but he was repudiated, or rejected somehow, by Margaret Thatcher at the time. So next came Jacques Delors. Perhaps that was why.

There is also perhaps this other consideration: Ruud Lubbers was more of an Atlanticist than Dehaene. It is very difficult to say or to explain this British vote, because in fact when I succeeded Dehaene myself, I was in the same party, we were both Christian Democrats and we shared the same vision of European Community integration, so from that angle there was nothing to distinguish the two candidates. Perhaps we shall come back to this later on. It did not bring me much luck afterwards. But it is very difficult to explain. At any rate, when I spoke to Chancellor Kohl after he had asked me to lead the Commission, I asked him outright: 'But look here, is there no new British veto against me, given that I cannot see any difference politically between Dehaene and myself?' Kohl's reply was very clear: 'Major cannot impose a veto twice.' That was his reply, but there was no explanation for the background to Major's rejection of Dehaene.