

Interview with Jacques Santer: the political circumstances surrounding his appointment as President of the European Commission (Sanem, 3 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] When and how did you understand that a political consensus on your appointment was, or could be, possible?

[Jacques Santer] As I have said, I was not a candidate for the Presidency of the Commission. On the contrary, I supported Dehaene's candidacy, and as there were ... perhaps I should say a few words specifically about this candidacy of Dehaene's. Dehaene was a candidate, that is certain; he had the support of a number of his Christian Democrat colleagues, including mine, and therefore that of Luxembourg. Then there was the candidacy of Ruud Lubbers. At which point the Benelux representatives were in some difficulty. That was when I was approached by Helmut Kohl in order to find an agreement between Dehaene and Ruud Lubbers; that is, to reach some sort of compromise. So, since I was the only Benelux representative who was not directly involved, I decided to convene a meeting informally, even secretly, at the house of a friend of Ruud Lubbers, a lawyer living near Maastricht. I remember it clearly; it was a fine residence close to Maastricht, in a park. The participants in this meeting, apart, of course, from Dehaene and Ruud Lubbers, were I and Martens, Wilfried Martens, who was the President of the European People's Party.

We tried to find, by negotiation, a means of settling the matter. At first the two parties could not agree, but at that point a proposal was put forward, one which was also very interesting, given later developments, that Ruud Lubbers might go for the post of NATO Secretary-General. Manfred Wörner was the then NATO Secretary-General, and he was seriously ill; he was already in no state to carry out his duties. Helmut Kohl had always led me to believe that he had nothing against Ruud Lubbers' appointment as NATO Secretary-General, since Lubbers had always been an Atlanticist. Lubbers would not hear of it. In fact, he said: 'It is not at all tactful at this time to discuss the succession while someone is still in the saddle.' However, it was clear that Wörner would not survive his serious illness and, in fact, Mr Wörner died quite soon afterwards. No agreement could be found, save this: that they would work together. This was because it was already known that Mr Papandreou, the President-in-Office of the Council — Greece held the Presidency of the European Union — was going to put the matter to a vote, since there were three official candidates. So we agreed that whoever secured the most votes would be supported by the one with fewer votes — in other words, the one with fewer votes would withdraw, in support of the one with more votes. That was the gist of the agreement. No other solution could be found. When we arrived in Corfu, for the meeting was held in Corfu in the evening, Mr Papandreou called the vote at the end of dinner — in Greece they dine quite late and Mr Papandreou was already very tired, because he was already suffering from his illness — and it was Mr Dehaene who received the most votes: I think he had 7, Lubbers 4 and Brittan 1 vote.

[Étienne Deschamps] How — if I may interrupt — how were things arranged there, practically speaking? Did everybody sit around the table and raise their hands to vote, or was it a secret ballot? How was it organised?

[Jacques Santer] It was a secret ballot. Voting slips were handed round and you cast your vote. Of course, they were both represented. Dehaene and Lubbers were not present. They were represented. Dehaene was represented by the Foreign Minister, who later became NATO Secretary-General, Willy Claes, and Lubbers was represented by Wim Kok, the Deputy Prime Minister. They naturally knew nothing about the agreement, which had been concluded tacitly among us in Maastricht. Having done this, Papandreou closed the meeting and we all returned to the hotel. As soon as we got to the hotel, a fresh Council meeting was called by the Greek Foreign Minister. Papandreou had gone back to his hotel, but not everyone was present. Since we were all staying in the same hotel, or at least all those from Benelux were, it was clear that consultations had taken place during the night. The next day, when Papandreou asked the other 11 — although there were 15 of us at the table, there were only 12, because the Scandinavians were not yet full members of the European Union — Major said that in any case, even if Dehaene were the sole candidate, he would vote against Dehaene. He would oppose Dehaene, and at that time unanimity was necessary. This is no longer the case today, but at that time unanimity was required. There was the veto, and no justification was required. That is why it is very difficult to understand. I am certain that secret meetings were held

during the night.

If things had gone ahead according to our plan, that is to say, if, in the wake of the election, of the votes cast at the table that evening, the candidacy of Lubbers had been withdrawn by Wim Kok in support of Dehaene's, perhaps things would have gone differently. Generally speaking, the solution to a problem comes when you sleep on it, but in this instance this was not so — on the contrary, we found ourselves in a difficult situation, with no solution in sight. It was the end of the Presidency, and there was one more attempt — I tell you this merely as a matter of interest — made by Papandreou, who asked Delors to carry on being President for another year, while a worthy successor to Delors was found. This was Delors' reply — and only later did I myself realise the validity or the significance of Delors' remarks when he said: 'Mr President, I was President of a Commission of 12 Member States; I do not want to be President of a Commission of 15 Member States.' Delors refused, so the ball was in the German court, given that, in accordance with the rotation system, Germany took over the Presidency on 1 July 1994. At one time I was not a candidate, even if there were rumours circulating to that effect, but there were other candidates. There was Mr Schlüter, the Danish Prime Minister, who was one candidate; there was Mr Amato, the former Italian Prime Minister, who was a candidate; there were others still ... Sutherland, the former Commissioner was also a candidate. There were quite a few other candidates, but I always refused to be a candidate. Besides, we had had our national elections in June; we had won them and I was primarily concentrating on forming a new Government with the coalition partner, the Socialist Party. While all this was going on, just before the coalition negotiations, Kohl telephoned me, saying: 'Look here, we have been considering the candidacy. Given that following Jacques Delors — a Socialist — a Christian Democrat is needed and, at the same time, following a representative of France, a large Member State, there has to be a representative of a small Member State' — there is always this rota system within the Presidencies — he then said: 'There is no one who enjoys the trust of the Christian Democrats apart from you.'

I was not enthusiastic because I told myself that I had won the elections, that I was in the process of forming a new Government and that my electors would not be very understanding as a result ... Think it over, just think about it. That was at the beginning ... That must have been in early July, around then. Then, of course, certain Foreign Ministers came to Luxembourg, such as Mr Kinkel, who was also insistent, who came to see me, as well as others who came to tell me: 'Listen, you must accept', and so forth. So one thing led to another, and in this way it came about. However, the decisive event occurred on 7 July 1994, I believe, when the G7 met in Naples under the Italian Presidency. There was Berlusconi, who was Prime Minister for the first time. It was a Saturday and I was at a wedding, I can remember it well. I was at a wedding, not far from us, in the Schorlemer château, and at a certain point — at that time there were no mobile phones, there was not yet all this new communication technology — my younger son Jérôme rode up to the wedding on his bicycle and said: 'Papa, somebody telephoned. He must have been a German, and he wants to speak to you at 7 o'clock this evening. It was someone from the German Chancellery.' He was not very sure, for he was still just a boy. So I said to my wife 'Well then, I had better go home.'

I already suspected what was happening, knowing perfectly well that the others were meeting in Naples, and then Kohl did call at 7 o'clock that evening, saying: 'We are here in Naples.' Apparently it was very hot there, and he said 'I have sounded out everyone here,' because there were the four Europeans there, namely Major, Mitterrand, Kohl and, of course, the Italian, Berlusconi, and they had reviewed all the nominations one by one. 'You are the only candidate that can secure a unanimous vote, including that of Major. It is the only chance.' So I thought: 'Well, this is a rather delicate situation now,' because by now I had finished the coalition negotiations; the swearing-in of the new Government had already been arranged — I think it was on 13 July, because on 14 July, there was the French national holiday and Mitterrand, since it was the final year of his seven-year term, had invited everyone to attend the great military parade in Paris, where the Eurocorps would be marching past, with the Germans, so we had to be there for that. On 15 July, the European Council was to be held there. The swearing-in had been fixed for 13 July, so I thought: 'This is a rather delicate situation. I shall be taking the oath on 13 July and I cannot put that off. A Government has been formed, the portfolios have been distributed and the Grand Duke has given his assent. I must first consult the Grand Duke.' There was still Mr Werner, and so I said 'I must inform Werner as well as the Party Chairman,' — who was then Mr Juncker — 'I have to tell the Members, my wife, and so on.' 'Yes, yes, yes, I understand very well that you have to ... but don't consult too many people,' he said. Then he

added something that was later to influence my decision, as well as that of the others involved, which was: ‘You must realise that right now the Presidency is being offered to a small Member State, in fact the smallest, and if it refuses on an issue like this, you will have to take the responsibility for the larger countries not bothering to favour a small Member State in future.’ Then: ‘Go ahead with the consultations, but I shall call you again’— because it was for the 15th, and this was on the 7th — ‘but I shall call you again tomorrow morning at 10 o’clock.’ It was a Sunday. I need not add that the wedding reception was over for me.

I telephoned the Grand Duke, I conferred with the others and then I accepted, on the Sunday, but I also asked Kohl to keep it all confidential. ‘Yes, yes, do not worry; it will all remain confidential between us.’ I did not want it all to come out before the swearing-in ceremony. Then something happened that I was able to verify afterwards: in the aeroplane in which Major was flying back from Naples, there were also some journalists flying back, and he confided in one — if one can confide in a journalist, especially a British journalist — and the next day all the British papers, all the dailies, were of course full of the nomination. So the whole political edifice that we had built collapsed, and at that moment I had to admit that it was true. It was not that simple, however, because I needed to prepare my party, and the party authorities, in order to find a successor, and all that. Afterwards, on 13 July, I was sworn in and on 14 July everyone was in Paris. Dehaene was next to me, and Delors beside me on the other side. Mitterrand gave his usual press conference. On being interviewed by the journalists he said: ‘There is nothing I can say, because the decision is to be taken tomorrow. All that I know is that it will be a French-speaker.’ That is what he said. On the following day, hence the 15th, the European Council met, and I was not present at it, of course, since it concerned me directly. But it lasted ten minutes, and for ten minutes I was waiting outside the door. They led me in amid the applause of all the members present, and there I was, President of the European Commission. Having been put forward by the European Council, I still needed the approval, of course, of the European Parliament.

[Étienne Deschamps] With hindsight, do you consider now that you gave a positive reply out of duty and because pressure was exerted on you?

[Jacques Santer] I had always been interested in European politics but I must say that I never had any ambition to become President of the European Commission. I was content with my position here in Luxembourg, and since I had also won the elections, I should have preferred to finish my term of office. We had created an entire programme, so from that angle I had no ambition to be President of the European Commission. Later, however, I applied myself body and soul to my new duties as President of the European Commission, since I wanted this Presidency to be distinguished by a series of advances at European level.