

## Address given by Nicolas Hommel at the 1000th meeting of Coreper (Brussels, 2 October 1980)

**Caption:** On 2 October 1980, a few days before retiring from his post of Secretary-General of the Council of the European Communities, Nicolas Hommel delivers an address on the occasion of the 1000th meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper). In his address, he gives an assessment of his time as Secretary-General and praises the crucial role of Coreper, describing it as the ultima ratio and the 'pivotal instrument' of the Council.

**Source:** Allocutions, messages de fin d'année de Monsieur Nicolas Hommel, Secrétaire Général du Conseil des Communautés Européennes, 1973-1980. [s.l.]: [s.d.].

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### ADDRESS TO THE COMMITTEE OF PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVES (II) (1000th MEETING) ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEPARTURE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

Brussels, 2 October 1980

Mr President,

When, one day, I think back to this moment, I shall have a vivid recollection of this memorable event, the 1000th meeting of Coreper.

This is an important occasion and, through the formality that the President's sense of history has prompted him to give our meeting today, he has allowed my departure to take place in an atmosphere of celebration and continuity. Here we see the coming together of two phenomena, one of which heralds the end of one part of life, while the other looks ahead to a new future. In addition, I have reached retirement age under the Luxembourg Presidency, and that makes the occasion all the more emotional.

Now that my countdown is in its final phase, my bitterness and my disappointment have subsided, events and matters have been put into perspective, and I am now in a state of great calm, but without any trace of indifference. I think that this will be evident from my words.

The moment of one's departure, is by definition, a time to take stock and to offer thanks.

My predecessor had handed over to me a Secretariat which, at the time, was generally seen to be highly positive and efficient. That was in 1973, at a time when European affairs were simpler, when Community solidarity could be practised more easily because the opposing interests were less acrimonious, when, in short, the Community spirit fuelled hearts and minds. The Secretariat's staff contributed to this atmosphere and were aware that their sometimes intense efforts were serving an ideal and stemmed from their European commitment. The subsequent slowing of Community progress has dampened the enthusiasm of many, reduced motivation, and — with working conditions deteriorating as the problems became more difficult — the often excessive pace of the expected results has provoked a moral fatigue which only the best have resisted. As a result of often strong and testing tensions, this process has led to a decline in staff morale which my persistent efforts have managed only to slow down.

However, these developments which I have briefly outlined must do nothing to detract from the contributions made by my colleagues. Your praise has been directed at me. Yet, for fairness' sake, I must recognise the contributions made by all those who represent the intellectual and technical resources of the General Secretariat. I am thinking, firstly, of my most immediate colleagues, those in my Private Office. They have all borne a very heavy burden with exemplary dedication and loyalty. I am also thinking, with sincere affection, of all those who have assisted me, in addition to their normal responsibilities, by providing friendly advice. I am also grateful to those who, from top to bottom, have seen their work as a mission, thereby giving this institution a standard and a capacity which the report by the Three Wise Men praised very highly.

As a general rule, when they leave, Ambassadors refrain from leaving a 'message', or indeed a 'spiritual testament', since they know, deep down, that everything will continue as before. I shall bow to their wisdom, and the few brief comments that I will impose on you are intended only to share certain experiences and impressions.

When, very soon after I took up my post, I realised that the Secretary-General was not often consulted on the substance of problems, I quickly felt confirmed in the role of observer. This role has enabled me to come to a realisation regarding the increasingly crucial role played by Coreper. Even though practically no action has been taken following the communiqué from the 1974 Paris Summit, which sought to enhance the role played by the

Permanent Representatives, the dysfunction within the Council has served only to boost Coreper's prestige. It has made it a body without which the day-to-day life of the Community would be unthinkable; it has made it, as it were, the '*ultima ratio*' of the Council. Coreper coordinates the findings of all the working parties, and it is the pivotal instrument and mediator between the technical and political levels and between the national and the Community systems. In addition, Coreper is increasingly ensuring that work progresses when the political climate is unfavourable to the Community and when the Council comes up against obstacles. Coreper is able to play this huge role because of the political commitment, the professional and technical efficiency, the sense of responsibility and the teamwork of those of whom it is composed.

Something else that I have realised is that your Committee has always faithfully endeavoured to make the Council work more efficiently, in particular by improving its decision-making power. The best minds have been put to work to that end. This has only ever produced procedural expedients which have, admittedly, rationalised working methods. However, the real remedy — more frequent but careful use of voting — still eludes us. And this is despite occasional encouragement from the Heads of Government and, indeed, the Three Wise Men. It is true that each country must be the judge of what are its own important interests. It is also true that the current economic problems give certain interests a gravity that they would not normally have. However, the observer in me has often been struck by the tacit understanding that you have shown for the difficulties of others by not reducing them to their true importance.

And this realisation is connected with another, one which relates to such a fundamental element as the solidarity between the Nine.

The Community is facing profound changes. It must conduct a large-scale restructuring policy as part of a new division of labour. It must create a common energy policy so as not to jeopardise its growth. It must deal with a second enlargement. This will cause serious upheavals. A high degree of solidarity and immense political will are required if we are to manage the situation. Solidarity is an essential Community phenomenon, just as give and take is a feature of intergovernmental cooperation. It is also harder to achieve when things are going badly. However, it will determine future developments. Depending on the degree of solidarity that the governments manage to mobilise in their countries, the Community will head either towards slow disintegration or towards this European Union which the governments continue to proclaim and to make every effort to create.

Having said this, I nonetheless have the impression that my observer's comments have slipped into a kind of 'message' which, battling daily with your national interests, you will see as platonic. But these remarks could take on a new relevance when events impose more drastic constraints within the Community and on the Community than at present.

After this digression into an area in which the assistance of the Secretary-General has not really been sought up to now, I would like to close by leaving you with a few concerns to which I kindly would ask you to give your attention.

First of all, I want to mention a taboo, a hot potato. The Three Wise Men also saw it as such and skilfully skirted round the issue. However, I believe that it is my duty, albeit one that ends in a few days, to draw your attention one last time to a problem that I think is likely to hinder the effective progress of our institutions. I believe that a comprehensive language system will be excessive after the forthcoming enlargement. This is not the place to describe what the details of that system should be. In its broad lines, it should purely meet practical needs and must have no hint of prestige. On the basis of those two criteria, a situation could be created which is financially viable and responds to the legitimate claim of respect for linguistic sovereignty. In the absence of such a solution, the Community, whose aim is to move towards unification, will be saddled only with additional paralysing diversity.

On an entirely different note, it would no doubt seem strange to you if I did not say something to you about my job and my role. Recently, certain British and German publications have offered fairly unfavourable assessments

in this regard. Whilst taking into account their stupid and spiteful ignorance, I must acknowledge that my job has not essentially been what I would have wanted it to be. I have told you that my role has been strictly confined within the limits of the Rules of Procedure. The General Secretariat has merely carried out the Presidency's wishes, and only its spirit of impartiality and objectivity has set limits. As regards the Secretary-General in person, these wishes too often related to simple administrative problems. This situation was not satisfactory either intellectually or morally. But the advantage was that the Secretary-General has, as a general rule, enjoyed a harmonious relationship with the successive Presidencies.

Accordingly, it is fortunate that the new-style Secretary-General will play a more substantial, more dynamic and more creative role. This does not mean that it will not be a difficult role, particularly in the light of a strengthened Presidency. My sincerest wish is that my friend Niels will find satisfaction and success in that role.

I would not want to close without thanking you once again for your complimentary, almost eulogistic remarks, which are made more out of kindness than on the basis of any real merit on my part. I am also grateful to Christofer for his remarks, which were so full of friendship.

My closing words are for you, the Ambassadors and your delegations. We have enjoyed a harmonious relationship. Admittedly, there have been frictions because there have been shortcomings on our side. You have shown a great deal of forbearance. You have also demanded a great deal of us, sometimes too much. However, by way of recompense, your appreciation of our efforts when the Presidencies ended brought us much satisfaction. Working conditions will certainly change in the future. I do not think that the Community will be any worse for it.

My dear Jean, seven years ago I took this job because my restless spirit wished to broaden the scope of its activities. At first, I thought that I could do what I liked. Today, I wonder whether I have always liked what I have done. However that may be, this job has been very rewarding for me; it has brought me into contact with important problems of current affairs, and, above all, it has brought me closer to and led me to appreciate some eminent persons. I think that that is due reward for the work that I have done.