

'Frans Andriessen on EEA: A new kind of neighbourliness' from the EFTA Bulletin (1991)

Caption: In summer 1991, in the monthly publication EFTA Bulletin, Frans Andriessen, Vice-President of the European Commission with special responsibility for External Relations and Trade Policy, gives his views on the European Economic Space (EES), later to become the European Economic Area (EEA), and the new European architecture.

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Frans Andriessen on EEA: A new kind of neighbourliness

You are the Commission Vice-President responsible for foreign relations. What are the main differences between your job and that of a national foreign minister?

It is very difficult to make general statements about these kind of things. I enjoyed my political life in the Netherlands very much but that surely also applies to my present job. I certainly don't want to underestimate the importance of national policies but on the other hand it cannot be denied that certain substantial political issues go well beyond national boundaries. The interdependence of national states is becoming more and more clear and the success of the integration process in the EEC illustrates that.

This does not mean, however, that political decision-making in Europe is always easy. In fact it is a constant evolution of checks and balances between the different parties involved with the ultimate goal of bringing about European unity.

I find it a challenging task to contribute to that process although I am quite aware that European integration will not succeed without adequate democratic control to ensure that the European citizen can identify with it.

From that point of view, national politics are sometimes more transparent and therefore easier to explain.

You have had and still have quite a lot on your plate - the Uruguay round, the Gulf crisis, negotiations with East and Central European countries, the EEA negotiations, etc. How do you find the time and resources to cope with all these important issues?

Indeed I cannot complain about the lack of work, but precisely that fact constitutes for me an incentive to work as hard as I can.

Moreover, I can rely on staff who are qualified and extremely devoted to their jobs.

Indeed it is fascinating to see how the Community has recovered from its "eurosclerosis", i.e. basically the period 1975-1985 during which no substantial progress was made concerning European integration. Today the debate about Europe has assumed quite another dimension. I don't claim that the Community has become popular everywhere but the least one can say, is that the Community can no longer be ignored. That applies to the points of view of the citizens in Europe but also to those in third countries. In particular, when you go abroad you feel that Europe is being taken seriously as a partner with whom not only business can be done, but with which a political dialogue can also be established.

In the light of the dramatic events that have taken place recently, for instance, the Gulf crisis and the "revolutions" in Eastern Europe - has this in any way devalued the importance of the EEA negotiations and resulting treaty?

The fact that the European continent is now experiencing quite fundamental changes cannot be a reason for us to ignore our immediate neighbours. The Community and EFTA are already very much interdependent and this process should now be strengthened in the interest of both parties.

EEA negotiations are just meant for that purpose, i.e. to establish a new kind of neighbourliness between equal partners. In such a way a substantial contribution is made to the future architecture of Europe.

This question is put to you before the EEA negotiations are finished, but could you single out the most difficult questions to solve from your point of view?

I think that the negotiations have been progressing quite significantly. There is agreement on a whole range of issues, although it is also true that some delicate items still remain to be solved. The joint ministerial session of 13 May in Brussels has proved very important and has confirmed the clear determination of all parties to continue negotiations constructively in the hope that a final settlement could be reached before this

summer.

In spite of the fact that negotiations remain very difficult in areas like fisheries, agriculture, free movement of people and cohesion, I still believe that we will finally succeed in bringing about a positive conclusion which would enable implementation of the agreement not later than 1 January 1993. From that date the European single market, i.e. the free movement of people, capital, services and goods should apply to the whole European Economic Area.

You are deeply involved in establishing what is often called the new European architecture. If you were the only architect, what would the final building look like?

First, I am not the sole architect. But even if that were be the case I would be extremely reluctant to draw a blueprint regarding the future shape of the European continent. The experience of the last two/three years has shown how difficult it is to forecast future developments. I therefore plead in favour of a more pragmatic approach, namely that one should aim to establish clearly defined political priorities with practical solutions. Consistency and flexibility will be required to meet future challenges.

What it is all about, finally, is to create conditions which will ensure peace and stability for all the people on the European continent. To the extent the European Community can contribute to that purpose, it is committed to do so.