

Interview with Jacques Santer: the Presidencies of the Council of the European Union (Sanem, 6 April 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Tell us, if you would, about another Community institution: I am referring to the Council, the Council of the European Communities, of which you were several times the President. How would you rate the importance of the Presidency, of a Presidency of the Council, in the organisation of Community issues?

[Jacques Santer] The Presidency is important in so far as it is the task of the Presidency to draw up a programme for six months. But it is a programme which — in my opinion — must be drawn up in close collaboration with the Commission. It is up to the Presidency, of course, to see how this programme will be put into effect. So it must be a realistic programme, but at the same time one that looks to the future and that, on occasions, seeks to resolve a certain number of conflicts that may exist in some areas. That is why the Presidency is important and I believe that it is really important because there is a rotation system. It is as a result of this rotation that different presidencies are motivated, and motivated for a relatively short period: six months are soon over. But for six months everyone in the Presidency, at various levels — at Heads of Government level, at ministerial level, at senior official, ambassadorial, permanent representative level and suchlike — everyone is motivated to ensure that the programme is carried out.

I think that this gives — and maintains — a certain dynamic within the European Union. If it were not there, I think that things would get bogged down all the more. But each Presidency has the ambition to achieve something, something by which it can identify itself, certainly, but where it also seeks to have a certain number of points appreciated by outsiders. I think it is a good thing. That is why I was always a fervent supporter of rotation, and still am — even if the Draft Constitutional Treaty has forced some concessions here — although with 23 Member States this takes place only every 12 years. But no matter; there is a dynamic which is created by a rotation system. Besides, above all, the question is sometimes asked whether small countries have the same means as the larger ones to allow them to implement it. But I have observed — and I have done so on several occasions, not merely as Prime Minister here in Luxembourg, but much more clearly as President of the European Commission — in general, the Presidencies of smaller Member States — and I am not referring only to Luxembourg and the Benelux States, but also to other Member States — have performed better than certain of the larger Member States. This is for the simple reason that they have no personal ambitions, their ambition being only to serve the Community and to end up with a positive result: one which will be judged as such by the international press. It is that which fortifies them and that is why I believe that a certain dynamic should be maintained by means of the rotation system. What is more, rotation — and this is an important principle — also maintains equality of treatment among the different Member States. This is an essential principle: that large and small should be at the same level. And this seems to me to be essential to the functioning of the European Union. Sometimes this principle is lost sight of, and it is an important principle; besides, in the Constitutional Treaty, in the proposed Constitutional Treaty, it is set down in an Article. We have always insisted on it. That is why the Presidency is important. It is important for a small country, but it is also important for the Community and, above all, that, through the priority programme set out in close cooperation with the Commission, we can enable the European Union to make progress, and that is important.