


# Interview with Jacques Santer: the preparations for the Single European Act (Sanem, 6 April 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] It was in September 1985 under the Luxembourg Presidency that the Intergovernmental Conference, the IGC, which was to lead to the Single European Act one year later on, opened in Luxembourg. At the time you were Head of the Luxembourg Government and Minister for Finance. What was really at stake concerning this IGC?

[Jacques Santer] It was the first Intergovernmental Conference since the Treaty of Rome. In fact, it was the first revision of the Treaty of Rome. And it fell on Luxembourg, which had been preceded by the Italian Presidency, it must be admitted, to adopt the White Paper on the Internal Market, the full internal market, which had been prepared by the Delors Commission and adopted at the European Council in Milan.

It was the first time that at a European Council in Milan a vote was taken by the Heads of State or Government, because there were certain Heads of State, or above all of Government, who were not in favour – such as Margaret Thatcher, at the time – on a certain number of points. But in spite of that, the then acting President, Mr Craxi, suddenly called for a vote, completely unexpectedly. Then he said: Now it is up to the Luxembourg Presidency. I am handing over the White Paper to the Luxembourg Presidency. And that is how we had this White Paper on our hands. We attached great importance to its success – I can still recall this very well, there was my Foreign Minister Jacques Poos at the time – and we really worked at it. We did nothing else but work on this Internal Market, this full Internal Market, which was later to come into force in 1992. That was the aim, because the Internal Market, or rather the Treaty of Rome, had created a customs union; it had created the Internal Market, but it functioned as different national markets. There were not a few obstacles in our way, so the establishment of this Internal Market was very important. At first we worked at our level, that of Luxembourg, in close cooperation with the Commission. We had drawn up a complete Treaty, with brackets and parentheses, and then it was the job of the Foreign Minister, just as it was for us at our level, to visit our corresponding colleagues, in the different countries where we discussed it with them, looking for possible grounds for compromise. We found quite a few potential areas of compromise, but everyone had to be in agreement, because a Treaty, or the revision of a Treaty, is negotiated unanimously. We got to the point in the end – and I can still remember this clearly – when there were ten or so points to settle. All the other points were more or less incidental. But those were really the key points and so we tried to negotiate them during the two days here in Luxembourg itself. Against all odds we succeeded, but it was not easy. It was not easy. I recall that it was almost midnight on the second day, with two or three points remainin

g to be settled because we were bundling them together, tying them into a packet points that were still under discussion. At that moment, as I was very patiently going round the table, not letting myself be put off by the different reactions, for we just could not agree, I remember that Helmut Kohl came up behind me at a certain moment and said: Jacques, leave it at that, because we are not going to manage it. We shall come back to it at the next Presidency and finish it; you have done a good job until now; we are nearly there; we shall put together what you have done and leave the rest for the next Presidency. Then I told him: Helmut, I am going to try just once more; that is to say, I am going to adjourn the session. And I did so. It was almost midnight. I adjourned the session, but I stipulated that it would be for half an hour or three-quarters of an hour, so as to carry on afterwards in order to find out what the Governments positions were, and to draw up new compromise documents.

At the time it was above all Mrs Thatcher who had a certain number of problems. One in particular because, in the text itself of the White Paper I remember it there was also a reference to economic and monetary union. And she was not having that. Each time that I went round the table yet again, she said: I have already said why I was against this; I have no more to say. So, I thought, I cannot talk to her, but I will speak to her Foreign Minister, Sir Geoffrey Howe, instead. I called Geoffrey and told him: Listen, Geoffrey, this is the problem: we can no longer discuss this with Margaret, but how do you see this? In that way we found a solution. I said: What if we did not leave it in the main body of the text but put it in a preamble or something like that? and so forth.

I called the others in to suggest this, but Delors was not too happy about it, so I said: But it is a compromise; otherwise, there will be no result at all and in six months we shall be faced with the same situation, because she will not budge. Then the others agreed, since it was already late and they wanted to be finished with it. So when we re-opened the meeting, I said: I have now found grounds for an agreement with the British delegation which will satisfy neither the Commission nor the other delegations, but which, for the sake of compromise is necessary. And put like that, it was accepted. So at about three o'clock in the morning everything was settled. It was an interruption that came just at the moment when it was needed.

This is something that I have remarked on several occasions, in other circumstances as well: you have to see and have the sensitivity to know just how far one can go, and if something still remains to be done, one must possess a sense of compromise, the capacity for compromise. That is what is important, even for a compromise that will always be somewhat shaky, one way or another, but the main thing is to make progress. It must be a compromise that goes forward, that represents an opening. Besides, later on in her memoirs Ma

Margaret Thatcher recognised that she had made a mistake, because afterwards everyone always referred to the Preamble, saying that the Internal Market is not merely a free trade area, but it also has as its aim monetary union. At that point she recognised that she had ceded too much, and that she had not foreseen the political impact of that period. It was accepted like that. I was not received particularly well at first by the European Parliament, I have to say, because they wanted to go further. But later on, some months later on, everyone said that it was the best step forwards that had been made in the European Union since the Treaty of Rome.

That was how it went. Delors also recognised this later on, quite clearly. As a result I consider that it was an important step; one that conditioned, and still conditions, the entire evolution of the European Union, and I was very pleased that it took place during the Luxembourg Presidency. It was also one of the arguments that were always made, when I became President of the European Commission later on, or when certain people wanted to present me as President of the Commission – it was the success, or the achievements, of the European Council that was held here in Luxembourg in 1985.