


Interview with Jacques Santer: the Benelux position during the work of the European Convention (Sanem, 3 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] During the work of the Convention — the various stages of consultation and the listening phase — what were the priorities of the three Benelux countries, particularly concerning the reforms and the workings of the Community institutions?

[Jacques Santer] The Benelux countries submitted a number of proposals. It was also a compromise paper, because some countries were going further than others. At least the Benelux countries were at an advantage, when, at one point, a confrontation took place within the Convention between the proposals submitted by the Chairman, Giscard, regarding the institutions, and the other countries, particularly the representatives of the small Member States — or the less large Member States: for at that moment the Benelux countries issued a paper that, to my mind, renewed and gave new impetus to the Convention. This is because at one point — and commentators were saying this quite clearly — there was an impression that the Convention was going to founder and be inconclusive. It was the Benelux countries that revived the Convention by bridging the gap between the proposals submitted by Giscard and the others. I believe that if some proposals made by Giscard were retained, such as, for instance, the President of the European Union, that was Giscard's idea. This President, however, is merely a figurehead in the proposal submitted by the Benelux countries, whereas in Giscard's view, he would have individual powers; this President was therefore quite another matter. So, briefly, Giscard's proposals actually constituted the representation function in the French constitutional system transferred to the European level, which is what we did not want. The Benelux countries then found the happy medium required for an agreement. I consider this a good thing. Besides, it is in the text: equal treatment for all the Member States, both large and small; there is, indeed, the Presidency of the European Union, but a Presidency that has to work together with the President of the European Commission, and, together with the President of the Commission, prepare for meetings of the European Council, and so forth; then there is the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who plays a dual role as Foreign Minister and Commissioner for External Relations and who chairs the Council of Foreign Ministers; the General Affairs Council once more becomes the coordinator, and so forth. So there are some really important elements in it which are reflected in the final text of the Convention. Above all, however, they had the advantage of getting the Convention moving again at a crucial point.

Sometimes during negotiations like these you find yourself at a critical point where you say: now it is make or break time. In this case, it worked, thanks to the Benelux proposals. I think that even if not all the Benelux proposals were retained, the general trend was always towards consensus. At least they had the merit of getting the discussion moving again. Giscard was not very happy at first, I must admit; he even summoned me, telephoned me, to tell me this and that. I had long discussions with him during that period. But in the end, what came out of it gives a certain satisfaction — besides, he has always defended it — and to the others as well, some satisfaction. Unfortunately, I have no idea what will become of it now.