

'Tortured attempts at transparency in Brussels' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (12 July 2006)

Caption: In its edition of 12 July 2006, the German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung comments in a mocking tone on the live online broadcasting of the deliberations of the Council of the European Union, particularly in its 'Economic and Financial Affairs' configuration.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. 12.07.2006. Frankfurt/Main. "Gequälte Transparenzübungen in Brüssel", auteur:Mussler, Werner.

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Tortured attempts at transparency in Brussels

The EU Finance Ministers throw open some of their sessions to the public — excruciating boredom also on the agenda

By Werner Mussler

Brussels, 11 June. The most enduring impression is left by the hairdos. Whenever an EU Finance Minister takes the floor, he lowers his head by some 45°. This is so that he may read out what he wishes to say to his colleagues. And as the camera is fixed high above the circle of Ministers, it generally catches only the top of their heads. It catches, for example, the new Council President, Finland's Finance Minister, Eero Heinäluoma. He is rather thin on top, and his pate has manifestly seen too much of Finland's summer sunshine. In contrast, the summer could do little to penetrate the consistently elegant mane of the French Minister, Thierry Breton.

The EU's Finance Ministers are once again addressing their business in public in the ugly Council building in Brussels. This has happened occasionally in the past, but, in accordance with a resolution of the EU Heads of State or Government, certain debates and decisions are, henceforth, in principle to be dealt with in open session. All EU citizens may now follow the discussions on the internet, putting a brake on some of the wilder speculation: did the Dutch Minister really give Germany another good telling-off? Was the Frenchman really quite that full of himself? And was it really the Poles and the Lithuanians who dragged the whole thing out?

Open sessions of the Council of Ministers are part of the EU's self-imposed 'transparency initiative', which is designed to bring Europe closer to its citizens. In the months ahead, the Finnish EU Presidency will be making a regular practice of broadcasting parts of Council meetings to the general public. Those who wish to do so should be able to follow the debates in the Council of Ministers. This Tuesday's practice run does, however, raise certain questions. Who could possibly want to listen in to a discussion compared with which any kind of exchange in the Bundestag or even in the European Parliament is compelling entertainment? And, above all: is it just as boring in the Council of Ministers when really important issues are on the table?

The first item on the agenda was the Presidency's programme of work for the next half-year — which Heinäluoma had already presented a number of times in recent days. More transparent tax systems, the continuation of various deficit proceedings, the action plan on financial services. Handing the floor to his colleagues, the Finn revealed endearing blind spots. Time and again he had to turn to his assistant to find out who was sitting where at the long meeting table. The delegations proceeded to present their prepared statements with, at best, muted enthusiasm. The Austrian Finance Under-Secretary, Alfred Finz, praised the remarkable results achieved by the outgoing Austrian Presidency. The Minister himself, Karl-Heinz Grasser, had preferred to stay at home. Clearly, what he had achieved in the last six months as Council President could not be outdone by anyone. Absent, too, was the German Finance Minister, Peer Steinbrück (SPD), who was busy battling in Berlin for the company taxation reform. At all events, his Under-Secretary, Thomas Mirow, fits in better with the sombre company in Brussels.

He reported on what the German Presidency was planning to do in the first half of 2007. Particular attention would be paid to 'improved lawmaking' and to 'lean and focused procedures for more effective coordination of economic policy'. A real boost, one imagines, to the flagging European convictions of people back home.

Discussion of the second public agenda item, namely preliminary discussion of an expanded mandate for the European Investment Bank (EIB) in respect of loans to Asia and Latin America, got off to a similar unemotional start. EU Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, Joaquín Almunia, read out a statement supporting expanded EIB powers. This was followed by a typically prolix intervention by the EIB President, Philippe Maystadt. Only then was there a sign that there might perhaps be an issue after all. Gerrit Zahn, the Netherlands Finance Minister, was convinced that the EIB was doing a genuinely useful job. But those who now wanted to expand its mandate to cover the entire world were manifestly forgetting that we already have a World Bank. 'We should focus our efforts on Europe.' Inevitably, this brought an immediate

response from Spain's Mr Selbes. He sees himself as Latin America's advocate in the EU and wants to see a wider development mandate for the EIB. But, for the time being, that run-in is as far as it gets — the Ministers have deferred a decision to a future meeting.

For the next, rather more delicate, agenda item, the report on the previous evening's Euro-group session, the public was once again excluded. And, in future, the Ministers will be continuing to take the substantive decisions behind closed doors. One delegate did not think that this was an entirely good idea. For him, there is something really to be gained from public debate: 'When meetings are held in public, no one listens anyway. The best thing would be to discuss and decide all the important issues in the public gaze. Then no one would notice.'