

Interview with André Dubois: the Presidency of the Council and the General Secretariat (Brussels, 8 December 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In concrete terms, the Council is made up of people who of their nature stay put, while the Presidency rotates and changes. So what happens when you have to deal with different interlocutors every six months? You work with the French for six months, and then you have more contact with the Germans for the next six months ... How do you provide for continuity when you have these constant changes every six months?

[André Dubois] Exactly, it is up to the Secretary-General and the Secretariat to provide that continuity. I think it works smoothly because first the Presidencies prepare for their presidency, which means many advance contacts with the Commission and with the Secretariat about the state of progress on the dossiers, and because we have regular briefings with the Presidency before all the meetings of the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the Council. We prepare outline papers for them, which set out the possible areas for compromise, and I would say that the Secretariat and the Presidencies form a team, the Secretary-General and the Presidencies form a team.

In general, the Presidencies' main objective is obviously to make progress on Community affairs rather than to defend national positions, and obviously in order to do so they cooperate closely with the Secretary-General of the Council and his colleagues, who in a sense make up the permanent element and who, in general, are probably aware of the possibilities of finding compromises and solutions that can help the Presidents. That is something the Commission probably finds more difficult to do, partly because of its institutional role — the Commission has a specific role, which is to submit proposals and defend them. It is well aware that at a given moment compromises will have to be reached, but in this regard it is not always able to abandon its initial proposals; but I must say that the crucial point that I have always emphasised to my colleagues is that the Secretariat has to cooperate closely with the Commission because we are all pursuing the same objective, which is to make progress. We therefore have very close relations with our colleagues in the Commission and we draft notes for the President before submitting possible compromises or solutions to him; we need to be assured that they will work. As for me personally, I have always cooperated very closely with my colleagues in the Commission, as also, I believe, with most of the Secretariat officials. After all, it is they who are the driving force that makes the Communities work, but sometimes they take risks. In the case of the Uruguay Round, I remember very well that the Foreign Affairs Minister, Mr Juppé, had turned that into a really divisive issue. We were aware that — to put it mildly — the Commission probably assessed things rather differently. We felt that a compromise was needed, that we could not accept the results as they stood, that this would not have worked, and that is what actually happened. I am just giving an example, but there are a great many other dossiers. But let me repeat that all this can only be done in close cooperation with the Commission. We always need assurances from the Commission that things are feasible.