

Interview with André Dubois: the powers and operation of the ECSC Special Council of Ministers (Brussels, 8 December 2006)

Source: Interview d'André Dubois / ANDRÉ DUBOIS, Étienne Deschamps.- Bruxelles: CVCE [Prod.], 08.12.2006. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:03:19, Couleur, Son original).

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Étienne Deschamps] I'd like to begin this interview by looking at your early years as a European official, which takes us back to the start of 1954, when you actually began your career in Luxembourg in the Secretariat of what was known at the time as the Special Council of Ministers of the ECSC. Can you remind us of the role of this newly created institution in Luxembourg, and how it operated?

[André Dubois] Thank you, Mr Deschamps. First, let me say how pleased I am to be taking part in this interview, which has given me an opportunity to recall quite a few memories of the early days of my career. And indeed, as you say, I began my career in Luxembourg, working for the Special Council of Ministers.

So what powers did the Special Council of Ministers have? As everybody knows, the ECSC was the first supranational community, and the one that was the most intensively supranational. It was the High Authority, an independent institution with nine members, which had the main decision-making power. The Council, for its part, was the forum in which the Member States and the High Authority coordinated their activities, since it was also the High Authority that was responsible for coal and steel policy, and the Member States retained responsibility for their countries' general economic policy. So coordination was required — and no doubt I shall be giving you an example shortly.

In addition to this, a number of the High Authority's decisions required either prior consultation with the Council or its assent, given unanimously or by a qualified majority. In such cases it really was a joint decision. And lastly, the third element, which was not explicitly included in the Council's powers, but which resulted from the circumstances, was that the Council of the ECSC was also the forum in which Ministers of Foreign Affairs discussed (at that time in which parallel negotiations were in progress on the EDC and the political Community) certain problems arising for the continuation of European integration and, in particular, Messina, which we shall be talking about shortly. This was on the occasion of a special Council of Ministers intended to find a successor for Jean Monnet, as you know.

As for how the Council operated, well, it was the standard mode of operation that we still see in the Council now — working parties, there was a coordinating body known as COCOR, the Coordination Committee, which anticipated the current Committee of Permanent Representatives, and was composed of senior officials from the capitals, and of course the Council itself. Incidentally, at that time the Council President held the position for three months — the presidency rotated every three months. So its mode of operation was absolutely standard for an organisation of this type.