

## Interview with Édith Cresson: the negotiations on the CAP and French farmers (Paris, 29 January 2008)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In 1981, two years later, you were appointed as Minister for Agriculture in the first government led by Pierre Mauroy. This brought you face-to-face with agricultural problems, in particular the spending and budget problems associated with the common agricultural policy. Could you remind us of the scale of the challenges involved?

[Édith Cresson] Yes, listen, I can assure you that the farming problems associated with the CAP and the negotiations in the Council of Ministers were relatively minor compared with the difficulties I encountered with the French farmers. There were endless demonstrations, extremely tough physical attacks, not to mention personal insults. When François Mitterrand asked me to be Minister for Agriculture he said: 'It is very tough because you have to negotiate [agricultural] prices all night in Brussels.' But I was already well aware that it was nothing compared to what awaited me in France. Anyway, to go back to the all-night talks, I found it quite amusing, with all these people round a table. I was careful not to drink, unlike some people who were drinking their fill of whisky. Walking around the corridors outside, it was like Sleeping Beauty's castle, with all these ministerial aides and assistants dozing on sofas and armchairs. It was an extraordinary sight. It was mainly a question of staying the course, and for the French Minister for Agriculture it was particularly difficult. Why? Because France produces all nature of goods: it grows rice in the Camargue, it produces wine, wheat, beet ... all sorts of things, and of course it also raises stock. So it is the only country which cannot negotiate by saying: 'I'll give you this in exchange for that,' because we cannot give ground on anything. All we can do is try to develop links with those who occasionally have similar interests to ours to try to form coalitions. So it was difficult but quite interesting. I managed to obtain the best agricultural prices France had ever had. It would be an exaggeration to say that the French farmers were grateful, but it was certainly a valuable experience for me and the negotiations were very interesting.

[Étienne Deschamps] Did you have the feeling that at that time it was more difficult to be Minister for Agriculture in France than ...

[Édith Cresson] ... than anywhere else.

[Étienne Deschamps] ... in Italy, in Spain, in the United Kingdom ...?

[Édith Cresson] Well, let me explain. Being Minister for Agriculture in France, particularly at that time ... it is still a bit like that but it is a lot easier now — for one thing prices have gone up a lot so there are no longer any problems. Or at least they are not the same sort of problems ...

[Étienne Deschamps] Yes, yes, yes.

[Édith Cresson] ... there are different problems. But being Minister for Agriculture in France is very difficult and I can tell you that it was also the first time that a woman had held the job. I had to deal with some extremely conservative people, with a lot of male chauvinism and rough behaviour, often pretty unruly, but I did get results.

[Étienne Deschamps] In those days how did France go about preparing its position for meetings such as the 'agricultural marathons'? Was there always prior ...

[Édith Cresson] Oh yes, always.

[Étienne Deschamps] ... I imagine so ...

[Édith Cresson] Yes, for all levels of negotiation.

[Étienne Deschamps] ... a whole series of meetings with the FNSEA ...

[Édith Cresson] Yes, of course.

[Étienne Deschamps] ... and the farming community?

[Édith Cresson] Yes, listen, in those days, when we [the Socialists] came to power in 1981, only one farmer's union, the FNSEA, was officially recognised. The others, in other words, the left-wing Paysans Travailleurs and Confédération Paysanne, which tended to be smaller farmers with smaller-scale structures, were not yet recognised by the authorities. The real Minister for Agriculture was the leader of the FNSEA, who would read out statements on the steps of the Ministry of Agriculture. Of course when I took office I put an end to that because it was ambiguous. There was the government and there were the unions. We held talks with the unions, all the unions, not just one of them. Of course they were furious. And there were no more press conferences on the steps of the Ministry of Agriculture. So relations were obviously very tense with the FNSEA and I had a lot of trouble. Having said that, when I moved on after a year and a half — and I certainly was not sorry to go — they were a bit sad because I had after all got good results and all in all things had gone quite well. They gradually got used to things.