

Interview with Édith Cresson: French policies in the late 1980s and the role played by François Mitterrand (Paris, 29 January 2008)

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[Étienne Deschamps] I should like us to turn to the decision-making process on the French side during the Community debates. I am referring particularly to the allocation of the various roles. Could you explain how, in practical terms, this allocation of roles worked between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Secretariat for European Affairs, Matignon and the Élysée Palace? How were these structures, these respective authorities organised so that, if possible, they might present a united defence of their position in the Council?

[Édith Cresson] Oh no, France always presents a united defence of its position. Anyway, governments are always united in defence of their position.

[Étienne Deschamps] But how did this preliminary harmonisation process take place?

[Édith Cresson] There is a working party called the SGCI, the General Secretariat of the Interministerial Committee, in which there are representatives from the Ministries concerned, then there follows an arbitration phase, after which that is the position adopted by France and it will not be changed later on. So that is all well organised.

[Étienne Deschamps] And who is responsible for the final arbitration? The Foreign Ministry, the Minister?

[Édith Cresson] When there are serious problems it is referred to the Prime Minister or even to the Élysée, because, naturally, the Élysée always keeps an eye on European affairs. Both the Élysée and the Foreign Ministry, the Quai d'Orsay. The Ministry, because it is a secretariat; when I was Minister it was a Ministry of European Affairs with full powers, the Ministry of European Affairs was a bit stuck between the Élysée and the Quai d'Orsay. So you are not always aware of what is going on and, in my case, I concentrated particularly on the issues that I had to deal with: Schengen, preparations for the Single Act, the issue of the Japanese car industry — I recall another issue, which may seem rather minor but is most important, and that is the export of works of art. That gave rise to a dreadful battle; that is to say, together with the Italians, we were in favour of requiring an authorisation in order to export from Europe works of art of a certain quality and value. On the other hand, the British were in favour of these circulating freely, and whether they left for the United States was of no importance. We therefore had some extremely stormy debates, and the Germans took the side of the British. We had some extremely tough exchanges. I left, really, really angry, saying that we still had things that needed to be preserved. That was very difficult.

[Étienne Deschamps] And on a matter like that there were important debates, there was tension.

[Édith Cresson] There were very important debates. Yes. And tension.

[Étienne Deschamps] At the French level, in Paris itself, there was tension between ...

[Édith Cresson] Above all in Brussels.

[Étienne Deschamps] ... in Brussels, yes.

[Édith Cresson] No, no. In Paris everybody was in favour of banning the export of works of art of a certain value. But there you are. It was something that was very difficult, yet we came to an agreement nonetheless. Each time it was a fierce battle, but when you fought you sometimes won. We won several of these battles, which were, after all, fought in the interest of France, of course, but also in the general interest of Europe as well.

[Étienne Deschamps] When arbitration takes place in Paris so that a position might be defended in Brussels, how important was the role — how shall I put it? — of personal relations in helping or impeding harmonisation?

[Édith Cresson] Do you mean within the French system?

[Étienne Deschamps] Yes.

[Édith Cresson] Just like anywhere else. Personal relations always play a role.

[Étienne Deschamps] In the case at that time of someone like Élisabeth Guigou, with Roland Dumas, with François Mitterrand. Is there a personal chemistry that can help or ...?

[Édith Cresson] The time when I was Minister for European Affairs was a crucial period because it was the moment when the Berlin Wall came down. I mean that it was something truly gigantic. And François Mitterrand took everything in hand. That was quite natural. After all, it was the future of France and of Europe which was at stake. One of François Mitterrand's aims was to have the single currency. The Germans, at that time, did not want the single currency; they wanted to keep the Mark, and I recall that Mitterrand said to us, in his rather crafty way: 'The Germans can't bear to be parted from their Mark. You must not hold it against them: it's all they've got.' It was a wicked remark. But it was true to a point nonetheless: they had not had to vote and the euro was decided upon without them. But in this case there was a compensation. Firstly, not to oppose unification, which was obviously agreed to. It would have been an illusion to oppose it, and above all, it was the Oder-Neisse frontier, because the Germans do not know what a frontier is — neither physically nor psychologically. It's a nation that just goes. For François Mitterrand, the Oder-Neisse frontier was therefore something absolutely vital. We negotiated that and we got the euro; then there was another issue, which was that of the former Yugoslavia. You had the Germans with Slovenia and Croatia wanting these countries to enter. For all these reasons, then, François Mitterrand, who above all set store by the euro because firstly, it was the fact that there would be no more devaluation, and secondly, on the political level it was highly important because it was a major integrating factor for the States of the European Union, so this involved some give and take.

This all means that the great strategy, the overall policy of France was, after all, decided by the Élysée. I dealt with those issues that François Mitterrand judged to be minor, like cars or works of art. Which are of some importance, naturally, but in the end it was he who handled the great political issues. So there you are, it all went ahead; Roland Dumas in the Quai d'Orsay took care of that. He had a relationship with Genscher on a personal level and it all went through the least badly possible, let's say. Later on it was said that we had gone too quickly, that we had admitted all the countries of Eastern Europe much too quickly, before the institutions could be modified. That is all perfectly true, but we could not say: 'Dear countries of Eastern Europe. You are clearly European historically and culturally, but we don't want anything to do with you for the moment.' To be fair, it was difficult. So they were admitted without our having the structures. And we still haven't got them. And, what is more serious, we still haven't got a consensus on economic and financial policy. In my opinion this is even more important than the political structures, for you can always appoint a Mr This or Mr That, a Minister for Foreign Affairs — as an aside, one wonders what he would have done over the war against Iraq ... But with regard to all that, I have the impression that we want to appoint people to these positions, but the fundamental problem remains: 'What are we here to do, together?' And as for that — on the economic level of job preservation and of the need for Europe to survive this globalisation process that is, in some ways, terrifying — I don't have the impression that we have made much progress.