Interview with Paul Collowald: his career at the Press Service of the EEC Commission (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] How did you come to work with Robert Marjolin in 1959 at the European Commission Press Service?

[Paul Collowald] When the European Economic Community, or to put it briefly, the Common Market, first saw the light of day in Brussels along with Euratom, this was in 1958 and nothing much was actually going on yet. The administration was being set up and I was in Luxembourg. But one fine day I received a telephone call from Brussels telling me 'Look here, an information system is being set up in Brussels. You are in Luxembourg, working in a service that has only just been set up. At some point, our superiors, our leaders are going to ask the question: Who should do what and how?' So I replied: 'Right, and so?' 'Yes, we shall be telephoning you because here in Brussels we are examining how, for the Common Market and Euratom, we can deal with the issue of relations with the press. A few press releases, what shall we do, to what end, and also some coordination with the ECSC, which is already well established and has its own activities. At the same time contacts will be maintained with the same six Member States; it is the same venture. So this is now being examined and maybe you should come to Brussels to take part in the discussions.'

Right. So in Brussels they explained to me that there were two concepts under consideration. I shall ignore Euratom, although it is more or less the same system, because it is more specialised. Let us take the Commission of Walter Hallstein, who was of course the initiator of the Commission as it still exists today. It is the continuation. There are two schools of thought. This can happen in all the disciplines, in medicine, in law and in relations with the media. One school says: 'We have nine Members of the Commission, the President, two or three Vice-Presidents; it is a collegiate body.' That was the definition: the Commission led by Walter Hallstein was a college. Then, you can attach to it — I'll use the classic term — a press attaché, whom you can place in the Private Office of the Minister — or whatever corresponds to this for the Commissioner — and then he will maintain relations with the press, just as a press attaché does. Alternatively, it is a team, the group, the Spokesperson's Service, which speaks on behalf of the college. There was therefore a double problem. The collegiate body team and how things would be organised vis-à-vis the press. They had not resolved the issue. I said: 'All right, we'll see.' And then I returned to Luxembourg. I got on with my work, and then one day I heard from the Private Office of Robert Marjolin, who was the French Vice-President: 'President Hallstein, Vice-President Mansholt,' who was the other Vice-President, 'and Vice-President Marjolin, have finally opted for a spokesperson's service, one that is relatively small, to be at the disposal of the Commission. Yet there shall be the usual distribution of tasks: the French Vice-President especially needs a French person who knows France and the French press well, but who will also work alongside the other journalists in order to explain what he is doing. He will be responsible for the economy, the currency and economic forecasts. As for Mansholt, he will explain what the common agricultural policy is but he will be responsible more particularly to Mansholt as an individual, and at the same time to the Directorate-General for Agriculture. That was more or less the arrangement.

'Very well,' said I. 'Well, Vice-President Marjolin remembers reading articles by a certain Paul Collowald for years in *Le Monde*. It was sometimes quite interesting because *Le Monde* was not very pro-European and the tone was intriguing. What became of him?' The reply was: 'He is in Luxembourg.' 'But it cannot be the same one; that is not possible. He was correspondent for *Le Monde*, what would he be doing …? I shan't quote all the eminent Luxembourg dailies, but it is not quite the same … It is most odd.' 'No, no, he is working for Jacques Rabier in the information service.' Then, since they all knew one another — thanks to the Planning Commission — in the end Robert Marjolin poached me from Jacques Rabier, who was told: 'Look here, Paul Collowald wants to go back to his journalist colleagues on the other side of the fence and he is going to be the spokesman for Robert Marjolin, part of the team that is currently being put together.' That is why I did not stay in Luxembourg for very long; I left for Brussels. We started work that spring, but I was officially appointed in November 1959 when we had finalised what became the Press Service, which functioned for a long time using a working language that was agreed on with the journalists in quite a friendly manner. What we said to our Belgian friends was: 'Quite frankly, the spokesman' — it was an Italian diplomat, Giorgio Mocchina, — 'speaks French, but it is not his mother tongue. We shan't start

discussing the problems of Flemish and so forth. By consensus, the working language shall be French.'

Fine. That worked well; there were five of us, then ten, and we created the Press Service. Very soon the German press, given its structure, was the greatest in number and was also noteworthy in qualitative terms; it helped me improve my German because I spent part of the day speaking to German journalists in my office. This supplemented what was said in the press room, where one sometimes had only what might be termed a 'passive' command of French. This enabled us to have French as a working language in the press room for many years. Obviously, for our Italian, Dutch and German friends this was sometimes rather difficult but it was taken in good spirit. We all spoke several languages. Some spoke English, others Italian and this service evolved; in this way we were able to help successive Presidents, since after Walter Hallstein there was Jean Rey, the Belgian President, and then an Italian, Malfatti, followed by Ortoli, who was French.

Each time it was different, and I had the honour and the pleasure, as I might say somewhat mischievously, to be for some months the spokesman for the German Vice-President, Haferkamp, because at the time of the enlargement, the President of the European Commission was a Frenchman, François-Xavier Ortoli. As a result, there was no longer a Vice-President dealing with the economy, finance, etc., and it was Willy Haferkamp, the German Commissioner and Vice-President of the Commission, who took responsibility for the economy, the currency, and so on. This was the sector with which the Germans were most closely involved. So his Head of Private Office telephoned me, saying most delicately: 'Might you not be prepared to come?' because this was the first instance where a Commissioner of one nationality did not have a spokesman of the same nationality. As luck would have it, since I had good spoken German, it worked very well and for several months I continued working with the accredited journalists, basically doing what I had done with Robert Marjolin and later on with Raymond Barre, the two French Vice-Presidents, since Raymond Barre had succeeded Robert Marjolin. I continued my work in this area; then owing to the effects of enlargement, the Directorate-General for Information, which had become independent, afterwards came to be headed by Jacques Rabier, as it was established over the years.

There were then successively three spokesmen for the three executives. In the terminology of the time: the ECSC, the Common Market and Euratom. Afterwards, there was the merger which left just one Spokesperson's Service and one Directorate-General for Information. It was at that moment that I was asked to become Director for Information. So I said goodbye to my journalist friends, whom I had met every day for the press briefing, in order to take charge of another aspect of European information: namely, to try to delegate our activities to offices in each of our countries, in Paris, Bonn, and so forth. This was also a major undertaking, which in some circumstances was not an easy one since, in the case of my own country on certain occasions — particularly during the period of General de Gaulle — issuing information to the public in France was looked upon unfavourably — and with Michel Debré as well, for he had some very clear ideas on the subject — because apparently the Republic would be endangered were Brussels to issue information in France.

So, constrained by this somewhat simplistic policy, we had to solve some very interesting problems in 1978 and 1979, in the first European elections, to try to say: 'Europe even exists where you live.' These were the first attempts to show how the various regional, agricultural and social funds had a direct impact on job creation and on the changes taking place in society. This is also why in the course of those years I both remained very close to my origins as a journalist, since I understood those techniques, and at the same time I performed my other task, that of popularising information — a fine discipline because in an attempt to simplify your message, sometimes you deform it, whereas if it is couched in technical jargon, you will not be understood.