


Interview with Paul Collowald: the development of the Commission’s information policy (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] How did the European Commission gradually develop its information policy?

[Paul Collowald] The means of information possessed by the Commission, to sum up very briefly, in the beginning comprised the three spokesman's services of the ECSC, Euratom and the Common Market, plus one joint service. There were four of them. A merger took place, so then there was only one spokesman's group because there was only one executive — as it was called at the time — and one Directorate-General for Information. The job of the service, the spokesman's service, concerned the accredited press in Brussels, but then what was happening in our various countries? It was therefore necessary to think about some form of decentralisation, and gradually, it's a fairly long story, gradually in each capital city a press and information office of the Commission was set up.

At first, these offices were at the disposal of the public, journalists, teachers and students, then gradually a minimum of documentary material was accumulated, and I recall that the first dissertations and theses were able to use the first resources in some of our offices in the capital cities. Later, all this gained importance and we had to resolve this dialectic, between the centre and the periphery. This was because, in Brussels, there was the daily accredited press meeting and we had to find some system to inform the offices. And, to supplement this system quite separately from the press and information offices in the capitals of the six countries, and later, in line with enlargement, of the other countries, there was also within the delegations — because in the larger countries of the world the Commission had a delegation whose function was commercial or economic, which gradually became a type of embassy, naturally in Washington, in Tokyo, and in Canada as well — at that time, within this system, there was a kind of commercial adviser, but in the larger delegations there was an office, acting as an antenna, a press and information office, which was controlled by the director for information — myself, at that time.

So I possessed both a network within the Community and a system for third countries. Obviously, the result was that what left Brussels had to be adapted accordingly and information had to be sent out that might be of interest to one of the Community countries on the one hand and to third countries on the other. That is how options were gradually developed in the name of decentralisation and according to the offices, because in each country the needs were rather different and within the various press and information offices, depending on recruitment, there might be journalists or no journalists ... So some offices had closer relations with the press than others. But, generally speaking, the system worked in much the same way, except, of course, that the range of information that we could send to Washington and to Tokyo was not what was sent to Paris, Bonn or Rome. This all meant that work to acquire a good level of knowledge needed to be done at the outset, namely in Brussels. 'What is happening and what shall we tell our colleagues?' And I gradually put in place a system based on two things — I should say that I have never patented it — but the first was that I asked Émile Noël, Secretary-General of the Commission, for permission to be present as deputy spokesman at the cabinet meetings, of all the cabinets of all the Members of the Commission that met on Monday afternoons in order to prepare for the Wednesday meeting. Because the Members of the Commission met in session, like a government. The Belgian Government sat on Fridays, the French, I believe, on Wednesdays and the Commission sat every Wednesday. Therefore, beforehand, every Monday afternoon, there was the muster of all the Heads of Cabinet of the Members of the Commission. And I was present. There was, of course, the agenda and an assumption of the decisions that were to be taken on the Wednesday. I was therefore able to study the dossiers and discuss things with the Heads of Cabinet and have the security of being informed; then there was the aspect: 'What is stirring? Careful! It's sensitive!' When I asked Émile Noël, he said: 'Yes, it's basically a good idea.'

That was the first part, which gave form progressively to something that, at the time, became famous, but no one knows this now: it was known as the 'Tuesday telex'. The Tuesday telex was ... — and my secretary knew this well — every Tuesday morning I dictated a telex destined for all the offices to tell them: 'Here is what the Commission has decided; these are the sensitive points.' This went to Washington, to Tokyo, with, of course, varying adjustments. Its effect was that our colleagues began to think: 'This is great! We're in on the action!' It is a pleasure for a Commission official who happens to be in some far away capital, when he

meets Ministers, or civil servants, or journalists, to be able to say: 'Look here, I can let you know that on Wednesday the Commission ...' Right.

The other aspect of the initiatives I had taken was that, in each of the offices, I gradually had to identify a sort of privileged partner who would be the one who could also let us know: 'Look, here in France some strange things are happening. Give me some points to use in debates with *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde* and so forth.' Incidentally, there were some tricky aspects: in some countries, since there were accredited journalists, the newspapers were well represented, whereas in France for a very long period we had only four or five correspondents. At that time the Germans had 25. There, too, we had to take care not to annoy the official journalists, who might have had the impression that we were up to something behind their backs with their editors in Frankfurt, Düsseldorf or elsewhere.

We therefore had to walk a fine line, and we did so for a while, which meant that owing to my experience of local needs, when in 1978 — because they were due to be held in '78 — the elections by direct universal suffrage burst onto the scene — in the end these elections took place in 1979 — I had thought about all this and it was extremely simple. European citizens were to go to the polls for the first time. They were going to elect an MEP, but first — this is always the case in France, for example, and elsewhere — it is a national list, so there was no direct contact as there was in other regional or national instances in other elections. That was a first difficulty, but at least: 'What is Europe? Does it exist? Why? Is it useful? Am I concerned, personally?' Concerned, perhaps, but equally so in Aquitaine, Alsace, Milan or Düsseldorf? So I said to myself: 'I'm going to set up a pilot project. I shall start with my compatriots, because that is the hardest bit.' It was the hardest, because DATAR, which was responsible for spatial planning, and the French regional prefectures made it very difficult to spread information on what are known as Structural Funds, regional, agricultural and social funds, which after all represent something concrete. I came to the following conclusion. The direct elections, the citizens, but Europe; yes, of course, I would find common ground there, because there were initiatives. But this had to be proved. And at this point I realised that I was fighting a battle on two fronts. On the internal front, I had to persuade my colleagues in the other Directorates-General, who tended to be rather secretive about classified proceedings and other matters — pretexts, really — I had to convince them that we were there to serve European citizens and that their work would be more worthwhile and put to better use if it could be presented to the European public. We were having the first elections. I had to make the breakthrough there, and then, externally, I needed to find a practical solution in order to bring in the offices. I got the Paris office involved and one of my colleagues came to spend a few days in Brussels. He collected information from the various Directorates-General, and, taking the French cuttings regarding the 22 regions, for each region we prepared a sort of brochure — a very simple one; I think we just printed them out on the Roneo. A brochure saying: 'Here you are: for the Aquitaine region, the Alsace region, the Lorraine region, here is what is being done. This or that Directorate-General, agriculture, the Social Fund.' It was utterly simple. There was no need to bring in a team of consultants to arrive at it. It was Columbus's egg. We went on like this, and meanwhile I learnt that over the years each region henceforth acquired its own extremely detailed, almost luxurious brochure — sometimes with a preface, not only written by the current President of the European Commission in Brussels, but also one by the regional authorities in a *Land*; in Spain there was even an edition for Madrid and the rest of Spain, but in Catalonia it was in Spanish — Madrid Spanish — and Catalan.

Therefore, as for the diversification that we had initiated at that time, I had the pleasure later on of seeing that it had been further developed. But then it was an event that took place during the pioneering phase, when we had to invent something for the direct elections, thinking of the citizens, of Europe — 'It exists but how and where?' This needed simple answers. I should say that it was a way to articulate very simply information that was regionalised and decentralised, and we definitely had a certain number of results over the years; but these made me think, and I believe that one day I suggested this during a meeting, that every human enterprise seeks at some particular time a logo, a symbol. Each of us put forward a suggestion. 'Ah,' I said, 'I propose the stone of Sisyphus.' 'Very well, but why?' I said, 'Look here, there are cartoonists, illustrators. I propose the stone of Sisyphus, for with one hand you push Sisyphus's stone up the hill every morning, and with the other you dunk your croissant in your breakfast coffee. Every morning you have to start again, start again because the generations succeed one another, and on a particular day Mr or Mrs Smith has not read the papers; they come home tired, that's work, but it's quite normal. And each time you meet

people at a dinner in town or on the train or on the bus and you hear: “But what is Europe? Nobody tells us anything about Europe.” Ah, I see.’ That is why I still carry on fighting; these are drops of water, gathered in order to approach the citizen and explain: ‘What is Europe, and why?’ There I have had tremendous luck, for having been a journalist, and having been spokesman for two seven-year terms, with Robert Marjolin and Raymond Barre after him, I know the subject very well. But I was also in contact with the founders; Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet. I can therefore reply to people: ‘But as someone in such-and-such a sector, this concerns you. Teachers, midwives, accountants, you’ll see what is going to happen.’ Now that interests them; they are concerned. But very often people say to me: ‘Yes, but you seem to know a lot about it. How did this happen? Why? How can it work?’ At that point I am holding both ends of the chain, and I have been struck, yet again, by something very simple. You must not just talk to people about how the institutions work — that does not interest them, it bores them, it annoys them. You cannot talk to them about the institutions. You have to reply: ‘Right, you’re an accountant, you’re a teacher, you’re a doctor, you’re a lawyer.’ Of course, that is daily life, but firstly, you must not take people for fools; secondly, they also think of other matters. I know that sometimes one says: ‘You must give people a dream.’ You have to give young people a dream — you must not deceive them; you must not manipulate them. But during my youth, we did dream after the war of how to make peace, and how to shape it. It was a form of utopia, an ideal, but nonetheless we managed to make some changes. Otherwise we should not be here now talking about the Convention and about what is going to happen in a future Europe as a result of enlargement.