

## Interview with Édith Cresson: the Santer Commission (Paris, 29 January 2008)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Between 1995 and 1999 you were a Member of the European Commission. Can you remind us of the circumstances surrounding your appointment and the stages by which you took up this post? How did you prepare for your arrival in Brussels and how would you describe your experience of this new role as Commissioner?

[Édith Cresson] Well, I had already resigned from the Government before I became Prime Minister because I considered that the European struggle was not being conducted by the authorities as I should have wished, so I established a consultancy to help French businesses to set up in the new countries of Eastern Europe, where we were grossly under-represented. The Germans were widely present but we were not, so I thought that this would be worthwhile, and indeed for those countries as well, to be able to rely on other countries than just Germany. The firm I was directing was going very successfully, and when the President of the Republic summoned me to the Élysée Palace to say: 'It would be a good idea if you agreed to enter the Commission,' I thought: I shall be able to carry on with this work, which I have been conducting in the general interest of Europe, in particular with this new Europe — it was a very good opportunity. Then, when President Santer called me in and proposed that I take on the post of Commissioner for Research, Education and Youth, I considered it to be the best post. I found it the best; much more interesting for me than Competition.

[Étienne Deschamps] Allow me to interrupt you here. How precisely did this allocation of portfolios take place? Is it a particular President, in this case Jacques Santer, who says to each of the candidate Commissioners: I am offering you this or that. Did he alone make the choice or had there already been negotiations with the respective governments that preferred to obtain this or that type of portfolio for their respective candidate?

[Édith Cresson] Yes, of course, in the case of France, it was Balladur who was Prime Minister. They had asked for Competition, which was requested merely for the record since, as I said, we shall never get it, and anyway in my case it is not something that appealed to me personally. On the other hand, when Santer offered me that portfolio, I thought it was great. It was immediately criticised in France as not being important enough. However, it is the third largest budget of the Union and, really, if the future does not lie in research, I don't know where it does lie. It is really great, research and youth, there's nothing better, so I accepted this portfolio enthusiastically. I was very happy to do so.

[Étienne Deschamps] And once you were inside the Commission, did the institution correspond to the image that you had held of it when you were outside it, both as an MEP and then as Minister, Junior Minister and Prime Minister? Or did you, on the contrary, discover an institution that fundamentally you did not know very well, from the inside at any rate?

[Édith Cresson] I had got to know the institution of the Commission during the Presidency of Jacques Delors; thus I was aware that there was a lot of ill feeling towards the French because Jacques Delors and his Private Office had directed it in a fairly authoritarian fashion. It was said that there were two German Private Offices, but one of them was Prussian! That of Delors. It was true that it was a Prussian administration, but, after all, that is not so bad. There is a Prussian tradition of administration that has shown what it is capable of — one that resembles the French tradition, and was copied from it, by the way — but with a side that is a shade more authoritarian, of course. So, the Private Office of Delors with its efficiency — after all, it was they who realised the single currency in Schengen, which is quite something — yes, the internal market is a gigantic step forwards. Not many have been taken since. This Private Office, as a result of its fairly authoritarian practices, was somewhat criticised. By the English, naturally, who found it a rather heavy-handed means of running an administration. Yet in the case of a large administration, it has to be run with a degree of authority, otherwise it will not work.

The successor to Delors was Mr Santer, who was anything but authoritarian, to put it mildly. So, it was ... there were some strong personalities within the Commission; there were some extremely competent people, but there was no — how shall I put it? — no doctrine, no overall design, no vision. There was no vision.

There had always been Mitterrand and Kohl at the beginning, then, later on, that was over and so there was neither Delors, nor Mitterrand, nor Kohl. It is my opinion that from that absence, from that void, stemmed the resentment against France, the internal rivalries, the personal ambitions, and Parliament starting to stretch out its wings as well: all that gave rise to an extraordinary state of disorder. Hence the crisis that it produced and from which I suffered personally a great deal, because I personally came under severe attack as a French woman, as a former Prime Minister who was regarded as arrogant — which really is not a characteristic of mine so much as someone wanting to succeed, naturally, and having succeeded in many of the tasks allotted to me. I successfully dealt with a large number of dossiers that were within my remit. But one thing that I learned was that it is not so much what one does that counts, it is not so much having brought one's dossiers to a successful conclusion, as the capacity to deal with and get along with the stars in Parliament. The stars are the ones who have been put there by their countries. I have not yet quite understood whether this was done in the interest of the country or in the personal interest of these eminent figures. I would lean towards the second hypothesis. But in any case, I came across people who, right from the start, were extremely aggressive. This was something that I had not expected at all. I appeared before the Parliamentary Committee for Education, then that of Research. An Italian was leading the Research Committee, and he was good. That was satisfactory. At the Education Committee, however, they were Germans, especially German women. I mean to say that the women were particularly aggressive. And also the Flemish. Both nationalities. An extraordinary aggressiveness.

[Étienne Deschamps] To what do you attribute this?

[Édith Cresson] I don't know.

[Étienne Deschamps] To the fact that you were a woman?

[Édith Cresson] Yes, I think so.

[Étienne Deschamps] To the fact that you were French?

[Édith Cresson] Yes, French, certainly.

[Étienne Deschamps] That you were a Socialist?

[Édith Cresson] Yes, Socialist as well. They were all right wing ...

[Étienne Deschamps] That you were a former Prime Minister?

[Édith Cresson] Yes, all these things. It was just too much.

[Étienne Deschamps] It was an accumulation of all these?

[Édith Cresson] It was too much. Yes, it was too much. I recall that there was a woman who came from the German minority in Belgium — it was then that I discovered that there was a German minority, which, by the way, was exactly like the right-wing Germans, the CDU. I had discovered a universe that I did not know existed. In our countries we all possess a collective unconscious against which we struggle, and in my case I was brought up to detest Germany. I spent years telling myself 'No, no, they have changed; it is not the same any longer. Everything I have been told is untrue.' I wanted to believe it. I had met plenty of people from these communities who were pleasant and open. You could work with them. Particularly among German intellectuals there is a depth of intelligence which in the field of research I find most interesting. They do not spend their time engaging in small talk, as they do in France, you know, in idle chatter. They go to the heart of the matter. I found this most interesting. Yet alongside these qualities, which are considerable, I perceived a sort of aggressiveness.

[Étienne Deschamps] A petty-mindedness?

[Édith Cresson] Yes, petty-mindedness and a wish to wound that stunned me. The English, well, they pursue their own interests, at least that is quite clear. They do not seek to do harm for harm's sake. Yes, that's it. But there, I witnessed something that staggered me and rekindled in me thoughts or emotions or impressions that I thought I had definitively put behind me, and this left me with a very bitter taste in my mouth. Really.