

## Interview with Nicole Fontaine: the European Parliament Committee on Budgetary Control (Brussels, 5 February 2008)

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[Étienne Deschamps] During your term of office as President, you were involved, if I might put it like this, in the work and in the control that the Committee on Budgetary Control wanted to exercise. The Cocobu. It is a term that is rather barbaric, but can you tell us about it and describe the issues surrounding this possible control over budgetary matters by ...?

[Nicole Fontaine] Yes, incidentally the Committee on Budgetary Control had had an important role in the overthrow of the Santer Commission because, having discovered anomalies in the actions of a number of the Members of the Commission — once again, and not just Mrs Cresson — they had asked for explanations that they did not receive. And when Mr Prodi formed his team, when he was appointed President of the Commission and I was given the role of President of the European Parliament, I must say that a number of colleagues, especially in the Cocobu, the famous Committee on Budgetary Control, would not have been averse to putting that off, yes. And they began to try to make trouble. That was a period that was a little crazy. So, it must be said, that was certainly one of the most politicised periods that we experienced in the European Parliament. Because Parliament, and especially those within my group, felt that it was not right for the President of the Commission to be essentially left wing when Parliament was mostly right wing. So you see that all that was part of the same political maturity, the European Parliament's graduation to political maturity, and a strong awareness that it was not right, and nobody but Mr Barroso could have ... unless they had the same profile, if you like, at the moment of Mr Barroso's appointment ...

[Étienne Deschamps] At any rate, it was necessary to have someone of the same political allegiance.

[Nicole Fontaine] Of course. The EPP would not have accepted for a second time the fact that the President of the Commission should be appointed, even though it gave its agreement — they did not make a fuss, but even so it remained something that was ... It remained, and then the memory that when the Santer Commission was overthrown, the European Parliament rose to prominence, people talked a lot about it, and after all the same causes could have produced the same effects without the realisation that it could have been disastrous, and of course I braced myself, I really ...

[Étienne Deschamps] What role can the President of the European Parliament play, aware that within this Cocobu there are certain waverers who are prepared to go to great lengths, to dig up the hatchet once again? How can the President calm the troops?

[Nicole Fontaine] Well, firstly by disowning them. I remember having written very severe letters to Mrs Stauner; very, very severe letters along the lines of: 'You are either saying too much or not enough. The accusations that you are making are very serious. Either you are able to prove them or you say nothing. But as President, I will not accept rumours.' And, working actively with a wonderful woman, who unfortunately has now passed away — it was Loyola de Palacio, who was Vice-President of the Commission, responsible for relations with Parliament. The two of us worked closely towards an agreement of good conduct between our institutions. 'Agreement of good conduct', I use that term to give you an idea — we did not call it that, but it was ...

[Étienne Deschamps] The framework agreement.

[Nicole Fontaine] That's right, it was the framework agreement. It was difficult, very difficult. We spent on it the time that we had to, the time that was necessary.

[Étienne Deschamps] Why was it difficult? Did you have the impression that there was no real conviction at either side of the table?

[Nicole Fontaine] Well, because my room for manoeuvre was ... We couldn't humiliate the Commission. Commissioner Prodi, President Prodi could not accept that the Commission should be humiliated. And even Mrs de Palacio had a high opinion of the Commission. So we really had to find methods which would mean

that neither of the two institutions would be humiliated but which would oil the wheels sufficiently that it would work well, and now this agreement works perfectly well, and relations are back on a good footing, absolutely, I believe that ... With maybe a few resurgences, such as those that I mentioned earlier regarding Commissioner Buttiglione.

[Étienne Deschamps] From the Commission's side.

[Nicole Fontaine] Things very nearly became extremely heated.