

Farewell address given by Eugenio Plaja as the Permanent Representative of Italy (18 September 1980)

Caption: Farewell address delivered by Eugenio Plaja, Permanent Representative of Italy to the European Communities from April 1976 to September 1980. The diplomat emphasises the role of Coreper as the 'basis of the structure of the Council'.

Source: Archives historiques des Communautés européennes, Florence, Villa Il Poggiolo. Dépôts, DEP. Emanuele Gazzo, EG. L'évolution des institutions et organes de la Communauté, EG-45.

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Address given by HE Ambassador Eugenio Plaja, 18 September 1980

It is the custom, when people part company, rapidly to take stock of the past and to cast a glance at the future. I assure you, I shall not go on at length. At all events, and apart from the fact that, by temperament, I tend not to make predictions, I hardly feel in a position to discuss the future since I am now withdrawing both from active diplomacy and from my present post.

For nearly four and a half years, I have taken part in the activities of Coreper, having become the oldest of its representatives in terms of not only age but also length of service, with the exception, of course, of the permanent fixtures! I still feel that I was fortunate to be a member of a privileged collegiate body that is one of a kind.

I have spent much of my career in multilateral diplomacy. I do not know of any other body that creates such intimacy, friendship and sincerity among its participants as Coreper; and, when I say participants I naturally include our friends in the Commission and the Council. That is certainly not to the result of the frequency or length of our meetings, whether formal or informal, nor to the scale or depth of the issues on which we work. It results from something quite different: I sincerely believe that the special link that has come into being between us is the clear awareness that we are working towards a common ideal and that the work carried out by Coreper is of capital importance for the attainment of that ideal.

Over the past few years, the Community has experienced many ups and downs. I would not use the word crisis. In that context, let me remind you of the subtle etymological analysis of the term 'crisis' made with such wit and on a note of optimism by His Excellency Ambassador Jean-Marie Soutou. In his farewell address he referred to the original meaning of the word in Greek (crisis = decision) and to its use in medicine. Yet I think that we would be denying reality — and, therefore, doing no service to our common ideal — if we did not admit that, recently, things have not gone and are not going very well in the Community.

True, whenever there is a change of President, his successor lists the achievements of the outgoing President, and the overall list may look long. Leaving aside, however, the kindness customarily shown during these ritual occasions, how many of those achievements represent genuine and substantial progress? How many, on the other hand, are no more than routine Community achievements? And, lastly, how many were in fact attempts to escape from a difficult situation? It is not a matter of interpreting the facts in an optimistic or pessimistic way. As something of an optimist, I feel, on the whole, that we must be honest enough to admit — and here I am using a term employed by my friend Emile Noël in a broad sense — the wheels of Europe are grinding and spinning as though their driving force was decreasing or weakening. At all events, we recently witnessed a Community event that dramatically drew attention to the situation and to the need for a review which it is up to the Commission to undertake but which will soon involve all those who are taking part in the European integration process.

I am convinced, in fact I am certain, that this fundamental exercise that the Community is about to undertake will succeed. If it were to fail, the consequences that this would have for the life of the Community and Europe's international influence would be so serious that I will not even consider that possibility. In my view, the road to success must involve a new balance in Community policies.

Oh, I hear you say, here is that boring old de Plaja trying to teach us the virtues of convergence again! Let me tell you in simpler terms why I am so convinced of that need.

It is certain that European integration must be what we usually define in our reports and speeches as the political will to move forward. I do not doubt that this will exists in all our countries, and I certainly mean all. But let us look truth in the face: that political will is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Perhaps I could put it another way: the political will in our democratic countries develops in parallel to the views of the general public and the economic players who, in their turn, reflect tangible interests. If the Economic Community is to survive and prosper, each Member State must, therefore, be able to derive from its participation in the Community a sufficient and appropriate amount of tangible interest. That is not a

mercenary view, but a realistic one. As things stand, I believe that the differences between the interests of the individual countries are too pronounced in regard to their participation in the Community. Anyone who supports European unity must, therefore, want to see a rapprochement. That rapprochement must not be achieved from the top down, i.e. by scaling down the most obvious interests and, in that sense, casting doubt on the Community acquis, but from the bottom up, i.e. by emphasising the least obvious interests. I think that the only way to achieve that result is to expand Community policies and establish a new balance among them. However, I welcome any other solutions, if they exist, provided the objective remains the same.

Let me now make a few comments about Coreper. I have often asked myself whether it is playing its role fully and effectively! I am sure that you have done the same. Of course, the answer depends on how that role is perceived. To say, as stated in our founding Treaties, that Coreper 'shall be responsible for preparing the work of the Council and for carrying out the tasks assigned to it by the Council' can mean everything or nothing, depending on what the words 'preparing' and 'carrying out' are taken to mean. As you know, I take very seriously Coreper, its responsibilities and its powers in the context of the Council's functions.

What are the main functions which the Council performs? It seems to me that the Council is the forum for permanent and continuous negotiation of the decisions that it has to take, in accordance with the method and with the participation of the Commission, as provided in the Treaty. The negotiations take place at various levels, ranging from the technical to the more specifically political level. I am convinced that Coreper can and must be the cornerstone of that process of negotiation.

However, the influence and importance of a negotiating body depend on the powers assigned to the negotiators. I have the impression that, perhaps to varying degrees, we do not have enough margin for negotiation. Moreover, have not our superiors themselves often stressed the need to strengthen Coreper's powers, even if they have not taken effective action to do so?

I sometimes wonder whether it is not precisely that sense of frustration, based on the inadequate negotiating powers that we are given, that quite often leads us, at least during our formal meetings, punctiliously to follow the instructions we receive, which are often of a technical nature, rather than seeking a balanced compromise that might make it easier for a decision to be adopted.

You must not, however, conclude from what I have said that I feel that we could or should, within Coreper, have full powers, except in the case of vital decisions. At all events, a body of that kind would be bound to provoke covetous looks on the part of the politicians, who would end up taking the place of the diplomats in it! I am convinced, however, that it would be possible to find a middle road and that if that could be done, it would greatly benefit the way in which the Council and, therefore, the Community functioned.

The fact that we all know one another very well and have such respect for one another, the way in which we understand one another's respective difficulties, the friendships that have sprung up among us during our many meetings and contacts are all factors that make Coreper unique and irreplaceable, as we have also learned from a recent event that we still remember and that could and should encourage people to make better use of it in the interests of all. Without resorting to revolutionary changes, perhaps it would not be impossible to find a practical system that could gradually be perfected as part of the review of the way in which the General Secretariat of the Council works.

Meanwhile, like our friend Sir Donald Maitland when he said his farewells, let me stress the importance to Coreper of the informal exchanges of views among its members, open conversations that are not followed by the drafting of minutes and that, in a sense, have no agenda. We have recently reverted to some extent to the custom of holding meetings of that kind, and I, for my part, have found them extremely useful. In my view, that is the second 'key' which should enable Coreper to play its part more and more effectively as time goes by.

Forgive me for setting out these considerations that are perhaps a little too serious. Yet, at this final official meeting, I did want to speak to you from my heart.

I do not want to close without addressing a few words specifically to our friend Nicolas Hommel. Like me, you are preparing to enter your 'third childhood'! Your thoughts, like mine, are tending to turn a little towards the past and very much towards the future. Or is the opposite true? I shall have fond memories of the pleasure of working with you over the final years of your career and mine, in addition to the importance of participating in the activities of Coreper. With all my heart I wish you what I wish myself: many serene years to come with the satisfaction of a life spent in the service of friendship among peoples, which is what makes our profession, diplomacy, such a noble one.

Let me close this address with a profession of faith. In the 1950s, as head of the competent department of my Ministry, I witnessed the beginnings of European integration and the birth of the most ambitious European projects. Even if, when I returned to working on European issues many years later, I did not find the same fervour as in the beginning, I am leaving this new European experience with a profound sense of confidence and a conviction that remains unshaken, despite the surrounding mood of crisis. I could not conceive of a future for peace in the world unless Europe acquires increasing influence in world affairs and in the various dialogues, in whatever geographical area. And I think that Europe's increased influence must inevitably, or rather inexorably, be achieved via European political and economic integration.

Regarding the Community more specifically, as I have already said during this address, I put my trust in the review that is now under way. I shall no longer be among you or able to take an active part in that review within Coreper, but, as a convinced European, my very best wishes will always accompany you as you accomplish the task that awaits you.

For the time being, I shall not say farewell to you, but rather au revoir, my dear friends, hoping to see you again at the informal thousandth Coreper meeting.

Dear Jean, Umberto and Nicolas,

You have said such kind words about me. I take them, above all, as a mark of friendship, which is what I hold most dear, and I thank you. In particular I thank you for what you said about my staff, starting with Pietro Calamia, whose work has largely enabled me to devote myself calmly to the post of President of Coreper. I am referring not only to those members of staff who helped me more directly during my Presidency but also to those who made my job easier, by taking on responsibility for the Italian delegation. While I appreciate the kind words that you have said about me, I am also happy to take very seriously what you said in general about the outcome of the Italian Presidency. You, Jean, spoke of that Presidency in terms that I shall happily pass on as they stand to my authorities, my superiors. You said what I felt but would not have dared say, namely that, given the very serious difficulties that the Community faced, we, the Italians, had acted with the European conviction that is the outstanding mark of our presence in this room and in the other rooms where the Council bodies meet at all levels.

If the Presidency, and above all Coreper itself, have done useful work, I owe that mainly, dear colleagues, to your understanding, your cooperation and your friendship. I have always endeavoured to keep Coreper at the heart of events. You may remember how often I expressed my conviction that Coreper forms the basis of the structure of the Council; even when there was some hesitation, in the end I had the satisfaction of seeing that it was we who had the pleasure and merit of giving the final impetus.

My dear Jean, you were kind enough to recall the visits that the Permanent Representatives made to Italy on various occasions. I do not want to take all the credit for that. Credit is also due to the organisers here in Brussels and in Italy. And the success also results from the efforts of all of you, and your wives, since at least one of those visits demanded quite strenuous efforts on your part, more strenuous perhaps than our

Committee's usual activities require.

The Presidency is now passing to you, dear Jean, and into your hands, which are safe and competent, as you have already shown many times in the past. Inspired by the same faith in the destiny of European integration, you will direct our activities with the traditional qualities of balance, humanity, sensitivity and ability to mediate that you have always shown and that are the best guarantee that your Presidency will achieve the brilliant results that we expect of it.

Let me add a word about the Presidency's relations with the Commission and with the Council. In the case of the Commission, I can only welcome the excellent cooperation that the Presidency has enjoyed with its representatives, even in times of difficulties and problems, of which there were certainly more than a few. I have always been very well received at all levels. May I ask you, Jean-Bernard Stefani, to convey to the Commission authorities at all levels, and, in particular, to those who have taken part in Coreper's activities, that I have always appreciated their approach and their efforts to help the Presidency in its task. So please extend my sincere thanks to Roy Jenkins, the Commissioners, Émile Noël, Sir Christopher Audland and your colleagues.

As for the General Secretariat and you, Nicolas Hommel, let me say that I had no experience of the Presidency and it is only on becoming president that one fully appreciates the importance and quality of the service provided by the General Secretariat. In saying that, I also want to apologise if, from time to time, when I was sitting with the delegations, I pestered you a bit. Now I understand, because I have had an inside view of the work of the General Secretariat. During our assiduous contacts with you, Nicolas, during the day-to-day cooperation that my colleagues and I have experienced with all the Directors, all the officials, I was able to take the measure of their abilities, their devotion, their attachment to the cause of the Community. And if, from time to time, I may have criticised the Translation Service for being a little slow, I have always admired the speed and quality of the drafting and the devotion and initiative shown by everyone, because that enabled me and my colleagues to keep up with all the background documents that kept accumulating.

These are the brief remarks that I wanted to make, while thanking you, dear colleagues, the Commission, the Secretary-General and all the General Secretariat officials. Nor do I forget all those who, seen or unseen, help us in our work. And I apologise if I have overrun the allotted time this evening. I wanted to tell all the translators and interpreters, all those who assist us with our work in this room, how much we appreciate their work and their help. The results that the Presidency likes to think that it has achieved would certainly not have been possible without their cooperation.