

'No more fireside chats' from the Europäische Zeitung (December 2002)

Caption: In December 2002, the German monthly news magazine Europäische Zeitung recalls the establishment of the European Council in 1974 by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt, as well as highlights of the meetings of Heads of State or Government, from the Dublin Summit held in March 1975 to the Brussels Summit held in October 2002.

Source: Europäische Zeitung. Hrsg. Entel, Stefan A.; Brok, Elmar; Prof. Schöndube, Claus; Dr Schoser, Franz ; R Herausgeber Keller, Horst. Dezember 2002, Nr. 12, 53. Jahrgang. Bonn: Europa Union Verlag GmbH. "Die Kamingespräche sind für immer passé", auteur:Hadler, Wilhelm , p. 6.

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The roller coaster of European Summits — from Dublin to Copenhagen and beyond

No more fireside chats

By Wilhelm Hadler

They have always been a media event. What newspaper or radio or TV station would pass up the chance to be there when Heads of State or Government foregather for their quarterly discussions? Whether it is worth the reporters' trouble to make the trip is by no means certain. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing once complained that the bureaucrats who organise the summits often decide what the outcome will be long before the meetings take place.

Yet it was the then French President, with his friend Helmut Schmidt, who suggested in 1974 that the 'leaders' should meet at regular intervals. They both hoped to advance European integration by taking the important political decisions in hand themselves and so making some headway against the weight of the Brussels administration and the national bureaucracies.

These officials were, in their opinion, responsible for the slow progress in establishing the common market. They thought, not without reason, that, instead of being able to concentrate on a few important problems, the Heads of State or Government were occupied at these informal meetings with a mass of technical details that actually hampered attempts to find a political compromise.

In the Benelux countries, the idea of creating a superior political body in the form of the European Council was initially greeted with some scepticism. Not all Heads of Government had the necessary power to take decisions, particularly on questions of foreign policy. The French Government was also suspected of wanting to weaken the Commission's role in the Brussels decision-making process. Under the Treaties of Rome, the Commission alone has the right to propose legislation. This protects the smaller Member States, because the Council of Ministers can amend Commission proposals only by unanimous vote.

'No papers, no officials'

Even in the case of the earlier EU summits, which took place only occasionally, the idea was that they should be 'as informal as possible'. For example, Helmut Schmidt's watchword was: 'No papers, no officials!' The tradition of 'fireside chats' introduced by Willy Brandt was, therefore, continued in the European Council. However, EU enlargement to encompass 9 and later 10, 12 and 15 Member States meant that there was less and less room for participants around the fire. From 2004 on, the atmosphere of relaxed family gatherings will probably become an even rarer event.

The first meeting of the European Council took place in Dublin in March 1975. The Heads of State or Government have met more than 80 times since then. Many of these summit meetings are now forgotten, some produced more confusion than guidance. But others proved to be of historic importance. They gave vital impetus to European integration and brought European unification a little closer on each occasion.

The first memorable occasion was the meeting in Copenhagen in April 1978. In the course of a 4½-hour exchange of views, the then very small circle of 'leaders' considered how the European economy could be rescued from the repercussions of the sudden devaluation of the dollar. The confidential exchange of views led to the decision taken a few months later in Bremen to establish the European Monetary System (EMS). It was to be the precursor of economic and monetary union, replacing the 'currency snake' introduced in the early 1970s. The agreement on the British contribution to the EC budget, reached in March 1984, was a great relief. The Nine had been arguing about the UK application for a rebate — Maggie Thatcher's famous cry: 'I want my money back!' — for five years. The result was that decisions on other matters, above all the reform of the common agricultural policy, were virtually blocked. In Fontainebleau the host, François Mitterrand, managed to reach a compromise after much toing and froing. Hitherto, the British had rightly claimed that they had to pay DM 4.5 billion more into the Brussels budget than they got out of it. Under the new formula for calculating their net contribution, they received a 34 % 'rebate' on the amount of value-

added tax payable. In December 1985, the Heads of State or Government meeting in Luxembourg established the framework for the further development of the European Community. In negotiations that lasted 30 hours, they produced a programme of reforms calling for the completion of a single internal market by 1992 and rules on cooperation in foreign policy matters to be secured by treaty.

A near-crisis

The Community narrowly avoided a crisis in 1987. Margaret Thatcher refused to agree to an increase in EC funds unless she received definite assurances on the limitation of agricultural spending. The Heads of State or Government were unable to reach a decision at their meeting in June, but they managed to find a compromise solution at a special summit convened in Brussels in February 1988. In June 1989, the Heads of State or Government meeting in Madrid signed the Delors Plan for Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). The plan provided for three stages, the first to start on 1 July 1990. Participating states were required to agree to complete liberalisation of capital transactions, closer coordination of economic policy and participation in the European Monetary System (EMS) exchange rate mechanism.

The Danes upset their partners

At first, it looked as though the British would scupper the Maastricht Summit in December 1991. The main bone of contention was the attempt to include principles of a common European social policy in the Treaty on European Union. However, the UK Prime Minister, John Major, finally gave way after a one-to-one talk with the Netherlands Prime Minister, Ruud Lubbers. The process of European integration was to be substantially deepened and extended to key areas of domestic and foreign policy. Most important decisions: the final phase of economic and monetary union (EMU) was to start in 1999 at the latest, and the Twelve planned to pursue a common foreign and security policy. They also proposed to cooperate in future in the areas of justice and home affairs (asylum, immigration, drugs, terrorism). The European Parliament was granted the right to participate in the decision-making process for the first time (albeit only on an extremely limited number of subjects). However, it was agreed that the British would not be required to comply with decisions relating to the Social Charter and would be allowed to retain border controls.

The other governments were upset when the Danes, by a narrow majority, voted against the Maastricht Treaty. At a special summit meeting convened in Birmingham in October 1992, the 'leaders' were primarily concerned with ways of making the European decision-making process more transparent and less bureaucratic. After all, at their meeting in Lisbon in June 1992, they had recorded satisfactory interim progress on the completion of the single internal market. By then, about 90 % of the liberalisation measures listed in the Commission White Paper had been 'ticked off'.

At their meeting in Brussels in October 1993, the Heads of State or Government discussed the implementation of the provisions on economic and monetary union, a majority of Danes having by now voted in favour of the Maastricht Treaty in a second referendum. Over a lunch of lobster salad, caviar and roast venison, they agreed that the European Monetary Institute, precursor of the European Central Bank, should be located in Frankfurt. They also agreed in principle on enlargement to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Accession to the EC should, they declared, be open to any Central or Eastern European State that fulfilled the legal, economic and political requirements for accession.

Fireworks in Corfu

The June 1994 Summit in Corfu ended with a bang. John Major voted against the proposal that the Belgian Head of Government, Jean-Luc Dehaene, should succeed Jacques Delors as President of the Commission in Brussels. He was the only Head of Government to vote against the proposal, complaining of a 'Franco-German diktat' because Chancellor Kohl and President Mitterrand had supported Dehaene instead of the Dutch candidate, Ruud Lubbers. The Luxembourg candidate, Jacques Santer, was subsequently elected on 15 July.

In June 1995, the Heads of State or Government meeting in Cannes approved a White Paper containing specific preparations for the admission of the Central and Eastern European applicant countries as full

members. In December, at their meeting in Madrid, they set 1 January 1999 as the starting date for economic and monetary union. In their 'conclusions', largely in response to German demands, they laid particular emphasis on the need for strict budgetary discipline.

There was another dispute with the UK in 1996. This time it was about the BSE crisis and the EU ban on exports of British beef. However, the 'leaders', meeting in Florence in late June, managed to agree on a framework plan to relax the embargo. This opened the way for the adoption of the convention on the duties of the common police authority *Europol*, which had been blocked by London.

Berlin: agreement on 'Agenda 2000'

Europe took another step forward, albeit only a small one, with the Treaty of Amsterdam signed by the Heads of State or Government on 17 June 1997. It replaced the Maastricht Treaty and bound the Member States to 'establish an area of freedom, security and justice' within five years. The Treaty incorporated the 'Stability and Growth Pact' negotiated by the Finance Ministers. The Council's ability to act was strengthened by the introduction of majority voting in 13 new policy areas. And an extension of the codecision procedure conferred more powers on the European Parliament. However, individual Member States could still block decisions in the area of foreign and security policy.

At a meeting in Berlin in March 1999, the 'leaders' agreed on 'Agenda 2000', proposed by the Commission. This was intended 'to equip the Union with more effective policies and the financial means to implement them in a spirit of solidarity'. The European Council also produced a 'financial perspective' for the period 2000 to 2006.

This provided a framework not only for the further development of the EU, including reform of the common agricultural policy, but also for the enlargement of the Union. The EU own-resources ceiling was to remain at 1.27 % of GNP.

The Heads of State or Government, meeting in Nice in December 2000, spent four days negotiating the reform of the European institutions. The aim was to secure the EU's ability to act after the forthcoming enlargement to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Jacques Chirac referred to it later as a 'historic meeting', but many governments would have preferred more far-reaching decisions to be taken. In particular, the weighting of votes in the Council of Ministers was hardly changed at all. The blocking minority would now be 89 votes out of a total of 342. Thus, one of the large Member States and three of the smaller ones could together prevent decisions from being taken. Nor was there any significant extension of majority decisions. So the Germans could continue to reject resolutions in the area of asylum and immigration law. And, in response to British pressure, taxation remained the responsibility of the Member States.

Laeken: the decision on the Convention

The 'leaders' gave the signal for a new round of reforms a year later at their meeting in Laeken, just outside Brussels. They decided to set up a Convention to explore the possibility of introducing a European Constitution. One representative from each of the Member States' governments, two from the Commission, 16 from the European Parliament and 30 from the national parliaments took part in the discussions, which were chaired by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. The applicant countries also took part in the discussions.

After lengthy preliminary discussions, an agreement on how to fund EU enlargement was reached in October 2002 at a summit in Brussels chaired by the Danes. It was based on a prior Franco-German compromise on reducing agricultural expenditure. Aid for farmers in the ten new EU Member States, which were to accede just in time for the forthcoming European Parliament elections in 2004, would be granted only gradually.

Rotating conference venues to be abolished

Reform of its decision-making structures is indispensable, if the EU is to retain the ability to act. But the 'leaders' have so far barely touched on the question of how the European Council is to work in future. True, it has been agreed that meetings should be run on 'much stricter' lines, accompanying delegations from the national capitals should be smaller, and rotating venues for meetings should be abolished. But what is needed, above all, is a clearer division of labour between the Council of Ministers and the Heads of State or Government. According to a study produced by 'Notre Europe', a think-tank set up by Jacques Delors, the European Council has lost the ability to lead in recent years. The authors, who include the long-serving Belgian Ambassador to the EU, consider that too many matters that should be dealt with in some other part of the Union's institutional system end up on the table of the Heads of State or Government.