

'Frenchman Jacques Blanc is President of the EU Committee of the Regions' from El País (10 March 1994)

Caption: On 10 March 1994, the Spanish daily newspaper El País comments on the successful candidacy of the Frenchman Jacques Blanc as President of the Committee of the Regions and on the agreement reached among European political groups, resulting in the Spaniard Pasqual Maragall, as 'candidate for the municipalities', succeeding the 'candidate for the regions' after two years as President.

Source: El País. 10.03.1994. Madrid. "El francés Jacques Blanc, presidente del Comité de las Regiones de la UE", auteur:Antich, José.

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Frenchman Jacques Blanc is President of the EU Committee of the Regions

Maragall, Vice-President, is confident of taking over from him in 1996 in accordance with a private agreement

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The President of Languedoc-Rousillon, Jacques Blanc, who is a member of the Union for French Democracy (UDF), was elected yesterday evening as the first President of the European Committee of the Regions following a full day of interminable agreements. The term of his Presidency will be two years, as provided for in the Union Treaty. The Mayor of Barcelona, the Socialist, Pasqual Maragall, who stood for the post, had to settle for the First Vice-Presidency. Blanc, who was the man backed by the President of the Assembly of European Regions (AER), Jordi Pujol, was elected in the second ballot.

Blanc is 54, a graduate in medicine who has extensive experience in local and regional life and has been President of Languedoc-Rousillon since March 1986, but his victory came as a surprise, as he is a candidate who does not belong to either of the major European political families, namely the Conservatives and the Socialists. The odds favoured Belgian Luc van den Brande, the President of Flanders, and, to a lesser extent, the Socialist Maragall. Blanc was the candidate backed by the President of the AER and the Catalan Parliament, Jordi Pujol. Several hours of negotiations saw the hammering out of a compromise between all the families under which Blanc will stand down as President in favour of Maragall within two years. Under the Maastricht Treaty, the 189 members of the Committee of the Regions are elected for four years, but the Presidency and the Bureau of this consultative body are renewed every two years. Maragall used that argument to present his Vice-Presidency as a success and gave assurances, although nothing has been signed, that 'a man's word is his bond'. Pujol, as President of the AER, confirmed the aim of this agreement but added, 'Two years will bring plenty of change, and I shall not be President of the AER. If I am still here, I shall stand by my commitment.'

Straw vote

Maragall's candidacy for the Presidency very soon fell by the wayside. In the early evening, an initial straw vote was held involving all the candidates who were standing; its sole purpose was to eliminate the candidate from the regions who received fewer votes. As President of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Maragall was the candidate for the municipalities and the Socialists. The regions put up two candidates for the straw vote, because 75 % of votes needed to be secured for a candidate to be elected, a figure which it was clear that no candidate would achieve. The one who received fewer votes — Blanc or van den Brande — would stand down. The result of the ballot was as follows: Blanc, 56 votes; Maragall, 55; and van den Brande, 50. Van den Brande immediately stood down, and the Mayor of Barcelona realised that his candidacy was not viable and that, in a first-past-the-post ballot, the margin of defeat would undoubtedly be even greater. It was at that point that the agreement was sealed that Blanc would be put forward as sole candidate with a commitment to exchange roles in two years.

Blanc was elected by 97 of the 170 votes cast. Maragall stood for the Vice-Presidency against the Labour Councillor for the region of Strathclyde, Scotland, Charles Gray, whom he defeated by 91 votes to 65.

The struggle between the various families of Spanish Socialism was yesterday in evidence in Brussels. The President of Extremadura, Juan Carlos Rodríguez Ibarra, who had already expressed misgivings about Maragall's candidacy, stood for the First Vice-Presidency — a decision which lasted several hours. In the corridors of the European Parliament, Ibarra's supporters displayed their unease at Maragall's strategy, accusing him of doing as he pleased while referring to their President as the 'Ferraz candidate'.

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