

Interview with Jacques F. Poos: the half-yearly Council Presidencies (Sanem, 16 April 2004)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In the course of your career, a very long one at the European level, you have held the office of half-yearly Council President three times. Each of these Presidencies has led, in different ways, to important advances being made at community level. In the light of your experience, what are the advantages and the drawbacks of the principle of a rotating Presidency?

[Jacques F. Poos] I can only see advantages, given that there is a single chain of command that changes every six months but which at least ensures that responsibility is clearly attributable: the responsibility to make proposals, the responsibility to call meetings, the responsibility for co-ordinating two Councils that may hold differing options and views. The Ecofin Council, the Environment Council and the Transport Council may all have different outlooks on the solution to a problem. It is the acting President who co-ordinates all that and it is the General Affairs Council who takes charge of it. Under the new Draft Constitution, I see that all that becomes blurred. There will be a Presidency of the [European] Council lasting two and a half years, but the President of the Council [of Ministers] will continue to rotate every six months. Then they will start sharing the various Councils out between the various countries. But who is going to co-ordinate all that if there is a hitch or a dispute? It complicates the system needlessly, whilst the merit of the six-monthly rotating Presidency is that it worked, and often the smaller countries proved capable of making a better job of the Presidency than the larger because they had set aside any national interests in favour of promoting the European Union. If all that disappeared, I believe that an essential component for the functioning of the European Union would be lost, one that need not have been abolished. It has been amended, or so I believe, because there will be 25 of us and certain larger countries worked out that they would have to wait twelve and a half years before holding the next Presidency. That is what it was. It was a subterfuge in order to introduce what I should describe as the 'board of directors system'; one that scorns the principle of equality among Member States and ends up with one large State presiding over important Councils — Ecofin, for example — with the smaller States having to be satisfied with Tourism or Culture, which I do not regard as minor, but which are not true Community powers.

[Étienne Deschamps] Can you recall, in the course of the Luxembourg, or of perhaps some other, Presidency, circumstances in which the Presidency really played a major role by imposing a decision — 'imposing' in inverted commas — but really did so by taking an initiative that was imposed, de facto, on some dispute among certain Member States? Have you any clear examples where it can be said, now or in the past, that the Presidency or this Head of State or that Foreign Minister really succeeded in pushing through a certain agenda, really played a role that was vital, that was a driving force in the taking of a particular decision?

[Jacques F. Poos] Yes, yes, yes, it is true for all the Presidencies. I think that there have been original initiatives that perhaps were well prepared because they had been planned by a certain number of those directly involved. When you start a negotiation, you always know in advance who wants to make further progress and who wants to maintain his present position or even go back. You know the two partners or colleagues so you can try to find out what their margins of negotiation are in preliminary talks and then you make a proposal that is on target and which allows a consensus to be reached. That is the real job of the Presidency. It takes place, above all, at the Intergovernmental Conferences where, in the end, a Treaty must be arrived at that is acceptable to everyone.

[Étienne Deschamps] Going back a few months, do you think that the Italian Presidency may perhaps have fallen short where the failure, or at any rate the postponement, of the Draft Constitution is concerned?

[Jacques F. Poos] I shall not criticise the Italian Presidency because the deadlock was caused by Spain and Poland. But behind Spain and Poland were hiding several other countries, both small and large, who still maintained what Tony Blair called 'red lines' that reappeared at the Intergovernmental Conference held afterwards. So there were points of disagreement that did not really appear in the course of the conventional method, which was completed in a bit of a rush amid vague consensus, but which even included the Eurosceptics since no discordant votes were officially recorded. But unspoken disagreement was there,

nonetheless. And there are still 26 points that still have to be settled. However, I am optimistic that we shall succeed. Perhaps not in June, but at the start of the Dutch Presidency. I hope there will not be any loose ends left for the Luxembourg Presidency.