

Interview with Pierre Pescatore: the causes of the empty chair crisis (Luxembourg, 12 November 2003)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In 1965, France decided not to take its seat at the table of the European Communities' Council of Ministers for several months. Could you outline for us the then French Government's reasons for doing so?

[Pierre Pescatore] That's a good question, because you cannot understand the empty chair crisis — either the sequence of events or how it was concluded — without analysing its causes. And my analysis differs from the generally accepted version, because General de Gaulle is generally given sole responsibility for having caused this crisis. In my opinion, the crisis was precipitated not by General de Gaulle but by Walter Hallstein's claims as well as by a bad move that Hallstein made. That move shows what a very poor politician he was, whatever his professorial accomplishments may have been, because he overestimated his strength by trying to force the hands of the other Member States regarding funding of the agricultural policy in support of two objectives: firstly, to increase the powers of the European Parliament, and secondly, to increase the financial resources and the financial autonomy of the Community. However, at that period the time was not ripe for these developments. They would come about much later on. As an idea, it could have been discussed, but Hallstein's mistake was to try to put pressure on France regarding a subject that was above all financial, and in a policy area that was then, and has remained so ever since, extremely sensitive where France is concerned. Even now, you can still see that France will never abandon its agriculture; and this is right, because, especially for geographical reasons, agriculture is and will remain a key sector of the French economy. So, when Hallstein overplayed his hand, General de Gaulle reacted as he always did, overreacting of course, but one must not minimise Hallstein's responsibility as President of the European Commission in this crisis. And it was Hallstein, fundamentally, who lost out in this crisis, on Europe's behalf.