

Press conference held by Pierre Moscovici on the reform of the European institutions (Paris, 13 November 2000)


Caption: On 13 November 2000, Pierre Moscovici, French Minister for European Affairs, reviews the state of negotiations on the reform of the European institutions and replies to questions from journalists on the action taken by France and Germany.

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Press conference held by the Minister for European Affairs, Mr Pierre Moscovici, at the Foreign Press Club (Paris, 13 November 2000)

First of all, let me thank you for coming once again to this meeting. It is one to which I attach a great deal of importance, as it gives us an opportunity to conduct a regular review of the progress of our Presidency, which is now at a decisive stage.

1. If you have no objections, I shall start with an update on the Intergovernmental Conference on the reform of the Institutions. At our most recent meeting, on 23 October, I gave you a report on the proceedings at the informal European Council held in Biarritz. As I told you, this Council, the first real opportunity for the Heads of State or Government to resume discussions on institutional problems since Amsterdam, came at just the right moment for it to give a political boost to the deliberations.

In the days which followed Biarritz, in order to take advantage of the impetus delivered by that meeting and at the request of the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister, I visited a number of capital cities. I went to Belgium, Luxembourg, Finland, Denmark, Portugal, I met my Greek opposite number, and I shall shortly meet my Dutch counterpart, to get a better idea of what our partners are asking for and to start collecting the information that we shall need in order to trace out the final compromise.

Contrary to what some people have said or written, the French Presidency has no wish to impose its views; what it wants is to do its work as well as it can. That means that a country like ours can have its own ideas and must set its sights high, but, at the same time, the Presidency's task is to find compromises, not to bulldoze its way through on this or that question.

The negotiations are difficult, because the stakes are very high. I would remind you that these are the same questions as those which caused the previous IGC to fail. The failure, of course, was in no way the fault of the Dutch Presidency, which did remarkable work but was forced to the conclusion that there was no consensus on which to bring matters to a close. The Conference failed because the questions raised were so difficult.

Today, no doubt because the prospect of enlargement is drawing nearer, all the Member States are fully aware of what is at stake and of the need to achieve an outcome of real substance in Nice. My assessment of the situation is that there is on all sides a willingness to achieve results, what I would call the 'Biarritz spirit', and I believe that, once certain misunderstandings and failures to understand have been dispelled, everyone will be ready to help find a compromise. I shall also take good care, when putting together the compromise, not to forget the recent Franco-German Summit held in Vittel, at which we did, of course, discuss the IGC at length.

Having said this, we are aware that, without wanting to impose anything, we shall at some point have to put forward some options and give some leads. I mainly have in mind the ministerial conclave taking place this Sunday, 19 November. This is also what I have been doing during the last two weeks.

So, on the very sensitive question of the composition of the Commission, we see quite clearly that many Member States are unable to give up having 'their own' Commissioner, after Nice. But they do also admit that a Commission consisting of a much larger number of Members will be likely to have a negative impact on its effectiveness. I think that there is now a distinct willingness to hammer out an interim solution, possibly involving a reform by stages whereby there would be a ceiling on the number of Commissioners once EU enlargement has taken place. The outline of such an arrangement has yet to be determined. We are working on it. You will appreciate that I cannot go into the details of the various options, which have not yet even been considered at 15-Member State level. I will say, though, that it might be a way of escaping from the conflict between two opposing camps calling either for a solution straight away or a Commission which isn't one and goes on being disorganised. I also think that there is a general consensus, not for a ranking order among Members of the Commission, which suggests the idea of having Commissioners without voting rights, something that nobody wants, but for a reorganisation of the Commission which would give the President greater powers and increase the number of Vice-Presidents.

As regards the question of the weighting of the votes in the Council, another very sensitive issue which can only be resolved in close conjunction with the question of the Commission, we are still looking at the two options on the table: a dual majority or a simple reweighting on the basis of proposals containing specific figures.

I personally think that the countries in favour of a dual majority system, who also want to keep their Commissioner, could be amenable to simple reweighting arrangements, provided they keep their own Commissioner for a time. The (slight) majority which has emerged in favour of a simple reweighting could increase, one never knows.

On extending qualified majority voting, something which, to my mind, is the most important issue, our partners are aware of the need to make some effort as regards the most sensitive points, which are also the most emblematic. They therefore approve the method chosen by the Presidency, which involves going through each of the articles concerned with a fine-tooth comb so as to achieve the most substantial result possible overall. I shall not go into details, but we can come back to this if you want to.

With regard to forms of enhanced cooperation, which are a vital tool for ensuring that an enlarged Europe may function properly, as we said at Biarritz, it should be possible to reach broad agreement on real measures to impart flexibility to what is an essential instrument for the functioning of an enlarged Europe. There are still question marks, however, over the practical arrangements for implementing enhanced cooperation in the area of a joint foreign and security policy. So we shall have to continue with our work.

A final word on Article 7 of the EU Treaty: I think that a consensus should be possible in Nice on the setting up of a preventive surveillance procedure for cases where there is a risk of human rights being violated in a Member State.

That is where we are now. As you see, we have not wasted any time since Biarritz — and that includes last Friday at the Franco-German Summit — and I think that the next ministerial-level meeting, in conclave, on Sunday, 19 November next, will be a very fruitful one. That will leave one more, on 3 December.

All in all, I am quite resolutely optimistic and quite confident as to the prospect of achieving substantial agreement in Nice on the reform of the institutions. The negotiations will be delicate, solutions remain to be formalised, efforts will have to be made to reach a compromise, but we are still moving in that direction. Since Biarritz, nothing has stopped us.

[...]

But I shall stop here and take any questions that you may have.

Q - At the Franco-German Summit in Vittel, did you make progress on particular points, and, if so, what were they?

A - We held in-depth exchanges of views. I do not think that the various subjects raised at the IGC will lead to any problems between France and Germany. So we confirmed a stance that we had adopted together in Rambouillet at the beginning of the summer. During the IGC, Germany very clearly stated its willingness to support the work of the French Presidency, and that is very important for us.

Q - Germany let it be known that it wanted a second IGC in 2004, to work out the division of powers between the 'federated' States, the 'Federal' State and the regions. What is France's position on that?

A - You are right to stress that we also need to think about what happens after Nice, when various types of question may come up: the legal status of the Charter, this question of the division of powers, the related question of rewriting the treaties, not to mention the theoretical possibility of a constitutional process. That is part of the 'package'. We have taken careful note of Germany's concerns, which are familiar to us, on this

subject. That will appear in the overall agreement, I am sure, but first of all there has to be overall agreement.

Q - You have been to a number of European capital cities over the last few weeks, including Lisbon. I should first of all like to know how relations with Portugal are going. Secondly, could you tell us what was achieved during your visits? Did you succeed in convincing the governments that you visited that there are good grounds for the reforms that France wants to carry through in Nice?

A - I am not the best person to answer your question because I only know what my own viewpoint is, even though I did read the reports in the Portuguese press after my visit there. I can only say that I had a private conversation lasting more than an hour with the Prime Minister, Antonio Guterres, which was very friendly and covered substantive issues. That is perhaps a sign that we do manage to talk to each other properly. I did, in fact, indirectly sum up what I thought about these visits to the various capital cities. I think that we did actually need to clear up a number of misunderstandings. There may have been an exaggerated feeling that France was a biased Presidency, that it wanted to impose a point of view, or that there was a split between the large and small countries. I did my best to say what I thought about these questions. France is not biased. As a Presidency, it will of course take the problems of all its partners into account. There is no split between the large and small countries. In that connection, the proposal which was causing the most problems, that of putting a ceiling on the number of Commissioners, with rotation on an egalitarian basis, is, when it comes down to it, a formula which penalises the 'big' countries more than the 'small' ones. We in France, for instance, are prepared not just to give up one Commissioner the whole time but possibly even to give up two, for a certain time. I think that the criticism levelled against us on that point was particularly unjustified. It is true, going on from that, that there are certain countries which see Europe differently, which have larger or smaller populations, but not countries which have unequal rights. We want to respect everybody's rights. That, I would say, concerns the psycho-political context, but I know that that counts for a lot.

Apart from that, we covered various questions in depth: regarding the Commission, for example, I have told you that we were well aware that, for some countries, some Heads of Government, it was difficult to go back to their national capitals and say: 'The Nice Summit has been held, our country no longer has a Commissioner' — which was Portugal's case. That is perhaps why the idea of a third solution, setting a ceiling by stages, is beginning to emerge. Once again, this idea of reform by stages is not yet set down anywhere in black and white. We are going to talk about it, but it is an idea which I saw emerging from several of the meetings that I attended. As for the other difficult subject which came out of Biarritz, the dual majority and weighting, I had the feeling that there was a willingness among most of the people to whom I talked to move in one direction or the other. All of a sudden, there was no obstacle to making progress towards a simple reweighting of votes. We are going to 'run some tests' on this. Those are the broad outlines. There are, obviously, more detailed aspects, especially with respect to the concerns of the various countries regarding qualified majority voting. More work is being done on these. My assessment of the position is, on balance, positive. According to what I have read in a range of newspapers from the various capital cities, elucidating these points was by no means a pointless exercise. For the Presidency, at any rate, it will have been a very useful one.

Q - The German Chancellor said in Vittel that the transition to qualified majority voting is what will determine whether Nice is a success or a failure. Could you tell us what points you have made progress on in the Franco-German pairing?

A - As far as the Franco-German pairing is concerned — the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister both reported on it at the end of the Summit itself — we made progress on our understanding of qualified majority voting on taxation matters. After Biarritz, I think that there were still four major areas outstanding — taxation, social security, foreign trade policy and visa, asylum and immigration questions. I can assure you that we are doing our best to make progress on all these points. With Germany we talked specifically about taxation. Our views on this are extremely close. The Economic Affairs and Finance Ministers will be defending common positions on these issues. We are getting there, it's fairly painstaking work.

Q - Regarding the reweighting of votes, did you have the impression in Vittel that Germany would be prepared to give up its demand for a dual majority system?

A - Germany's position is an open one, and I would refer you to what we said to each other in Rambouillet. But Germany considers that the dual majority is still on the table. The Presidency will be exploring each solution in the next few days.

Q - On your journey to Finland you apparently suggested that there needed to be a mediator between the 'large' and 'small' countries. What do you say to that?

A - That is not exactly true. I read it in the reviews of the Finnish press which were prepared for me, and I know that it irritated some of my Swedish friends who will be holding the next Presidency. We are not going to appoint a mediator: we are the Presidency, it is up to us to do any mediating. After that it will be the next Presidency. I said that, since it seemed to us a sterile exercise to set the 'large' and 'small' countries against each other, we would be very open to proposals coming from countries which are in fact seen as small. I told Mr Lipponen, Mr Rasmussen, Mr Verhofstadt, Mr Juncker and Mr Guterres that all proposals from those countries were admissible and could be helpful in putting together a compromise. I said it, in particular, to certain people like Paavo Lipponen, who is just emerging from a recent Presidency, who did very good work and whose voice commands respect. As I see it, in every EU country there is a fantasy of small against large, because we are nations which chair the EU in succession, which each have important histories, and each of us has something to contribute to the European Union.

What I meant was that the French Presidency would not be an imperialist Presidency but that it wanted to listen, note down and take account of any proposals that others might make. That is what I told the Finnish Prime Minister. We have not delegated part of our Presidency. Mediation and compromise are our business. Ideas are for everyone to put forward, be they Finnish, Belgian, Portuguese or whatever. I could give you a string of examples, such as the imposition of a ceiling by stages, an idea which comes from some of the Benelux countries. It is up to the Presidency to, as it were, make the most of all these suggestions. It will hand on to the next Presidency, the Swedish one, a dossier which, I hope — and we are working on it — will be in good condition, in other words settled.

Q - Leaving aside the majority vote or other mechanisms, if my understanding is right, France's position is to target some 20 or so areas and subjects which could be covered by majority voting — that was the agreement reached in Biarritz. Can you tell us what areas and subjects France wants to see covered by majority voting and if there is already agreement, in particular, on matters relating to international trade? Could you also tell us whether you feel that the Council of Ministers is going to implement its decision to take retaliatory measures against the United States in the matter of the foreign sales corporations, that major tax affair where Europe is demanding four billion dollars in sanctions against US imports, which is obviously unpopular and is seen as endangering transatlantic relations by the outgoing Washington Administration?

A - On qualified majority voting, there are 45 questions on the table. There is already agreement on some 20 of them. There are 15 or 20 on which I think we can now reach agreement easily. And then there are between five and ten of them on which agreement has not yet been achieved and on which we are still working. Some of the issues concerned are very sensitive. I mentioned four of them a short while ago, and they are the main issues. Within those four areas, there is one, foreign trade policy, on which we, the French delegation, still have some doubts. We think, in particular, that it is very important for Europe to be able to retain a mechanism which enables it to preserve its cultural identity — I am talking about identity, not about a cultural exception. It is very important for us to have guarantees on that. We are currently trying to consider compromises which would go in that direction. On the second point, no decision has yet been taken, I believe. The US position, at any rate, is not all that simple at the moment.

Q - What do you understand today by a substantial outcome? We have the impression that the Commission is being seen increasingly as an 'left-over' which would be determined in 2004.

A - No, not at all. That is not what is happening. Let me make myself clear. If there is a reform which stipulates setting a ceiling by stages and says, for example: until 2004 we shall retain the existing Commission, then we shall have x number of Commissioners, a figure which is more than 20 and expands with enlargement, and then there will be a reduction — such a mechanism itself must be included in the Treaty. We do not just want a political declaration or a new protocol. That would be pointless. The question must be settled. It may be settled by stages, over time; that is one possibility. But we cannot under any circumstances have another left-over to deal with in Nice. That would mean that we had not attained our objectives. All in all, I think that it would be better to preserve the previous situation, which is not at all satisfactory. That would create the problem of a political appraisal of the results achieved in Nice: would people think that that was enough or not? So it is absolutely vital that the new mechanism, whatever it is, should be enshrined in the Treaty. It is essential. We are revising the treaties, not rearranging the dust left by the past.

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