


# Interview with Jacques F. Poos: from European Political Cooperation to the CFSP (Sanem, 16 April 2004)

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[Étienne Deschamps] As Foreign Minister, you played an active part in what is referred to as European Political Cooperation, which has long served as the framework for Community foreign policy. Could you tell us how matters concerning political cooperation and diplomatic relations were dealt with, day to day, among the chanceries?

[Jacques F. Poos] Political cooperation had always existed, but at an informal level since the Treaties did not mention it. It was only the Treaty on European Union which began to institutionalise what is now called the CFSP — common foreign and security policy — by defining what constitutes a joint action or a joint position, and so forth. Here I should add that, although it has been set down in the Treaty that the European Union should have a common foreign and security policy, the rules of operation have not been changed fundamentally since it is all decided unanimously. To adopt a common position on any issue — for example a common position on a peace plan in the Middle East, or on whether to participate in a war against Iraq — unanimity is necessary. Each time that we have been in a difficult situation of this type, one where the electorate has expected a certain position from its leaders and its foreign ministers — because there may be a difference between the views of the man in the street and those within the upper echelons — each time there has been a clash, a failure at the highest level, because all it took was for one minister to block the process and no position was possible. At such times, painfully, I have to say ‘painfully’, following long negotiations we managed nonetheless to arrive at common positions, which then constituted a common denominator. Unfortunately, however, we did not succeed in adopting a common position on non-participation in the US President’s war against Iraq, because there was effectively a state of vassalage in a number of Member States — particularly among the British, who obstructed any expression of the European will. In response to your question regarding practice: the Political Committee played an important preparatory role. The political directors of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the Fifteen and the Commission, with its Commissioner responsible for international affairs, are in direct contact and communicate with one another through the COREU network — COREU is a secure communication network (fax and nowadays probably electronic, but secured) — by which they inform one another of their positions 24 hours a day. The role of the Presidency is to circulate a text which the capitals are invited to express their opinions about, and agree to. Next, this text is amended, changed again, and then it is passed ... In the end, the Presidency comes up with a text which, if it needs to be fixed, will be done so during a meeting of political directors that is convened as a matter of urgency, or during the next ministerial meeting. So there is, after all, a mechanism that can lead to a consensus, but a consensus that will always be tricky since, ultimately, it can be obstructed by just one country. It is an absurd system, but it exists.

[Étienne Deschamps] Yes, and doubtless it is at present the only system that can be envisaged in Europe precisely because this mechanism, which works more or less well, is nevertheless the result of a slow process of evolution. Can you recall any problems or failures in the beginning, in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when countries were not accustomed to exchanging information, as you said, 24 hours a day, that they might consider strictly national, or confidential? Can you remember any instances of information being withheld or of clashes, when it was first put into practice?

[Jacques F. Poos] I cannot recall any concrete examples now, but I do remember that this area of foreign policy was one that was guarded jealously. In the French Constitution there is even the phrase ‘reserved for the Head of State’. On occasions even the Foreign Minister may not express himself before the President gives his agreement, and in other countries it is sometimes the Prime Minister and not the Foreign Minister. This is the case in Great Britain where it is the Prime Minister, and the Foreign Minister is merely an executant. The instructions arrive, but I do not know where from. For example, it is well known that the alliance between the British and the Americans is so strong that when the British minister speaks, you think you are listening to the Voice of America. All this was known, yet I think that despite these difficulties, the leaders at the time realised that an economic bloc of the importance of the European Union, with the weight that it carried in the world economy, had to have a political counterweight, and that is why, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, after practically the unification of the European continent, this political union was superimposed, imperfect as it was because of the unanimity issue. I can only criticise it formally, on the

grounds that in this essential area qualified majority voting was not achieved, nor even special qualified majority voting perhaps, in order to adopt certain decisions. I fully appreciate that if the national interest of a country is at issue, or if it is a question of sending troops into this or that conflict and risking the lives of one's young people, there must be the agreement of that country and there must be a unanimous decision to do so in the name of Europe. But when it is a matter of condemning the violation of human rights in a third country or even of imposing economic sanctions on a country that has clearly violated the United Nations Human Rights Convention, well, in such a case is unanimity necessary? Of course not. No! All that can be adopted by qualified majority. It is all right if one has the courage to say so.

[Étienne Deschamps] And to come back to the enlargement that we were talking about just now — do you think that it will help or, logically, hinder matters?

[Jacques F. Poos] It will not help matters. It will not help matters. Perhaps I should qualify this reaction, for it is early days and I think that, little by little, these ten new Member States will get used to Community discipline and somewhat relax the special ties that they believe they have with this or that world power. But this is a learning process that will take time.

[Étienne Deschamps] Although it is a different issue, Poland's stance on the draft Constitution has clearly shown that this is a slow process. There is no doubt about it!

[Jacques F. Poos] Here we are talking about foreign policy. Thus Poland's stance on Iraq was clearly symptomatic of a country that was being manipulated. However, it is interesting to note that the Polish Prime Minister was one of the first to admit that he had been misled by the lie concerning weapons of mass destruction. He has clearly stated, about that period: 'I was misled.' At least he had the courage to say so, whilst Tony Blair does not have the courage to say so. This shows that the learning process is working, although they are not yet members of the European Union!