

Address given by Hubert Védrine on the reform of the European institutions and on Franco-German relations (Berlin, 9 May 2001)


Caption: On 9 May 2001, Hubert Védrine, French Foreign Minister, delivers to the Committee on European Affairs of the Bundestag an address in which he criticises the German proposals for reform of the Community institutions and calls for an institutional balance in the European Union to be maintained.

Source: Audition du ministre des Affaires étrangères, M. Hubert Védrine, par la Commission des Affaires européennes du Bundestag (Berlin, 9 mai 2001). [EN LIGNE]. [Paris]: Ministère des Affaires étrangères de la République française, [13.09.2005]. Disponible sur <http://www.doc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/BASIS/epic/www/doc/DDW?M=1&K=942571523&W=AUTEUR+PH+IS+%27v%E9drine%27+AND+DATE+%3D+%2709.05.2001%27+ORDER+BY+DATE/Descend>.

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Hearing of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Hubert Védrine, by the European Affairs Committee of the Bundestag (Berlin, 9 May 2001)

Mr Chairman,
Ladies and gentlemen of the European Affairs Committee,

Dear Joschka,
I am very glad to be able to exchange views with you today.

[...]

As the date for the major enlargement draws near, I am more than ever convinced that there can never be any option, either for France or for Germany, other than a Franco-German understanding.

During the German Presidency of the Union in 1999, and during the French Presidency last year, we could see how difficult it has become to find consensus solutions by negotiation among 15 Member States on important questions, although that type of agreement is an absolute constitutional and democratic necessity. Understanding between our two countries must be clear-sighted, specific, loyal, and based on the actual realities in our two countries and a vision of Europe as we want it to be. It is demanding, it is irreplaceable, but that does not mean, of course, that it is exclusive or sufficient in itself. For all these reasons, Joschka Fischer and we have embarked, with conviction, on that redefinition of Franco-German relations determined by the Chancellor, the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister in Alsace on 31 January 2001.

[...]

Our priority, of course, is the reason for our Union's existence, why we are together, our objectives, the content rather than the container. The French Prime Minister will be talking about these subjects shortly. But, this afternoon, I should like to convey to you some thoughts of mine about the institutions.

- Our starting point is that the Union already, de facto, constitutes a federation of nation states. It combines federal elements, of which the euro will be the strongest example, with sovereign nations, the abolition of which is out of the question.

So it is not so much a matter of knowing how to describe our European project as of answering two major questions: how should competences and powers be divided between Europe and the Member States, between the federation and the nations, and how should power be organised at European level.

- In Nice, we set ourselves the ambitious target of securing agreement on a precise allocation of powers and competences. A proper division will not emerge automatically from the words federation, constitution and subsidiarity, even if they are the expression of guidelines and values. Each of them may cover very different situations. For example, a Constitution may just as well limit the powers of a federation as limit those of the bodies in the federation. The federal level may include a great many policies or very few; and the policies may be integrated to a greater or lesser extent. These are choices which have to be made, not dictated in an authoritarian manner by specific words.

In the end, not all the policies necessarily concern all the Member States, and that is an additional parameter to bear in mind when we determine this division of powers. We shall have to strike a balance by conducting negotiations and not by making a futile attempt to apply ready-made formulae.

- Our reflections on the manner in which power is organised must also take as their starting point the actual situation in the Union and what has enabled it to progress, namely the balance of the institutional triangle consisting of the Council, Commission and Parliament, plus the case-law of the Court of Justice, which shapes the Community system and provides the European integration process with its momentum and its uniqueness and which is why we have progressed as far as we have today and why we can go still further.

Does the major enlargement, a radical change in the European integration process, entail any alteration to this system? I think that it would be dangerous to disturb that balance, one which has stood the test of time.

Of course, we shall certainly have to strengthen the powers of the European Parliament and of the Commission and go further than what we determined in Nice. A great many proposals have already been made regarding those two institutions. In that connection, even though, for a variety of reasons, France's position cannot be the same, I welcome the forthrightness of the SPD's recent contribution to that discussion.

I would observe, however, that it would clearly upset the balance, at the expense of the Council and the Member States. I am convinced, on the contrary, that the powers of all the institutions will have to be strengthened. If only one or two points of the triangle were strengthened, we would be jeopardising the effectiveness of a system which has demonstrated its worth, and we would very probably approach deadlock among the Fifteen.

I think that the more we strengthen Parliament and the Commission, the less we shall have to reduce the Council to playing the role of a second chamber. We shall actually have to strengthen and modernise it, for reasons of legitimacy, political representativeness and democracy, and to make it more effective.

- We shall also have to determine our views on the way in which European policies must be administered. The common rule is management by the Commission, in accordance with rules laid down by the Council in agreement with Parliament. But, for an indefinite period, some policies will continue to be administered by the governments acting together. That does not mean less effectiveness or less extensive ambitions, it means that these intergovernmental procedures will also have to be overhauled and brought up to date.

Let us, at this stage, be brave enough to admit that the points of view already expressed in Europe on the division of powers and the nature of European power do not yet coincide, as they are so rich or so varied in terms of their source, but let us be sure that we have the requisite boldness, inspiration and ambition to arrive at that point in 2004.