

Interview with Paul Collowald: the Hallstein Commission and the empty chair crisis (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What was the stance taken by Walter Hallstein and the European Commission during the empty chair crisis?

[Paul Collowald] Walter Hallstein was very aware that it was necessary to take things gradually, certainly, but in his view, it was a huge political project. In his view, and I think he said so one day: *Alles ist politisch*. Meaning, if you change the budget, it's political; even if you change the common agricultural policy & (supranationality, just a tiny bit, was introduced into the common agricultural policy – prices were no longer fixed in Paris and Rome, they were fixed in Brussels). But the day when a certain logic drove Hallstein to think up this 1965 plan, in which the concept of own resources was incorporated, he introduced this logic, for I'd say he was more Cartesian than a Frenchman, reason clearly dictated: Common agricultural policy, all right & own resources, all right & but, when it comes down to it, all this must be managed by a Parliament, properly. So he brought in parliamentary powers, and these were at the limit of acceptability where General de Gaulle was concerned. So, Robert Marjolin, the vice President, who knew his country well and met Couve de Murville quite often – it was his job to take the temperature at Paris – he said to Walter Hallstein: Look, there is the yellow line; beyond that line, I cannot guarantee anything. And that is how in the course of 1965, there was progress made in a coherent fashion – a cartesian, logical fashion – but which at a given moment fitted into a fundamental progressive process, with the added coincidence that on 1 January 1966, several areas defined in the Treaty of Rome, from being subject to unanimity, swung to a qualified majority vote. Well, that, for General de Gaulle, that was the warning signal. Beware: national sovereignty, etc. But then Hallstein would not listen to Robert Marjolin's advice, who had warned him that if everything went ahead like that, it would be very dangerous. Now, with this political context thus clearly defined, there are often circumstances in which someone employs a pretext as part of a strategy. So, we, I say we – because we were both in Strasbourg – Bino Olivi, spokesman for the Commission and I, deputy-spokesman – covering the work of the Commission that regularly went to Strasbourg to hold its meetings because it could not hold them in Brussels on Wednesdays. As fate had it, the work of the Commission on this important dossier of new proposals linking agriculture, the political aspect, own resources, the role to be played by Parliament, had to be concluded by mid June, at a meeting of the Commission. Impossible; so it was decided: All right, too bad. We'll do it in Strasbourg. Disaster! In Strasbourg, routines were set in place and some surprises as well. The routine was that every time the Commission was in session in Strasbourg, Bino Olivi held a press briefing because some of the accredited journalists came from Brussels and those from Strasbourg were already there, the Commission sat, the spokesman did his job, and said: Right, this morning the Commission decided & etc. Since we were in Strasbourg for a long time the Parliament had

been criticising the Commission with comments like: Ah, but when you take decisions on the Wednesday, you go straight away on Thursday & Émile Noël, the Secretary-General, goes to explain them to the permanent representatives, to the ambassadors & Whereas we parliamentarians have to read about it in the papers. Ah, read about it in the papers ! When a parliamentarian says that, it's an alarm bell take care! By luck or miracle, the Commission took this decision in Strasbourg, so Hallstein was obliged to say something in Parliament, which was then in session. That is when the thunderbolt struck: the Minister for Foreign Affairs was outraged by this procedure. The governments knew nothing about this extremely important initiative that the Commission had taken. So, this was the first clash announcing the storm to come, and when, in Brussels, at the 30 June 1965 meeting, it was at midnight, the end of the French Presidency which rotated every six months Maurice Couve de Murville, Minister for Foreign Affairs, looked at his watch and said: Well, gentlemen, it is midnight. As you know, I am handing over to my friend Amintore Fanfani here present, but I have to state that the Community has not kept its word; we have not come to a decision on the Financial regulations for agriculture. Therefore, I am returning to Paris. Meanwhile, the telephones were busy. Fanfani said: Gentlemen, we must stay here, we must carry on. At the time no one imagined: This is a dramatic moment, because we had already stalled for time, we had stopped the clock for a week on several occasions. So we thought: Right then, it's a warning; take care, there's trouble brewing. But in the end & After half an hour, an hour, we realised that & Already, at the best of times, Maurice Couve de Murville wasn't a bundle of laughs, but this time it was obvious that he was very serious indeed and that things were taking a turn for the worse. After this, I remember, in the corridors of the Ravenstein building there was excitement, journalists were getting wind that something was happening and saying: There's a whiff of crisis in the air. Then, of course, there came consultations with the governments and Paul Henri Spaak found himself once more taking a role that he enjoyed and for which he had a real talent. I recall that in the corridor, for I was attending the session, I overheard something like: Yes, but what the Commission has done, it can undo, without making him lose face. Let's try. Yes, but clearly, the decision had been taken; it was over and done with. So there the interesting figures of Walter Hallstein, perfectly consistent, a great European (let's go forward, forward); Marjolin, the French vice President, very European, though not a dyed-in-the-wool federalist, yet one who knew his country well, as well as knowing the General and Couve de Murville, giving his opinion to his President as a friend and to Mansholt, saying & Especially to Mansholt, he said to him: But listen, I looked at that with Pisani, because Mansholt and Pisani, General de Gaulle's Minister for Agriculture, followed practically the same line. Mansholt was somewhat astonished by what had happened and visibly so that it is another job for researchers, something to go into more deeply: at what moment did General de Gaulle's Minister for Agriculture, Pisani, realise that they were bent on disaster? I think it was only Maurice Couve de Murville who was in the know. So on that 30 June, all of them, Walter Hallstein, Mansholt, Marjolin, Pisani and Spaak, whom I just referred to, felt that it was serious, but not that serious, since it was known that the French Government had recalled th

air ambassador, the permanent representative, Jean-Marc Boegner, to Paris this is the explanation for that rather bizarre expression empty chair . At the table where representatives of the Six had their chairs, France's ambassador had returned to Paris, which, in other more dramatic circumstances, would have been like sending in the gunboat. It was a crisis a serious one, certainly but nobody was killing anyone. It was not as bad as that. It went on like this for six months and then, at one point, Marjolin helped draft a document which enabled, firstly, part of the substance to be re-worked, and secondly, it was at a meeting in Luxembourg, in January 1966 the Six, reunited once more with France, to agree to disperse, after agreeing on the following idea: when taking a decision that was particularly important for one country, the discussion was to be as thorough as possible and there should be no forcing it through to a qualified majority vote, etc. It was virtually a confirmation of the importance of the veto, and therefore of the principle of unanimity, and it called a halt to the normal procedure of 1 January 1966 laid down in the Treaty of Rome, but it was a statement in which the Six declared: All right, it is agreed: we shall resume living together. This All right, it is agreed: we shall resume living together , it is what is known as the Luxembourg compromise . But it was not a compromise on the substance. The other five the term mental restriction springs to mind took the position: So the French maintain that it is necessary to keep discussions going on and on, if there is an issue that is vital to a country so as not to place it in an impossible situation. But, practically speaking, that will never happen, or only happen very seldom. And that is why, over many years, we have had to put up with the phrase is not quite a misinterpretation, but& this Luxembourg compromise, which has been invoked in various circumstances, and which has the serious disadvantage of going even further than what General de Gaulle intended, because of what the French said: it concerned an issue that was very important for one country, etc. As a result, the bad habit was acquired later on in Brussels, in Luxembourg, when something did not suit one country, of saying with a wink: Look, this is just not possible. And where quite a lot of files were concerned, in this way, an insidious form of paralysis took over the Community, which suffered damage in those circumstances and it has had difficulty recovering from this ever since.