

Address given by Nicolas Hommel at the end of the Presidency of Helmut Sigrist (Brussels, 22 December 1978)

Caption: Address delivered on 22 December 1978 in Brussels by Nicolas Hommel, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Communities from 1973 to 1980, on the occasion of the end of the German Presidency of the Council. In his address in tribute to Helmut Sigrist, Permanent Representative of the Federal Republic of Germany and outgoing President of Coreper, Nicolas Hommel critically analyses the relationship of the Presidency with the General Secretariat in the organisation of the work of the Council.

Source: Allocutions, messages de fin d'année de Monsieur Nicolas Hommel, Secrétaire Général du Conseil des Communautés Européennes, 1973-1980. [s.l.]: [s.d.].

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MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE OF PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVES (II)

Brussels, 22 December 1978

End of the Presidency of HE Ambassador Helmut Sigrist
Permanent Representative of the Federal Republic of Germany

Mr President,

The words that I use today will not be like those that I usually use on these occasions. That is not because it would be boring or difficult constantly to work variations around the same theme but because I feel a great need, at the end of the German Presidency, to make a few comments about the Secretariat's role and prospects and about the responsibility of the Secretary-General himself. But that will not stop me from beginning by paying tribute to your Presidency.

You gave your Presidency a promising theme: '*Nötiges tun, Mögliches versuchen*'— 'do what is necessary, attempt what is possible'. And giving real substance to this approach, a little later you spoke these wise words: '*Man darf alle Hoffnungen haben, aber keine Illusionen*'— 'we may have every hope, but no illusions'. To the General Secretariat, these sententious words seemed to express a very realistic and positive approach by the Presidency, pointing to better days.

It was a promising start. You mobilised a large team consisting of highly qualified, personable people. Subsequently, the priorities given to your activities were fully consistent with the theme that had been announced at the beginning. Gradually, however, the difficulty of the problems faced and the will to succeed developed a dynamic that led to the excessive workload of the last two months.

Mr President, as these events have unfolded, you have been a witness, a victim and, to some extent, a stage manager. I have had a great deal of admiration for you throughout this period, for many reasons. During this often tumultuous time you have been a President who essentially knew exactly where he wanted to go. Because of the skilful way in which you qualify what you say, discussions were able to produce transparent and comprehensible conclusions.

Your calm has been no less impressive. I do not remember ever having noticed any sign of agitation or even the slightest impatience when you have chaired the discussions. This has been possible because you have risen above purely organisational problems and have therefore succeeded in keeping yourself fully available for the real heart of your activities as President. That calm has also been a hallmark of your dealings with those around you, that is to say your colleagues, and the Secretariat in particular.

Your manner — amiable, conciliatory and pleasant — has done nothing to detract from your authority; on the contrary, it has made it possible to achieve results that a more commanding, more categorical approach could never have produced. Consequently, despite the final overburdened phase of the Presidency, you continue to be well liked within the General Secretariat. After all, you were, like us, the victim of policies and decisions that were not in the hands of the Permanent Representation. Otherwise, certain events that were not founded on the idea of doing what is necessary and attempting what is possible would not have taken place.

A few days ago, Mr François-Poncet and Mr Jenkins paid a well-deserved tribute to the impressive achievements of the German Presidency. We shall never forget that, during the German Presidency, the European Monetary System was created, the negotiations with Greece were successfully concluded on time and the German Presidency successfully cushioned the difficulties inherent in the MTNs and the renegotiation of the Lomé

Convention, nor shall we forget that it skilfully handled an awkward test in the highly sensitive matter of relations between the Council and the European Parliament.

Although the Presidency is theoretically indivisible, the centre of gravity of its activities lies in preparing the Council's work, in Coreper. The ideal whereby Coreper would meet in its two configurations on two specific days has been seriously undermined over the last three months. It is to your credit that, with one or two exceptions, Coreper II has been able to enjoy a normal and humane existence. For that, on behalf of all my colleagues involved, I am immensely grateful to you.

In the past, there have been situations where I believed that, by virtue of my responsibility, I had to give a few discreet hints as to the limited possibilities of the Secretariat. In the course of the Presidency which is coming to an end, however, the excessive workload over the last two months has been such that I cannot avoid saying something: not as a reproach for what is past, but as an indication for a future, where I believe we can hope for better days.

I bear a dual responsibility. First of all, vis-à-vis the Council. I believe that I take this seriously, and I have let all those, from the basements to the more elevated floors who share responsibility for serving you best, feel its full force. I am also responsible to the staff, whom I constantly remind that their duties correspond to their materially privileged position. However, in exercising that responsibility, I would like to keep a clear conscience.

In the past, I have kept a polite silence when I felt that Council sessions were piling up on the same dates as if some magical magnetism was involved. In the course of the outgoing Presidency, this phenomenon has occurred with alarming regularity. I appreciate the various reasons that can give rise to this kind of situation. However, when faced with excessive repetition, I can only believe that the organisational and administrative function is not being exercised where it should be: not because of any shortcoming on the part of those who are responsible on the ground but because certain powers have been moved to the capitals. I am happy to believe that the remote instigators are acting in good faith, it is just that they do not always know the workings of the General Secretariat very well, and the contradictory demands, which are often excessive and defy any coordination, require efforts which, where they are called for repeatedly, sometimes go beyond our means.

I am the first person to be deeply saddened if the work done by the Secretariat is regarded as inadequate or deficient. My natural tendency — for which I have certainly been criticised — is to seek the cause not outside but within the General Secretariat. However, when you think about it, is it surprising if an apparatus used by four Councils taking place at the same time at all hours of the day and night seizes up or has simple weaknesses for which I am, unfortunately, blamed?

Circumstances have dictated that the relative failings of the General Secretariat have also become apparent. The Council's work schedule would require its Secretariat to have a certain overcapacity if it was to be able to deal with critical situations smoothly. This argument has never found favour with the budgetary authorities. The Council wants to set an example. However, given the peculiar features of the budgetary procedure, the result is that the example is ineffective, and the General Secretariat continues to be the 'poor relation'. That is why, in the present circumstances, outside any budget debate, I am now taking the opportunity to raise a problem which merits your close attention.

I realise that my comments are unusual. The calm of Christmas Eve might have called for me to remain silent one more time. The sincere liking that you engender would also have been a reason to restrict myself to less spontaneous comments, as is customary. If I have not obeyed this holy rule, it is, in all conscience, because there was a task that I wanted to perform.

You have nothing to do with the problem I have raised. In so far as the organisation of work depended on you, it has been arranged perfectly. Together with your colleagues, you will look back on a successful Presidency, marked by authority but also by a great deal of charm and human warmth. That is something of which both I and

my colleagues have been very aware.

Finally, on behalf of the General Secretariat, I would like to offer you, your family and all your colleagues my warmest wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.