


# Interview with Jacques Santer: the allocation of portfolios (Sanem, 3 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] It was not an easy task, but in spite of everything you managed to set up your Commission and allocate the various portfolios. Then, in October 1994, you organised in Luxembourg, at the Château de Senningen, the first working meeting with the Members of your Commission. How did this first meeting go?

[Jacques Santer] It went fairly well, because, generally speaking, allocating portfolios always ends up in a 'night of the long knives', as they say. Delors did it that way, as did all the Commissions, and I too arranged the meeting here for the end of October. The first of November was the date I had fixed as the deadline, the final date: the first of November. I had timetabled the journalists' press conference for the afternoon, at 4 o'clock. They said: 'You are optimistic,' and I replied: 'Yes, but by 4 o'clock it will all be over.' That is how it happened. It all went well. My proposal for the allocation of portfolios was ratified in its entirety by the Members of the Commission. It was just that there were still two problems remaining: a minor problem was that of the Italian, Mrs Bonino, because in Italy, nearly every day they would change the Commissioner, the individual that they were nominating, and the last one to be proposed was Mr Napolitano, who was President of the Committee on Legal Affairs and of the Security Committee in the Italian Parliament or Senate. He was a most distinguished lawyer, and so, when allocating the portfolios, I had given him Justice and Internal Security. Then, on Friday afternoon — this meeting was scheduled for Saturday — I received a telegram from Mr Berlusconi, who was then Prime Minister, saying: 'No, Mr Napolitano will not be going to Brussels; it will be Mrs Bonino.' However, Mrs Bonino was in New York at that time, at the United Nations, so it was difficult to get in touch with her, and she had to return. She was not even aware that the meeting was taking place, but she willingly accepted appointment as a Member of the Commission. I then had to change all the portfolio allocations on Friday evening, giving Mrs Gradin responsibility for Justice and Internal Security and Mrs Bonino — because this was what she wanted — responsibility for Human Rights, since she was very keen on Human Rights, even though Human Rights did not carry the same weight in the European Union as in other international forums. That was why I had to boost it later on by combining it with responsibility for Fisheries. That was one problem.

The second problem was that Mr Brittan, Leon Brittan, was not happy with his portfolio, because he had wanted to have International Trade, which he was given, so he wanted that — including the negotiations for the Uruguay Round, the WTO, and all that. He got that, but he also wanted policy for the Eastern bloc countries as well, since he was of Baltic origin. He also wanted responsibility for that. This I refused, because I wanted to give it to Mr van den Broek, and I did in fact do so. Upon which, Brittan threatened resignation. I said: 'If you want to resign, I accept your resignation. All my life I have always, always accepted all the resignations that have been tendered to me.' Everybody was aware of this, so it did not constitute a threat for me. I said: 'If you resign, I shall ask Mr Major to appoint someone else, it is very simple. I accept it, for it is not up to me not to accept a resignation.' So that was it. In the British press there was one newspaper that was quite aggressive on this point, and in the following days it tried to identify some discord within the Commission. I said no, for at the press conference I invited some British journalists and I told them: 'No, it has been accepted just as it is. I shall present it as such to the European Parliament. It is up to Parliament to approve it, and if somebody does not accept this, he need only resign and I shall appoint someone else.' The British had some difficulty accepting this. Nonetheless, they had to face the fact that it really was my intention to do so. Yet, generally speaking, if you read the dailies and the weeklies that came out after the Senningen meeting, on the whole the press was quite favourable. I remember that the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, which is usually fairly tough, said that it was a great success diplomatically. So it was generally well received, with the result that in the European Parliament too, I secured a very large majority. Although the vote at the investiture was a close one, I should say that the result for the Commission here was quite convincing. At any rate, I believe that two-thirds or three-quarters of the votes in Parliament were guaranteed.

Before the investiture, hearings had been held of the various Members of the Commission, and they went quite well. There were just one or two hearings that went off less well, the one involving Mrs Gradin and also, I think, the one involving the Irish Member, who was less sympathetic to divorce or abortion. But that was the traditional Irish position, and on that some MPs had certain reservations, but that was not important,

and despite all that, it went off well.