

Interview with Jacques Santer: the election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage (Sanem, 6 April 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] I should like to devote the beginning of this interview to the European Parliament, since from 1975 to 1979, you were sitting in Parliament, of which you were the vice-president from 1975 to 1977. Could you recall for us some of the memories that you have retained of this period, and particularly of the battles that the Assembly had to fight in order to be elected by direct universal suffrage?

[Jacques Santer] You are right to point out that I was at the European Parliament for the first time from 1974 to 1979. It was, of course, a Parliament that was quite different from what it is today. At the time it was called the Parliamentary Assembly, not yet the European Parliament. There were double mandates, so one was a member both of the national and the European parliaments. As a result, it was physically demanding, because it not only meant moving to Strasbourg or Brussels, but also working at the national level. So, from that point of view there was a completely different atmosphere from that of today. What is more, at the time Parliament had no power of its own, except for a few crumbs of budgetary powers. Apart from those, it was just consultative in that respect. It was then that the debate on election by direct universal suffrage was born. At the time, if I remember correctly, it was an idea of President Giscard d'Estaing's, who announced it. But there was the controversy about whether the powers of the European Parliament should be increased and then followed by an election by direct universal suffrage, or vice versa. So, to reply to your question, that was the great controversy at the time.

At first the MPs, as well as the political parties, wanted first of all to increase the powers of the MPs, saying that an election by direct universal suffrage would be of no use at all if the powers were not increased. It would be merely a façade, or something like that; but then the question arose: perhaps following elections by direct universal suffrage, by virtue of the enhanced legitimacy that MPs elected by direct universal suffrage obtained, they would be able to attribute extra powers to themselves.

This was the idea that held sway in the end, because no one really wanted to abandon the idea of universal direct suffrage. This was the controversy that was then raging in Parliament, but, as I said, 1974 also signified the arrival of the British for the first time. There was a change in the atmosphere in the European Parliament at that moment. The Labour MPs, who were anti-European, arrived. Today it is the contrary: it is the Conservatives who tend to be anti-European — that is the way it goes. But the atmosphere in Parliament was different then, it was completely different. Furthermore, I must say that there were much closer relations with the Council of Europe, and I still regret that this is no longer the case today. This was not only because we were based in the same building as the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, but there was a lot of interaction between the European Parliamentary Assembly and the Council of Europe. For instance, I can remember that at one time I was appointed rapporteur for human rights for the European Parliament and I had a co-rapporteur at the Council of Europe. As a result we exchanged ideas, but I would go to the Council of Europe just as the rapporteurs from the Council of Europe would go to the Strasbourg Assembly.

That all disappeared later. Now they are trying to build links between the two parliamentary institutions again. But the atmosphere was completely different from what it is today. We had no powers and there were the great political leaders there, and I was very young at the time — one of the youngest — in 1974 I was 37 years old. I was also the national president of my party. We were then in opposition, for the first time since 1926. We were in opposition, so I had lots to do here at the national level and I enjoyed frequenting some of the outstanding figures who were there, such as Mitterrand, who, I think, was there; Chirac was there; a little later Willy Brandt was there; so I was able to rub shoulders with some notable political figures. I should say it was that sort of friendly atmosphere that attracted me to politics; it was quite different from today's.

However, to reply very precisely to your question, there was this controversy — this controversy that came to light afterwards, which was there in the treaties as well — between enlargement and deepening. It is always the same controversy. In that case, it was deepening versus election by direct universal suffrage, and thus legitimisation.

We finally opted for the latter. It was precisely this decision, to institute elections by direct universal

suffrage from 1979 onwards that gave rise to a number of confrontations between the various institutions of the European Community later on. This was because Parliament always wanted to take more powers away from the executive, that is to say, the European Commission. I suffered as a result; we shall certainly come back to this later on. It was therefore a decision that had quite important political implications afterwards.