

Interview with Jacques Santer: the composition of the European Commission (Sanem, 3 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Parliament approved your appointment. From that point on, practically speaking, how was everything organised? How did you prepare for your arrival in Brussels and how did you go about forming your Cabinet?

[Jacques Santer] First of all I tried to set up ... not my Cabinet in its entirety, just choosing some individuals, among whom was the Head of Cabinet, Mr Cloos, Jim Cloos, whom I already knew and had worked with when he was a member of the Permanent Representation in Brussels during the 1991 Intergovernmental Conference that we chaired, and which led to the Maastricht Treaty. As a result I knew him; he had also been Head of Cabinet to the Luxembourg Member of the Commission, René Steichen, beforehand, so I appointed him Head of Cabinet. Then, with his help, we assembled a whole jigsaw puzzle. I went round the various capitals to canvass the Members of the Commission and put forward the necessary proposals, given that it was well known that — for the very first time — all the Members would have to appear at a hearing held by the European Parliament. This was not very easy, but little by little it came about. There were already some heavyweights — former Members of the Commission who re-enlisted, such as Mr Brittan, Leon Brittan, and Bangemann. However, to constitute the Commission, posts had to be allocated politically among the various political groups. That was important so that the larger groups, and also the smaller groups, might not feel marginalised when it came to the composition of the Commission. It was obviously necessary to have the right persons with the proper qualifications for the various portfolios. Moreover, the European Parliament had already made some demands, particularly concerning the representation of women in the Commission.

In short, there was a real jigsaw puzzle to put together, and it went off relatively well. I had some difficulties with some Members of the Commission, which I would rather not have had, and others, where I was unwilling to go along with the demands made by the various Member States concerning the allocation of the portfolios. Those were the problems that were the most tricky to solve. But I succeeded in the end. The difficulty was that at that time the President only had the right to be consulted by the Member States — this has since been changed by the Treaty of Nice — but it was the Member States who decided on the appointment of their candidates. As a result, in some cases one needed to be persuasive — to exercise one's powers of persuasion on the various governments. Some responded well to this; others just appointed their candidate. In some cases they hesitated between different possibilities, in which case one had to find the means or adopt a strategy to shape the choices made by the various Member States. We succeeded in some areas; I could cite some examples. Finland, or rather the Finnish Government, had proposed a candidate: the former Foreign Minister, who was clearly anti-European — or Eurosceptic, as they say nowadays. What is more, he wanted the Agriculture portfolio, because he was also a former Minister for Agriculture. That, I had difficulty in accepting; I telephoned the Finnish President during the night — a referendum was being held in Finland — I called President Martti Ahtisaari and said: 'Look here, I find it difficult to envisage having someone in a team whose vision of Europe does not correspond precisely to my own.' To which Martti Ahtisaari, a very open man, but one who, as President of the Republic, had some power, replied: 'I can accept that; I shall make you a proposal and you can come and see me.' I went to see him at once, the following day, and in my presence, at the press conference following our consultation, he immediately put forward another name. It was the name of Mr Liikanen, the then Permanent Representative of Finland who had also conducted the accession negotiations with Finland, and he therefore became a Member of the Commission. That is how we short-circuited the other one. Of course Mr Aho's Government was not very happy about it... I had another problem with the Austrian Government, which wanted to have a woman appointed. To have a woman would have been a good thing, because it corresponded to the profile, but for Transport ... And a Socialist into the bargain. And I did not have enough Christian Democrats. Since there was a coalition, a grand coalition in Austria, I spoke to the then Vice-Chancellor, Mr Busek, who was a Christian Democrat. I said: 'Erhard, do you not have a Christian Democrat who could perhaps take the Agriculture portfolio?' because Agriculture had not yet been allocated. 'Oh yes, yes' he said. 'We have a very good Minister for Agriculture who is sure to be delighted to go to Brussels.' It was Fischler. That way we removed the Socialist lady; not just because she was a Socialist or anything like that, but in order to have a balance within the Commission. The same thing happened with Mr van den Broek. There had been a

change of coalition in the Netherlands. van den Broek was a Member of the Commission whom I knew well, and I worked very well with him. He was a Christian Democrat, and the coalition in the Netherlands was a Social-Liberal coalition which had also proposed a Socialist for the Transport portfolio. I therefore went twice to see the Prime Minister, Mr Wim Kok, whom I knew and who also worked with Mr van den Broek, and he told me: 'I agree to van den Broek, provided that my coalition partner also agrees.' So I said: 'If the Netherlands wants to retain a major portfolio, the Foreign Affairs portfolio, they will have to keep van den Broek; otherwise, if they take somebody else, in that case it is certain that the Netherlands will have no right to the Foreign Affairs portfolio.' At that time I had the Transport portfolio in mind. Upon which the Netherlands said: 'No, no, no, in that case we prefer Foreign Affairs.' That is how van den Broek remained in the Government, and that is why I had to give van den Broek the Foreign Affairs portfolio, the CFSP.

As you can see from all this, there is a whole procedure to follow. Of course, there were some states that had their eye on certain portfolios. So I said ... Italy wanted to have, generally speaking, the Foreign Affairs portfolio; they had an excellent candidate in the person of Mr Monti, but he wanted to have Monetary Policy. I said: 'But that is going to be rather difficult', because at that time Italy was having a lot of problems in the monetary sphere, and I said: 'You will always be in an awkward position with your country of origin if you take Monetary Policy.' So I gave him the Internal Market, together with taxation and so forth. It was a major project, and he dealt with it very well. As for France, there was Yves-Thibault de Silguy, who was an independent but nominated by Mr Balladur, and Mrs Cresson, who was nominated by Mr Mitterrand. Mrs Cresson wanted the Eastern bloc countries, which I refused her because she owned a company that was operating in the Eastern bloc. I told her: 'This is quite impossible; it is incompatible,' and so on. As a result, she got Research and Development. As you see, it is one big jigsaw puzzle made up like that, from small and large countries, in both the North and South. I had even given one portfolio to a Norwegian, Mr Stoltenberg, because the referendum in Norway had not yet been completed, and it was thought that Norway was going to accede to the European Union as its 16th Member State. That is why I gave him Fisheries, for Norway's sake, to give a little support to Norway's accession to the European Union by bolstering public opinion. This fell through, of course. The Commission had already been constituted here in Luxembourg when the referendum resulted in rejection. So in the end I had to give Fisheries to someone who was not ... let us say, whose portfolio was not sufficiently balanced: it was Mrs Bonino who obtained Fisheries in this way. If we had known beforehand, we would have combined Fisheries and Agriculture, or something like that. But that is the way it went. Anyway, she dealt with this task very well. It was a difficult thing to do, but despite everything, we managed to create a certain balance in the various ... And in the end, I had five women in the Commission, so Parliament was quite happy, I must say, concerning the allocation of posts to women.