

Interview with Charles Rutten: the role and operation of Coreper (The Hague, 29 November 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] From 1960 to 1969, you were Deputy Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the Council of the European Communities in Brussels. Could you remind us or explain to us how Coreper worked and what was its role at that time in the Council's decision-making process?

[Charles Rutten] Yes, Coreper, meaning the Committee of Permanent Representatives was charged with preparing the decisions to be taken in the Council of Ministers. In general it dealt gradually with more and more technical questions, sometimes even very, very technical. Coreper prepared them with sub-committees etc. and the ministers (since initially it was almost always the Council of Ministers meeting at the level of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs) the ministers preferred by far that Coreper agreed on the full package to avoid them having to study the files they weren't interested in. That was the main role of Coreper.

This meant that, gradually, Coreper developed a position that gave it considerable ... one could say powers — I prefer to speak of influence — because it had no powers; it could not take decisions, it could only submit proposals to the Council of Ministers. They preferred to make A proposals. An A proposal was one that, within Coreper, enjoyed complete unanimity, and thus the ministers had merely to adopt it formally but without any debate.

The system of A Decisions clearly gave rise to mistrust outside with many people having the impression that Coreper was practically seeking to assume the power of ministers. And that of course was quite impossible because they were civil servants, Coreper — they were diplomats but they were still civil servants. So they couldn't do so nor did they do so. But it was the only way to get the Council of Ministers to function. Ministers could then focus on questions of policy and of sufficient importance to merit their attention.

Coreper was divided in two. I believe that was the question you wanted to ask. There was Coreper I and Coreper II. Coreper I were the Deputies. Each Permanent Representative had a deputy and I was the Deputy of the Dutch Permanent Representative. The division of labour gave the deputies all the very technical questions in a whole range of areas, while Coreper II, where the Ambassadors met, dealt with questions of a political, legal or foreign relations nature. And this division of labour gave us, the deputies, a lot of work because it meant that we had very long meetings, first in order to understand what we were talking about and then to reach an agreement. But that was *grosso modo* the division of labour and how Coreper operated.

I recall a member of the European Parliament, Mr Van der Goes van Naters, who recently died aged 101, who always said that Coreper was the work of the devil because the Ambassadors had hijacked the powers of the ministers. That is something I take issue with.