

Interview with Charles Rutten: how Coreper's activities evolved (The Hague, 29 November 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In the 1980s, you came back to Brussels as the titular Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the European Communities. Had the way in which Coreper worked or the nature of its activities changed much compared with the period that you had known in the 1960s when you were Deputy Permanent Representative? Twenty years later, how had things changed?

[Charles Rutten] The 1960s were essentially a period of construction. It was the time when the basic decisions were taken. You must not forget that the Rome Treaty was a framework treaty. It established a certain number of principles, a certain number of objectives; it created institutions to achieve those objectives, but otherwise left the decisions for the attainment of those objectives to a later date, with one single exception: that was the famous common customs tariff which was established in a detailed way with the various stages, etc. But, for example, on the common agricultural market, which was vital both for France and for the Netherlands, the Rome Treaty enshrined only the principles and some very vague and even contradictory wording. Otherwise, everything was left to later decisions.

And the 1960s was the period when these objectives were gradually attained and codified in documents, in regulations, etc. When I returned in the 1980s, of course, the situation was very different. First of all, when I left Brussels there were still six of us; when I came back there were 12. And that completely changed the atmosphere, also within Coreper. For a start, when there were six of us, we were with the six founding countries, those who had heard the call and had responded. That had an extra special dimension, not just purely political and based on national interests but based on the desire to eliminate the threat of war and establish an area of lasting and perpetual peace in Europe.

That ideal no longer played any role whatsoever in the 1980s, and there were now a number of Member States that had joined the Community purely for reasons of national interest and nothing else, and hence, during the decisions, the discussions, the negotiations, they adopted positions that were inspired, if not solely, then at least mainly, by national interest. The idea that one could sacrifice a part of one's national interests in the interests of the Community or of the Union had completely disappeared. That doesn't exist any more. The only debate, and especially also at national level, is always: 'What have you brought back? How did you defend our interests?' The question as to whether, by not reaching an agreement, one has harmed the interests of the Union, has disappeared. And that's what struck me the most when I was there. There was, of course, Margaret Thatcher, who was the very embodiment of the national interest first and foremost. But she was followed by others and also even by some founding Member States.

[Étienne Deschamps] And I imagine that, if there were necessarily twice as many members at Coreper meetings, there was also a more cumbersome administrative machinery, new language problems, more people and, well, an institutional machine that was more and more unwieldy, cumbersome ...?

[Charles Rutten] Yes, I wouldn't like to be a Permanent Representative today because of the enormous complications and complexity of the machinery, as you said, the national interests of 25 countries, with countries that have very little in common and certainly no common ideal.