

Interview with Norbert Schwaiger: the sharing of budgetary powers between the Council and Parliament (Brussels, 22 November 2006)

Source: Interview de Norbert Schwaiger / NORBERT SCHWAIGER, Raquel Valls.- Bruxelles: CVCE [Prod.], 22.11.2006. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:07:49, Couleur, Son original).

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Raquel Valls] Since you arrived in the Council, you have witnessed the gradual growth of the budgetary and legislative powers of the European Parliament, notably with the introduction of the codecision procedure in 1993. Has the new procedure got under way easily? How has the relationship between the Council and Parliament evolved over time? Can you recall a particular episode that was memorable for the degree of cooperation or tension between the two institutions?

[Norbert Schwaiger] Perhaps we could first analyse the beginning of your question. There is quite a substantial difference between budgetary powers, which began by being a means to give Parliament more responsibilities and, later, the allocating of legislative powers.

When I first arrived, the parliament was the Assembly, with duties that were essentially consultative, and which was unelected, being made up of members who were appointed by the national parliaments. In the course of the opening process begun by the Hague Summit, the need was stressed of enhancing the role played by Parliament, the democratic component.

This was begun by giving complementary or additional competences, or just competences, to Parliament in budgetary matters, however, very, very limited ones. You could say that they had the right to have their say, but no more than that. Furthermore, this was limited exclusively to expenditure. [...] Non-compulsory expenditure increased with the creation of various funds: the Regional Fund, the Social Fund and certain other specialised funds.

Then, and this was still at the beginning, it was Parliament that could make these observations and there were meetings, either informal or formal, between the budgetary authority — which remained the Council, and the Budgetary Commission in Parliament. That did not go very far; this was why an attempt was made to improve the competences of Parliament in this area, in the mid-1980s, by giving it the right to take decisions on part of the non-compulsory expenditure, within narrow limits. There was a margin calculated according to certain criteria, based on the preceding year's budget, and Parliament used half of this margin freely — freely so to speak, but still within these limits.

This did not help make Parliament more satisfied with its lot. There were even disputes occurring more frequently, because they were contested, quite rightly. Where are the limits to the right to... how is the margin for Parliament defined? What is more, Parliament tried to use the budgetary margin in order to influence the legislative process — sometimes conniving with the Commission to do so — by developing pilot projects that they tried to maintain for several years, and so forth. This sometimes led to situations where they were unable to achieve a budget for the following year, or at any rate, not in time. In these circumstances the result was that the Council or the Community had to live on monthly twelfths of the budget, with all the complications that this entailed and with the tardy adoption of the definitive budget, sometimes several months later — once I think it was in September, or even afterwards.

At the same time, the Council, seeing that it had given Parliament certain opportunities — partly in order to keep an eye on it, but also to develop the budget in a more structured fashion — following Delors' appointment as President of the Commission, conceived multiannual budgetary programming. This was known as the Delors I Package, Delors II, then it was Agenda 2000, where they decided on this package in Berlin. We are now at the point where last year was given over to discussions on how to complete this package of multiannual programming until 2013.

This was partly to give more responsibilities to Parliament, but it was also to discipline the sectoral appetites of the Member States, to put in place multiannual programming and, at the same time, settle the overall budget, or even the development of the overall budget and its allocation.

All this was a process that I think was, on the whole, very useful because it is well adapted to continuity of development on the one hand, and to allowing Parliament to play an ever greater role in the budget on the

other. Now it is generally Parliament... its second reading concludes the budgetary procedure and that is where the button is pushed for final adoption of... in close contact during the second reading between the Council, the Commission and Parliament. So I think that this evolution has been, on the whole, at any rate ultimately, very positive.