

‘Transparency replaces trickery’ from Die Welt (22 August 2006)

Caption: In its edition of 22 August 2006, the German daily newspaper Die Welt outlines the objectives of the new policy of transparency in the Council of the European Union and publishes several opinions on its advantages and disadvantages.

Source: Die Welt. 22.08.2006. Hamburg. "Transparenz statt Gemauschel", auteur:Schiltz, Christoph B.

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Transparency replaces trickery

From the autumn, it will be possible to follow EU debates on the Internet — bringing the EU closer to the citizen

By Christoph B. Schiltz

Brussels — A minor revolution is under way in Brussels; from this autumn, EU citizens will be able to experience live on the Internet how major political decisions are taken — whether they happen to find themselves in a Spanish finca or in a lobbyist office in central Berlin.

Things that were hitherto negotiated in obscure meeting rooms will now be dragged into the public gaze. Transparency, not secret whisperings — that is the EU's new vision. Henceforth, all discussions by the 25 EU Member States on legal measures in which the European Parliament has a say will take place in public. That accounts for almost 80 % of all meetings.

The new rules arise out of a decision taken in June this year by the Heads of State or Government, the aim of this new transparency initiative being to bring Europe closer to its citizens. The point was already made in the Final Declaration of the December 2000 Nice Summit that 'the democratic legitimacy and the transparency of the Union and its organs must be improved'. One year later, in the Laeken Declaration, much the same noises were made. And, in 2004, the 'transparency of the proceedings of Union institutions' was even enshrined in the European Constitution — although the new Treaty will not enter into force until 2009 at the earliest. It was at this point that a German law student from Bonn took the matter in hand. Last year, Heiko Piesbergen complained to the EU Ombudsman about the lack of transparency in the Council of Ministers. At the same time, he managed to win to his cause such influential MEPs as Elmar Brok (CDU) and Chris Davis (Liberals). In April, the European Parliament called on the 25 Member States to introduce greater openness into their dealings. Backing also came from EU Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso. He is, at all events, a fervent advocate of transparency, and has for months, together with Siim Kallas, the Commissioner for Administrative Affairs, been fighting for greater openness in the matter of subsidies 'in order to win back the trust of Europe's citizens'.

This increased the pressure on EU government leaders. And, in June, they approved the new guidelines on transparency in the EU. But just what benefits do public sessions bring? British MEP Chris Davis believes that 'they are an important step forward and will change the Council of Ministers for the better.' Joachim Wuermeling (CSU), Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs, is not so upbeat: 'Openness is a good thing in principle. But the real deals are not, of course, made in the public eye.' The point is made more pointedly still by a veteran Brussels diplomat: 'If the Council of Ministers meets in open session, even more decisions will be taken in the corridors, and lunch gatherings for the select few will last even longer. The subsequent official meetings will then turn into a boring media event.' For the lobbyists, too, there is nothing to be gained: 'We have to be on the ball when laws are drafted in the Commission rather than when they are passed by the Ministers,' to quote the lobbyist-in-chief of a large German association.