

‘Jean Quatremer: Fog in the Channel’ at Libération.fr (13 June 2006)

Caption: On 13 June 2006, on his blog entitled ‘behind the scenes in Brussels’, Jean Quatremer, reporter on the French daily newspaper Libération, analyses British reservations about the opening to the public of the work of the Council of the European Union. The broadcasting of Council deliberations on TV and on the Internet forces Member States to adopt their positions publicly and to take responsibility for their vote before their citizens.

Source: Quatremer, Jean, Coullisses de Bruxelles, UE. Libéblogs, les blogs de Libération. [EN LIGNE]. [s.l.]: [s.d.]. Disponible sur http://bruxelles.blogs.liberation.fr/coullisses/2006/06/brouillard_sur_.html#more.

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Fog in the Channel

Jean Quatremer

The United Kingdom — traditionally leader of the charge in any attack on impenetrable Brussels Eurocracy — has suddenly discovered that the transparency that it so desired might not, after all, be such a good idea. Last week, the new British Foreign Secretary, **Margaret Beckett**, voiced reservations about the proposal — due to be agreed by the EU Heads of State or Government at their summit meeting this Thursday and Friday — to give the public access to the Council of Ministers' deliberations (see Annex 1 to the draft conclusions of the European Council, entitled 'An overall policy on transparency').

This proposal goes further than the partial access agreed last December (and already discussed on this blog). The current intention is to publish on television and the Internet all ministerial deliberations about matters subject to the codecision procedure with the European Parliament (i.e. virtually everything concerning the internal market, including immigration and asylum policy), unless the Council decides otherwise. Matters covered by the 'second pillar', i.e. common foreign and security policy, and the 'third pillar', judicial and police cooperation, will, however, remain confidential.

One diplomat commented that 'the proposal does not go as far as the **European Constitution**, which had divided the Council's work into two separate areas: one legislative and, therefore, public, the other non-legislative and, therefore, to remain secret.' Under the new proposal, certain legislative areas, notably concerning 'third pillar' matters, will still be kept away from the eye of the camera.

In Luxembourg for yesterday's meeting of EU Foreign Ministers, Mrs Beckett, who has taken over from Jack Straw, spoke of the need to 'strike the right balance'. She said there was a failure to recognise not only that difficult and sensitive negotiations were sometimes conducted in the EU but also that the Union had to engage in such negotiations with third parties at world level, for example about trade. It should not be seen to be debating its own negotiating position in public before negotiations opened. 'The British have woken up a bit late on this one,' commented the annoyed diplomat quoted above. **'What is their real problem with the proposal? If they intend to take it to the wire in the European Council, they may well find that they have allies because most of the Member States, apart from the Scandinavian countries, have been more resigned to transparency than enthusiastic about it.'**

The British criticisms are indeed curious, to say the least. The fact is that the new transparency policy will have no bearing on the Council's executive functions (with particular regard to trade), nor on foreign policy or defence. Moreover, as in a parliament, there will be no ban on informal meetings between governments in order to thrash out compromises. The sole purpose of the policy is to require Member States to state their positions publicly and take responsibility for their votes in the eyes of their citizens. Surely this is only as it should be, given that the Council of Ministers is simply a 'chamber of nations'? Small wonder, then, that Britain's posturing has raised eyebrows in Brussels.