

Interview with Norbert Schwaiger: the General Secretariat of the Council as adviser to the Presidency (Brussels, 22 November 2006)

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[Raquel Valls] During negotiations held at various levels — at working party, committee or Council level — to what extent do representatives of the Member States and the Presidency call on the expertise of the Secretariat's officials?

[Norbert Schwaiger] In its reports, in its working documents, or sometimes in its notes to the Presidency, the Secretariat seeks to outline the paths to explore so as to reach a compromise, or just the suggestions for a compromise, or at least the issues identifying a certain direction. This is quite clear and the Secretariat would not be a competent body if it did not do so. To what extent it accepts these offers or even makes a request, depends on each Presidency. Generally speaking, in our experience the larger Member States, which possess a complete infrastructure at home, are happier relying just on themselves. Although they will accept advice from the Secretariat, they have already arrived at their own philosophy and at the way to tackle a problem. Which is all very well, but I believe that the role of the Secretariat, as a result of increased numbers and of the fact that there is a lack of experience among the new Member States, is an important one to play in this direction, and it is also substantial.

We also noticed that the smaller Member States — even the older ones — were usually more open to accepting advice from the General Secretariat, or to relying on it, because they do not always possess the necessary resources for these tasks, which are often very technical. That is the general rule.

Now this case has certainly been strengthened — as I have just mentioned — by the arrival of the new Member States, and the next step will be in early 2008, when Slovenia holds the Presidency. We shall see how far these new members will rely on the secretariat. It is very probable, because it is obvious that they still need some help, more so than the older members. But in future, this will be a permanent issue, because with 25 Member States and very soon 27, and perhaps even more after that, the experience that a Presidency can acquire will be lost if it has to wait for twelve or fifteen years between one Presidency and the next.

That is quite clear.

For these reasons too, when we contemplate future reforms, should we not abolish the very short six-month rota system and perhaps find a different solution, perhaps longer presidencies with several Member State participating simultaneously? Whether or not they should be split up by sectors or otherwise will be decided in the future.

At any rate, much thought has already been given to this in relation to the Convention and even beforehand; studies have been made within the Secretariat. All this is certainly... if the current situation is described, this will not be the definitive situation, given the enlargements — or enlargement.