

Interview with Norbert Schwaiger: the Secretaries-General of the Council (Brussels, 22 November 2006)

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[Raquel Valls] During your career within the Council, you were able to meet the five Secretaries-General who succeeded one another at the head of the General Secretariat. How has the role played by the General Secretariat evolved?

[Norbert Schwaiger] Up to a point, of course, this development was linked to their personalities. For instance, the first Secretary-General that I knew — this was towards the end of his period of service, because he had been there since the beginning of the ECSC — was given the title of Secretary-General during the merger of the three executives and therefore of the Council as well. He set up a single secretariat. He had been there from the start and was present at the Treaty negotiations. It was he who established the General Secretariat. He was more or less the first official there and, later on, he had the task of developing the whole thing. He was very close to the leaders of that period; he knew them all personally, whether it was within the secretariat of the delegations of the Member States — you must remember that there were only six — or as leading figures in charge of ECSC or common market affairs in the Member State governments. So a lot was achieved as a result of his personal background and his personal contacts. In this position he was a sort of patriarchal figure.

His successor had some difficulties because he had no past history within the Community. His had been a diplomatic career in Luxembourg and he had to manage affairs during a fairly difficult phase: it was the first enlargement, which also had fairly difficult implications for the secretariat. The Community of the Six used one working language — French — which was also the language, or one of the languages, of the host country, which facilitated many things. With the arrival of Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom in particular, both English, as a language, and Anglo-Saxon working practices, arrived. Little by little, these made inroads — the language did so very swiftly; the working methods more slowly and differently from one area to another. One of these was to organise a new in-house translation service, for instance. At the time more than half the staff here were translators or were concerned with the reproduction of documents in various languages, because this was still virtually manual work.

He therefore had quite a difficult, almost thankless task, because there were new structures to develop everywhere as well as a lot of staff to recruit, and the secretariat grew very rapidly. I arrived in 1969 and then there were a little over 500 of us, if I remember correctly. Ten years afterwards, we had certainly doubled our numbers. And it was to increase still further. When I left the secretariat, we were well past the 2 500 mark, and I believe that this process has continued. I do not know the exact figures — I have tried to find them but without success. Where Mr Hommel was concerned, it was essentially work to do with restructuring and the development of the secretariat on the technical and practical side... We also changed building when he arrived — perhaps we could talk about that separately.

The next one, Mr Ersbøll, was again someone with a different background. He had been the Permanent Representative for Denmark here, later on he was the Danish Junior Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, and as a result he knew everybody as well as all the procedures. It was clear right from the start that he sought to play the role of Political Adviser, or Senior Political Adviser to the Presidency, at any rate outside his own delegation. He also conceived that of the Directors-General, on a technical level, as going in the same direction. So it certainly did not mean abandoning any ambition to deal with the substance, but rather strongly reinforcing it, which is what happened, not only at the level of the Committee of Permanent Representatives, but also at Council level and it happened at European Council level too.

The following Secretary-General, Mr Trumpf, where his experience was concerned, came from a similar background to Mr Ersbøll. He had also been a German Permanent Representative in Brussels, before which he had been Director for European Affairs in the Foreign Office; afterwards he had become State Secretary, still for Community affairs. This made it quite clear that he had been chosen because of his experience or his background, for his curriculum, because he would be able to continue, and he also wanted to continue, with the same role as Political Adviser, both for himself and for the secretariat as a whole. He too took some initiatives and developed what Mr Ersbøll had already prepared, so the same line was followed. With the

arrival of the High Representative — we have already touched upon the change of attributions — the Secretary-General/High Representative was essentially expected to be concerned with the CFSP and its development: its conception, implementation and advice on the drafting, etc. To this end the office of Deputy Secretary-General was created: Mr de Boissieu, who is the first holder — he still holds it — took on more or less the role previously played by the Secretary-General, by Mr de Erzbøll or Mr Trumpf, particularly for Community Affairs and, to some extent, for the JHA sector.

So that is the position now. Yet again, the Constitutional Treaty would have foreseen further developments, but for the moment it is not worth describing them in detail, since that has been put on the back burner, hasn't it?