

Interview with Norbert Schwaiger: the Secretariat's role in preparations for the European Councils (Brussels, 22 November 2006)

Source: Interview de Norbert Schwaiger / NORBERT SCHWAIGER, Raquel Valls.- Bruxelles: CVCE [Prod.], 22.11.2006. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:06:35, Couleur, Son original).

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/interview_with_norbert_schwaiger_the_secretariat_s_role_in_preparations_for_the_european_councils_brussels_22_november_2006-en-d37eedd6-e9c0-47a2-8634-d4540bc1141e.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

Interview with Norbert Schwaiger: the Secretariat's role in preparations for the European Councils (Brussels, 22 November 2006)

[Raquel Valls] Let us return to Mr Niels Ersbøll, who was the third Secretary-General. Do you recall the role that he played after 1982 in the organisation of the European Councils and in finalising the conclusions of the Presidency?

[Norbert Schwaiger] Yes... He played a most important role in the attempt to structure the work of the European Council. The Presidency, with the help of the Secretariat, had already prepared this work in the past. At first it was somewhat improvised, but later it became an institution, and the Presidency would travel about before a European Council, making a tour of Member State capitals. Mr Ersbøll did not merely contribute actively to preparing this 'tour of capitals', but he also took part right from the start and was asked to come. This came, once more, under the banner of continuity and essential memory, for in this way the Secretariat could infuse its experience of past presidencies in the advice that it gave to the current Presidency. This also had its consequences: often during these 'tours of the capitals, they had notes including outlines for discussions, or guidelines, or even the desirable results of a European Council concerning a given dossier.

So they developed this preparatory work while they were making preliminary provisional drafts of future conclusions. Then with all this as baggage, the Presidency could lead its talks in the various capitals towards a final objective, namely the desired result. I believe that Ersbøll contributed greatly to the development of this process. And it did not end there: I believe that he also played an important role in rationalising the drafting of the conclusion between the first day, which is usually a day of discussions, and the second day, which is essentially reserved for conclusions. This is because, beforehand, the practice had come about of Coreper meeting at night, sometimes together with members of the Political Committee, in order to draft a conclusion. It was then decided that the meeting was far too wide-ranging, because it was used as attempt to anticipate the negotiations that were to be conducted by the heads on the basis of a draft. As a result, these meetings were rationalised. There was, of course, the Presidency, often the Chairman of Coreper or sometimes a close collaborator of the President of the European Council, alongside other senior officials.

The Presidency was certainly the key element, but also present was Mr Ersbøll and, later on, his successors and sometimes the juriconsult, if there were any problems with the drafting, or clearly legal problems; there was generally the Deputy Secretary-General or the Secretary-General of the Commission as well, according to who it was. It was therefore a more rational exercise and one which brought a certain freshness to its conclusions, [which may have been worked on] until six o'clock in the morning, when these drafts were delivered to the delegations, who could as a result sleep soundly and get to work early enough to be able to write their comments for their heads — their ministers, or Chancellor, or President of the Republic, as the case might be. For more or less twenty years this remained the model that we worked to, with some adjustments made to different situations. Of course, when it is a matter of final negotiations on a Treaty, the drafting committee is different, but for a normal European Council this is the way things go.

So he contributed these elements or these initiatives that tended to go in these directions. Certainly [he played] an important role in putting in place a structure for certain things around the European Council itself. And he, like all Secretaries-General for some time now, was always seated to the left of the President of the European Council and was therefore listened to, which is most important. They do not have to make their way up from a seat further back, but they have the President's ear and more, in the external structures that have been set up... In the past, the European Council was a travelling show; now that everything is in Brussels or, at any rate, in Brussels for the formal meetings, it is easier here where all the apparatus of the Secretariat is in place and, if necessary, you can press a button and people are warned. It usually works and it makes practical matters much easier.