

## Interview with André Dubois: the role of the Council's General Secretariat in trade negotiations (Brussels, 8 December 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] To what extent do the representatives of Member States in this 'Technical Committee 113' (which has now become 133) and the presidency rely on the expertise of the officials in the Secretariat in negotiations?

[André Dubois] I believe that generally speaking, in fact in all negotiations, the Secretariat's role is no different from the one it usually plays. This means that it advises the presidency, with a view to encouraging progress and helping to find compromises; this calls not only for technical knowledge of the dossiers but also for a good knowledge of the delegations' positions, which is something that we have through our participation at all stages — working parties, Coreper and then the Council; it also calls for excellent collaboration with the Commission, because the roles are absolutely complementary here. As you know, the President works on the basis of dossiers prepared by the Secretariat, which provide him with all the elements he needs to conduct discussions, and which also provide him with pathways to solutions.

Huge trade negotiations like the Uruguay Round, for example, are very complex, involving many topics and many partners, and sometimes continue for many years. The Commission necessarily sets out in these negotiations with a fairly general mandate. It negotiates with the main partners and also often has many bilateral and unofficial contacts. It regularly reports to Committee 113, or indeed to the Council, and to take the example of the Uruguay Round, which I was still following, there were a number of ministerial meetings attended by Trade Ministers, who assisted the Commission in these negotiations. The Commission plays an essential part in negotiations of this kind, without the shadow of a doubt. It equips itself with plenty of advice, but has a great deal of room for manoeuvre and to take the initiative, and sometimes it takes risks. I remember the end of the Uruguay Round, when France was unable to accept the results of the negotiations, particularly as regards agriculture. I believe at the time it was Willy De Clerq and Ray Mac Sharry who were the Commissioners for Agriculture, and the Commission had virtually sealed the negotiations with the Americans in Washington. We had a very difficult Council meeting, at which Willy Claes presided. As so often, things happened in the office of the presidency, via what we called the confessional, and there we prepared for Mr Claes the basis for a compromise, because we knew the dossiers and the delegations' positions well. We had a team in Geneva and a team here, and I can tell you — but by the way, as it is the normal task of a secretariat, without deriving any particular glory from it, particularly as it was essentially my colleague in Geneva and the Secretary-General who were involved in the matter — that we succeeded in helping to resolve the problem. Obviously that calls for very good technical knowledge, very good knowledge of the delegations' positions, and very good knowledge of the room for manoeuvre, but that forms part of the normal tasks of a secretariat, which we do not perform only in the field of subsequent relations, but in our general work, in all the dossiers that have to be dealt with at Council level. It is now increasingly becoming an enormous organisation, and there is increasingly close teamwork between the President of the Council and the Secretariat, all the more so now that the Secretary-General's role has been politicised.