

Interview with Édith Cresson: the failings of the French political elite in Brussels (Paris, 29 January 2008)

Source: Interview d'Édith Cresson / ÉDITH CRESSON, Étienne Deschamps, prise de vue : Alexandre Germain.- Paris: CVCE [Prod.], 29.01.2008. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:10:47, Couleur, Son original).

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URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/interview_with_edith_cresson_the_failings_of_the_french_political_elite_in_brussels_paris_29_january_2008-en-abbdbd03-12de-4772-8d13-2bb3364735f6.html

Last updated: 05/07/2016



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[Édith Cresson] The French, or at least French politicians, have not yet realised that they have to make an all-out effort on public relations. When I was at the Ministry of Foreign Trade, I remember saying we should do some lobbying in Brussels. It caused an outcry in France, even from the then Minister for Industry. Lobbying was evil. I quite agree that people are free to see it as being good or bad. Personally I don't see it as either. It all depends on what you do with it.

[Étienne Deschamps] Yes, of course.

[Édith Cresson] So either we no longer want to exert any influence, bring no pressure to bear in a field that is vital for our future, or we should invest the necessary resources to exert influence. For the time being, French politicians have not decided where they stand on this issue, which is very important. In the European Parliament, French MEPs are often absent. We send people there to get rid of them, former ministers, people we want to reward for this or that. In the meantime the others are there from Monday morning to Friday evening and they are extremely active.

After the last election the French Socialists formed the largest contingent of all in the PES group. But we did not lay claim to leadership of the group. We could very well have done so, but no. We were told that the Germans had pre-empted that position. They had pre-empted the EPP too, and they had even pre-empted the presidency of the European Parliament. Then, because they could not take all three positions, they gave the EPP leadership to someone they had chosen. So the Germans carry a considerable amount of weight, but it is our fault. It is not the Germans' fault. I wish to make that clear. We have to realise that this is a struggle. French politicians have still not woken up to the fact that it is a real battle. We have recently discovered that to reduce VAT on restaurants we have to ask Brussels' permission, despite the fact that this is not a sector which is in competition: our restaurants are not competing with restaurants elsewhere in the European Union — even if there some very good restaurants there, for instance in Brussels — but we are not in competition. Well, we are not permitted to do so. In other words, on a matter that is really very minor — I mean, no one can claim that it is fantastically important — though this sector of activity is important in France, because there are a lot of tourists, indeed it is the world's top tourist destination. But we do not have the right. The French still have not understood that decisions are taken in Brussels, even on apparently secondary issues — all the more reason why it should be up to the government to decide — but, no!

[Étienne Deschamps] How do you explain this lack of awareness on the part of the French elite that the centre of decision-making is slipping away and that they need to engage in lobbying at the place where decisions are now being taken?

[Édith Cresson] It is a shortcoming among French politicians.

[Étienne Deschamps] But to what do you attribute that?

[Édith Cresson] To the elitist system.

[Étienne Deschamps] Why more so in France than elsewhere?

[Édith Cresson] Because France has a very elitist system. To start with it has a system of education which creams off the elite most effectively. We have a supposedly 'sensational' elite and for a long time, perhaps even now, the French, or more exactly the French civil service made a point of checking how many A-grade managers we had in the Commission's administration. As if that was where decisions were taken. Decisions are taken all the way up the ladder. It is very important not only to have people on every rung of the ladder but also to keep track of them.

The British, I may say, are the world champions in that field. The United Kingdom ambassador keeps tabs on the civil servants at the Commission. I have met French officials who have been summoned by the UK

ambassador, who inquired of them: ‘How come Mr So-and-So, a British citizen, has not yet been promoted to a particular position?’ I mean, you may criticise this attitude, but I have no intention of doing so. I think they are just standing up for their interests and they are quite right.

[Étienne Deschamps] They are standing up for their interests and that is fair enough.

[Édith Cresson] Historically, France adopted a different approach. The French view was, as ever, that France had a mission and its mission was to build Europe in order to end wars. And that was it. Britain was not involved at that stage. So we set up Europe with six nations, with Italy, the Benelux countries and France. So France tended to see Europe as an extended version of France, assuming that French talent would export itself to the other countries, which were just waiting for this to happen. It is a rather naive view of the real world, but my impression is that in the collective subconscious of France’s ruling class, certainly among its politicians, it is something that still exists. It is a bit different in business. They know they need to lobby and they get on with it. But in the world of politics they go on appointing people to the European Parliament — I say ‘appoint’ deliberately because in a party-list election they are put on a list, so in fact it is an appointment. They select people whose main concern is to come straight back to France and start preparing for the next election, their future job and so on, whereas the others stay for a long time. In France we have a ‘revolving-door’ system, in other words when someone has occupied a particular position for one term, they are told to hand it over as it is someone else’s turn. In other words, it is reward, a sort of sinecure, much as kings in the old days would give someone a stool as a reward. So everyone gets a turn but of course it is completely ineffective. It is an absolute disaster, and as long as France and its ruling class fail to realise this, we shall have lots and lots of problems.

[Étienne Deschamps] What about someone like Nicole Fontaine, who has often drawn attention to precisely these issues, in exactly the same way as yourself?

[Édith Cresson] Yes. Nicole Fontaine has done a great deal. Yes.

[Étienne Deschamps] She often condemned the absenteeism of French MEPs too, their lack of team spirit, their failure to keep track of issues from A to Z to secure a positive outcome.

[Édith Cresson] First of all they are spread over almost all the various groups, so they are divided. But even when they are not split up, as was the case with the Socialist group, which was the largest group in the European Parliament in numerical terms, we still failed to lay claim to the presidency. So, if you like, there is a certain ambivalence: on the one hand the French are absent and in a way not very effective, but on the other hand, they have been subjected to so much criticism for being too arrogant and pushy, for behaving as if France had a sort of mission, with France projecting its influence all over the world and so on, that now they are afraid of upsetting people. So they no longer dare say anything. I have often heard French MEPs say: ‘No, but we can’t say that because if we do we’ll be criticised for not being sufficiently European.’ So, in a way, we have ended up with the worst of both worlds, with the drawbacks of having perhaps been too arrogant in the past — which is quite possible, and it was certainly felt by some people to be arrogance, although I can think of other people who are arrogant too, but there it is. They only say it about the French.

[Étienne Deschamps] To those that have shall more be given.

[Édith Cresson] Yes, quite. And, on the other hand, there is almost complete absenteeism with a total lack of interest which means that when they are actually there they do not really dare speak out. For one thing they’re not sure of getting any support, uncertain of having the power they need, but also they’re afraid to upset people who are extremely well armed and organised. In addition these same people are persistently throwing back at us this image of arrogance. It’s quite possible that the French are arrogant. I couldn’t say. I don’t get that impression. Personally, I’m inclined to think it may have been the case in the past, as we were in a completely dominant position when it all started. Germany was nothing much at that stage, so France enjoyed a dominant position. Maybe that left a lasting impression on people? I always get the feeling that France is paying for its past mistakes.

[Étienne Deschamps] Past, yes, yes.

[Édith Cresson] Yes, past. But it would not pay so much if it had a greater presence and showed its true face, through effectiveness, clarity, trying, for example, to promote an economic doctrine, which is what Europe lacks most at present ... not to mention monetary policy.

[Étienne Deschamps] During the second half of 1989 you were directly involved, and for good reason, in the French Presidency of what was then the Council of the European Communities. Under such circumstances, six months is a very short period, both short and long at the same time. Do you think that during a single presidency a country — France in this instance — can nevertheless leave its mark ...

[Édith Cresson] Yes, absolutely.

[Étienne Deschamps] ... on certain issues, if not on European affairs as a whole?

[Édith Cresson] Well, I did myself. It was at that time that I broke the deadlock regarding Japanese cars. Backed by excellent civil servants. The French civil service is of very high quality, in particular when it produces what are known as *notes* (memos). They learn to write *notes* at the École Nationale de l'Administration (ENA), putting everything you need to know quite clearly on one page. I was genuinely impressed by the French civil service at that point. It's a pity not to use that very great capacity in the service of a genuine policy. So I took charge of the matter and I introduced the idea of quotas. Because the manufacturers — PSA and Renault — asked me to. They were joined by Fiat, then by governments in all the countries of the European Union, who were concerned about jobs. I started that process, because I had the will to do so. Here again, when a government has the necessary motivation — even if just one minister has sufficient motivation to get the rest of the government moving — it can be done. The only thing is that such motivation is slightly lacking at a European level.

So back we go to face our public opinion, with the news that Brussels will not play ball, and whole swathes of the population are furious — the fishing industry, or hotel and restaurant owners. Quite a lot of people who cannot understand, because they get the impression the French government can do nothing to defend them, because their demands are legitimate but nobody will hear them. The decision is taken elsewhere, no one knows where or how. But they are certainly furious with Europe. One after another, successive governments have told the public that it is not their fault, but Europe's. There is some truth in that. But if they approached the whole matter differently — not just to make an immediate difference to such or such a decision — but if their strategy meant greater involvement, things would obviously change. When I was at the Ministry of European Affairs, I organised regular meetings with French MEPs from all the groups and I explained to them what we were trying to achieve and asked them what they thought. We tried to boost their motivation. Not much along those lines has been done since. I would rather not comment on what the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of European Affairs do for our civil servants, who have no guidance at all. As they are loyal civil servants they serve their organisation. They are mercenaries but they do not, unlike the British or even others, defend the interests of their country. Of course people will explain that they have taken an oath, undertaking only to defend the interests of the Community. There is a touch of hypocrisy in all that — though not for the French and not because they are any less hypocritical than anyone else — they are just missing the point. But the others have certainly got the message.