

Interview with Édith Cresson: the first election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage (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 (00:04:03, 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_edith_cresson_the_first_election_of_the_european_parliament_by_direct_universal_suffrage_paris_29_january_2008-en-4afda5d1-ceb8-4c43-a51b-590c287bb8c3.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

Interview with Édith Cresson: the first election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage (Paris, 29 January 2008)

[Étienne Deschamps] With your agreement I should like to start this interview by going back to the very beginning, namely to the first election by direct suffrage to the European Parliament in 1979. You were elected as a Member of the European Parliament and served as a member of the Committee on Agriculture for three years until 1982.

[Édith Cresson] 81.

[Étienne Deschamps] 81?

[Édith Cresson] Yes, until the election of François Mitterrand.

[Étienne Deschamps] Yes, right. Could you tell us how this experience was helpful to your career, if at all? In particular with respect to your subsequent interest in agricultural, European and Community issues.

[Édith Cresson] Yes, it was extremely valuable. I saw how the European Parliament worked. It had only just started operating in this way, with the first election by universal suffrage, a change initiated by President Giscard d'Estaing [of France]. I was third on the Socialist Party list, because François Mitterrand had insisted on having a list with one man, one woman. We called them 'chabada' lists. So I was able to choose the committee I liked. As I had been the agriculture specialist in the Socialist Party, where I was a member of the National Secretariat, I opted for the Agricultural Committee. I was able to size up the balance of power there and see the way things worked. It was immediately apparent that the British adopted positions along the lines of: 'We should import New Zealand lamb rather than raising it in Europe'. Naturally I was against that and fortunately I was not the only one. I also noticed that the French MEPs took little part in parliamentary debates — as is still the case even now. This is a great pity; perhaps we might come back to this point, which is extremely important. It is something that is not taken seriously enough in France.

So what did I do? I joined forces with the Rally for the Republic (RPR) group, led at the time by Jacques Chirac, and we organised working sessions to prepare France's position. I had five British delegates opposite me who all wanted New Zealand lamb, so I felt a bit isolated, but I did manage to rustle up some support elsewhere. All this proved very useful in my subsequent job as Minister for Agriculture, immediately after François Mitterrand was elected in 1981. In that capacity I had to take part in the negotiations on farm prices, which were interesting, indeed very exciting and action-packed. At the European Parliament itself I saw a great deal too. For one thing I met a large variety of people. You might say that one of the problems inherent in any parliament is that it represents extremely varied opinions. There was the extreme right-wing, with Le Pen from France sitting next to a former Waffen-SS officer. It made one sit up and think. Then there was Stauffenberg, I recall, the nephew of the man who attempted to assassinate Hitler. Quite a nice man. Of course there were the British Conservatives, often very sceptical. Even the Labour MEPs were not very pro-European. There were the Italians, who were friendly, but it was hard to see which way the balance of power would tip. It was highly diverse. That is the impression it left on me, a patchwork of very different people, both in terms of their views, their sympathies and indeed their history. The history of nations is something that is really very important in France and in Europe as a whole. So, with these sympathies, we more or less knew from the outset what someone from a given country, regardless of their political leanings, right or left, would say on any issue. It was clear that though there was a determination to display loyalty to the EPP [European People's Party] or PES [Party of European Socialists] group, or indeed to one or other of the smaller groups, what MEPs actually had to say almost always reflected the same views, closer to a national standpoint than a party line or opinion.