

Interview with Édith Cresson: the Santer Commission and the European Parliament (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 (00:03:07, Couleur, Son original).

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Étienne Deschamps] And what do you put this rise in power of Parliament down to — at that particular time, at any rate — and this obvious determination, which was displayed quite openly, to exercise control over the executive and over the Commission?

[Édith Cresson] Well, the fact that it exercises control, that is one of its prerogatives, it's entirely natural. But the fact that it did what it did is something that is altogether astounding, and that it did not meet with, from the Commission and its President, or indeed from the States ... because neither Mitterrand nor Kohl was still there at that point. We were in the last phase of Kohl's tenure — he was on the way out, one might say — Mitterrand was no longer there, and so there was an evanescent quality about it. Jacques Chirac did what he could. I went to see him, we discussed it, and he was as astounded as I was, but he did not have the same power, and above all he had no contacts on the other side to put a stop to it all.

And in the Commission, Jacques Santer didn't have the charisma and the authority that Dehaene would certainly have had, I am sure, because I knew him a little, at that time. It was not without reason that we wanted someone strong at the head of the Commission, whereas the United Kingdom wanted someone weak at the head of the Commission. Someone weak at the head of the Commission was certainly not what Europe needed. If we are simply faced with a Commission that is coming up against difficulties on a permanent basis and therefore is not able to work ... I spent one year there and was able to do virtually nothing. If that's what we want, why join Europe if it is merely to prevent it from operating properly? One might well wonder.

At a personal level, I had good relations with the British — very good, in fact — but they had ... maybe it was a sort of reluctance as far as continental Europe was concerned, but once again, everyone has a collective unconscious, and we need to understand the collective unconscious of the British. Continental Europe has only ever brought them problems. Why would they want to be part of a territory that, throughout their history, has been nothing but a source of conflict? So they tarred everything with the same brush. They said to themselves, 'Germans, French — they're all the same, they're a constant source of problems. We look to the other side of the ocean,' as they have always maintained. 'Our allies are the Americans, and as for Europe — the less it works, the better off we are.' That's the impression that I had. That doesn't mean that at a personal level I did not have good relations with the British, but it's something that is innate, in the same way that we hold a grudge against the Germans, and they probably hold a grudge against us, too. We have tried to overcome it because we have been told for years and years that all of that is over, that now we need to adopt another attitude. When you see resurfacing the thing from which you wanted to flee, the thing that you have tried to suppress, even at a personal level in your own unconscious, it is terrifying. It is the return of the repressed.