

## **Interview with Alain Lamassoure**

*On the occasion of the plenary session of the European Convention April 25<sup>th</sup> in Brussels, "Tisser la Toile" interviewed Alain Lamassoure, MEP and former French Minister for European Affairs.*

**With regard to the recent declarations of Mr. Giscard d'Estaing on the election of a president of the European Council, how would you interpret the reaction of the small countries?**

Some representatives of the parliaments haven't even read the texts of the proposal. I, for my part, look upon the matter from a detached point of view, taking the viewpoint of a spectator. The press represented the point of view of the big states. Everybody reacted, without knowing very well actually about what they were talking about. And there have been very few reactions on the text of the Praesidium itself. Now it is the small countries' turn to come up with counterproposals. The interest of France is to read the text and to wait for the proposals of the small states.

As concerns the "chairman", a mandate of two and a half years is short. He leaves his post the moment he gets to know the problems. The chairman would have no legal powers. It wouldn't be him who makes the proposals, he would not have a staff under his orders nor a separate budget, he just chairs the sessions. However, this question has been handled badly since the beginning. The small countries are obsessed with the ulterior motives of the big ones. In fact, one should more be concerned about reality.

What is really going to change is that this proposal will be made after the European elections, taking into account their results. One will be obliged to choose the president in the winner's camp. If this system had been applied in 1999, it would not be Mr. Prodi who would have been chosen. In 1994, it would not have been Mr. Santer. Then, the teams put together by the president would be invested by the European Parliament. This already is a parliamentary regime.

**And as to the question of one commissioner per country...**

Claiming one commissioner for each country isn't serious. It is not justifiable. It would mean to deny the vocation of the Commission. It is not the States but the common European interest that they defend, which is quite different. The misinterpretation the small countries are subject to is to believe that it is the Commission that best defends their interests and the Council that defends those of the big ones. However, the framework where all States are represented and of which the weighting of votes is to be adapted, is the Council. Instead of saying that the president of the European Council is elected with qualified majority, that he is elected with simple majority and by secret ballot. Neither France nor Luxemburg have understood that the only real issue is the weighting of votes. One could even go further. There is now co-decision on all issues, the last word therefore resting with the Parliament.

In order to adopt a European law, the majority of States is necessary, represented in the Council with one vote per state. And the European citizens are represented by the European Parliament. This is acceptable for the big countries provided that one introduces two amendments: that the European Parliament represents the populations according to a rigorous proportionality, which is not the case today. It would be what the Praesidium calls "degressive proportionality". In case of conflict, the last word would go to the lower chamber. This is how it would be possible to play the double majority in the two institutions.

As concerns the proposals for the Commission, two ways are possible: One is that of the Praesidium, in favour of the big States, with few commissioners. For membership in the Commission, all States would be treated equally. The small countries are worried, but the question is less the nationality of the people but their quality. One would leave out all reference to a ceiling. This idea dates back to the entry of Austria. In 1994, Alain Juppé raised the question. He said that with the entry of central European and Scandinavian countries an unbalance would be created between small and big countries. Until then, in the Europe of Six and Twelve, there existed a balance between small, medium-sized and big countries. Then the problem of the voting rights in the Council came up. Mr. Juppé added the question of the number of the commissioners. The argument of the foreign ministers, whose every-day job is to fight the Commission, was that a strong Commission needed few Commissioners. The French set the example and decided to abolish the second commissioner of the big States. Today, one cannot reduce to less than one commissioner by country and the commission becomes a scene of struggle for power between big and small countries, which wasn't the case at the beginning.

Today the French government is interested in waiting for the counterproposals of the small countries and in rethinking the statute of the Commission. Wouldn't it be wiser not to put a ceiling and to see what happens? Tomorrow, that's is for sure, a political authority will be needed. One cannot tell the citizens that Europe is not being governed. This is why I've been saying for a year: The Commission as we know it is dead.

### **What do you think of the proposal to create a European foreign minister?**

I have written off a common foreign policy. Let's concentrate our efforts on the internal policies and the classical external competences. Even before Iraq I was pessimistic, but today, I don't have any illusions anymore. The governments need to have cosmetics. The foreign minister gives them cosmetics. You see, the French don't want a common foreign policy, Chirac's position towards the Eastern countries has shown that.

### **What do you think of the polemic concerning a reference to God in the Preamble of the Constitution?**

The problem is that the more one speaks of God, the more one mistrusts Europe. In fact, when one speaks of God, one doesn't speak of the real issues.

It seems to me that France has behaved ineptly. At the time of the previous convention, which dealt with the question of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, France refused to allow to mention God and the religious heritage. However, it seems to me that if one had allowed that, no one would speak of God today. Since that hasn't been accepted, this problem has occurred. Today, there is a strong lobbying on behalf of God. God has lobbyists!

I tell you this because for each meeting of the EPP, for example, there are two bishops. But in my opinion, the rest is more important than this quarrel. I take for example the text proposed by the Praesidium. Because anyway this is a topic on which one will be obliged to obtain a very large consensus, an open formula, acceptable for all. Here the national constitutions offer a wide variety of solutions when it comes to a reference to God. It goes from complete secularism in France to texts less neutral as in Greece, in Ireland or in Austria where the state is laic but where the president takes oath on the Bible.

### **A couple of weeks ago, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing proposed a declaration of independence of Europe...**

That is my idea! Europe will only exist on the international stage the day it will be independent, especially from the United States. Six months ago, I distributed a written contribution of principle. If the European countries want to act on the international stage, they must start with reassuring the rest of the world. Because for Asia and Africa it was Europe which invaded the world. Therefore, it is necessary that we agree to create within Europe an era of justice and solidarity towards the outside world; we must promote peace and ask for pardon for colonization.

The declaration of independence means that we don't seek to use power but to affirm our freedom of action. When the British tell us: This is not kind towards the United States, I refer them to the Declaration of independence of these very same United States. If one looks at the relations Great Britain maintains with the United States today, one sees that they haven't been damaged. What we want is a "special relationship" on the European scale, in all independence. Mr. Giscard has taken up this idea, perhaps it was a little premature.

**One speaks a lot of democratic deficit. Do you see a gap between democratic procedures on the European level and the emergence of an European public sphere?**

That is the history of the chicken and the egg. Today, there won't be a European public sphere as long as there won't be a Mr. or Mrs. Europe. The Praesidium is going to solve this problem. What I call "Mr. or Mrs. Europe" is the British "chairman". In French, the term "president" reflects too much the idea of an executive.

In the present case, it would be about the president of the Commission. Let's imagine the European elections according to the system imagined by the Praesidium. Not in 2004, but from here to 2009 at the latest. One will know that the President of the Commission, chief of the European executive, will be elected by the European Parliament.

The political parties will organize themselves to announce their candidates. Then, an electoral campaign in all countries will take place, each one in its language. When the national media will follow this campaign, they will be obliged to observe the manner it takes place in the other member states. It is this unification of national debates which will be the beginning of the emergence of a European public debate.

The second proposition would be to hold a referendum on the constitutional treaty on the same day in all countries of the Union.

But your question reveals the problem of the languages and multilingualism in the European Union. Principally, each member of the Convention can speak in his mother tongue. Except for the representatives of the accession candidates who can also speak their language but under the condition they bring their own interpreter. This happened with Hungary and one of the Baltic countries. In plenary session, the eleven languages of the Union are spoken. But in practice, it is English, French and German, sometimes Italian and Spanish. With a strong majority for the English language. Even though that is something of which it is difficult to talk about in France...

*Interview: Florence Deloche-Gaudez and Andreas Orator*