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THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION IS UNQUESTIONABLY
A POLITICAL ONE

Summary of the talk given by Mr. Etienne Davignon to the IRRI¹ on
Tuesday, 11 September 1979, in Brussels

"I do not subscribe to the view that the choice of priorities for action by the European Community should rest entirely with the European Council. That would mean simply adopting a system of negotiations between States, with the essential coordination and cooperation tending to recede into the background. The need for cooperation will become even more acute in a Community of twelve. I believe that the European Council - which implies acceptance of the idea that a common policy should prevail over national policies - could not satisfactorily bring its weight to bear on European policy unless this were clearly defined in the first place. It is the future fundamental task of the European Commission to define this policy, over and above its management and advisory function. This means that the Commission will become a full partner in determining overall Community policy." These were Mr. Davignon's words when he addressed the IRRI on Tuesday evening on the subject of the role of the Commission in the context of the enlargement of the European Community.

In identifying the main features of the European Commission's role, Mr. Davignon stressed the fact that, while the Commission was not a European government, it was nevertheless a political body endowed with political powers and responsibilities in the dialogue with the Member States, "including that of convincing the Nine of the need for action".

He added that the Commission was not a secretariat nor an executor of choices made by the Member States but it had to realize that power was in fact shared. Mr. Davignon stressed that, in his opinion, the Commission was not a body which sought to find the lowest common denominator amongst the interests of the various Member States; nor was it a faithful go-between of the Nine or a lawyer trying to reconcile the differing opinions of his clients. On the contrary, the Commission had its own aims and objectives.

Mr. Davignon said that in the past fifteen years there was not a single instance of a major step having been taken in the process of building Europe which had not initially been the subject of study within the Commission.

If the Commission wished to accomplish to the full its political role of identifying the main priorities for action at European level, it had to spell out its own objectives and relate them to the practical results achieved. This was where the role of the European Parliament was vital, continued Mr. Davignon, since that institution offered the only possible corrective to paralysis of the system.

¹IRRI: Institut Royal des Relations Internationales (Royal Institute for International Relations).

Thus, if the European Parliament were to consider that a new policy was required but saw nothing being done about it in the Council of Ministers, it did not mean that the debate would come to a halt. Europe had suffered from too many proposals being "smothered" and it was essential to avoid the state of indifference which went with the absence of decision-making. As a means of reactivation, therefore, the European Parliament was of paramount importance.

Mr. Davignon also stressed the fact that the collegiate nature of the European Commission was an essential attribute since its priority task was to assure the progress of Europe. He added that if the Commission wished to play its full part here, it would have to be a pluralist body. Some people asserted that if a majority view emerged in the European Parliament, the Commission would have to reflect that majority view. This, he said, was a mistake.

The task of the Commission was to determine the "common weal" to take quick decisions on the basis of requirements - in short, "stick to the facts". The Commission was not composed of stateless technocrats cut off from European reality; its function was to transcend purely national considerations and to define a common policy. To deny the political role of the Commission would be to condemn it to sterility. If their only function was to carry out the Council's decisions, the European Commission officials would have an easy time because their work-load would be very light. On the other hand, Mr. Davignon stressed, it would run counter to Europe's priorities to attempt to do everything at European level. The priorities proposed by the Commission for European action should conform to the needs of the moment. The choices which this involved (action in the monetary field, action to encourage adaptation of the European economy to the crisis etc.) clearly showed that the Commission's activity was basically of a political nature. None was in a better position than the Commission to define a project meriting Europe-wide priority because no other body could take account of the legitimate special needs of the various Member States. Such measures were only projects because the Commission did not hold the monopoly of decision-making; on the contrary, it shared this power with the Member States and the European Parliament. The essential component of the credibility of the Commission's policy was its management function, which ensured the cohesion of day-to-day policies.

Mr. Davignon thought that the Commission had a further responsibility which was to explain just how the existence of common policies affected the lives of Community citizens. "The Commission does not do enough of this", he said.

Mr. Davignon then identified three factors which made the Commission's role more difficult.

Firstly, the fact that the Commission preferred to stick to reality meant that its management and forecasting function was made more arduous not because of any doctrinal question regarding national powers to the Community, but because the Commission had to ensure that common projects were translated into action in a consistent manner throughout the Member States.

The second difficulty was of a more technical nature. The Commission had to submit files which were unquestionably superior in quality to those presented at national level. It had to be possible for Commission projects to be implemented without any debate in the face of rearguard action frequently conducted by upholders of the status quo.

The third and last difficulty, according to Mr. Davignon, was that the Commission was not spared the effects of the familiar phenomenon of erosion of public authority as experienced at national level.