



Event Report

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PRIORITIES OF THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY OF THE EU

Breakfast Policy Briefing - 13 June 2008

Summary

France's EU Presidency may now be dominated by the fall-out from Ireland's 'No' to the Lisbon Treaty, but the country's Permanent Representative to the Union insisted its key policy priorities would not be derailed. Speaking at an EPC Breakfast Briefing just hours before the result was known, Pierre Sellal said the French priorities - immigration, climate change, defence and agricultural policy - would not be directly affected by the referendum. But Europe would need "an extra push" if the Treaty was rejected.

Full Report

Pierre Sellal, France's Permanent Representative to the EU, started by explaining that the rotating Presidency was based on continuity of purpose and the need to work with other EU Member States. France would drive forward the dossiers already on the table as well as preparing the ground for European Parliament elections and the new European Commission next year.

"We must ensure that Europe responds to people's needs. Whatever the crisis or catastrophe, we must react as necessary," he said.

Speaking before the Irish referendum result was announced, he said the French Presidency would be characterised by trying to bring the Treaty of Lisbon into being - if it had been ratified by all 27 countries - and would also be characterised by uncertainty over the global situation, the general economic downturn, the fuel crisis and concerns over rising world food prices.

The four French presidency priorities will be:

- immigration;
- climate change;
- European defence;
- agricultural policy.

Mr Sellal said there was already consensus on these big challenges.

On immigration, France plans to launch a "European Immigration Pact", designed to tighten controls on amnesties for illegal immigrants, to harmonise asylum policies and to set clear rules for the return of illegal immigrants.

A clear immigration policy is needed, combining encouragement for legal economic migrants, including the European Commission's plan for a new EU 'Blue Card' scheme (for highly-skilled migrant workers), with combating illegal immigration.

On climate change, Ambassador Sellal said the Presidency would press forward the necessary legislation to flesh out the EU climate change agreement reached at the March 2008 European Council. The over-riding goal had to be a "low-carbon model" for Europe.



The Ambassador acknowledged that defence was a traditional issue for France in Europe, and said a great deal had been achieved in the ten years since the Anglo-French defence accord at St. Malo. But now France was promoting the issue again, as it was determined fill a gap in EU military defence, and to ensure that the Union had the means to step up its military-defence capability, particularly its defence-reaction capacity.

On agriculture, France would push forward with the Common Agricultural Policy reform programme started by the European Commission in 2003, in the light of its recent CAP "health check". But Mr Sellal was clear – the French approach may involve changes to the Commission's proposals. "Our aim is to adopt the necessary measures - not exactly in line with the Commission perhaps," he said.

He said the current food crisis put a new obligation on Europe over farm policy and the French aim was to increase production.

Apart from these four priority policies, Mr Sellal said France would have to tackle many other issues: completion of the single market, telecoms, energy security, the renewal of the social agenda - all factors affecting the EU's financial stability - as well as judicial cooperation.

There was an imperative for European action and, whatever the "Irish situation", the EU had to demonstrate the added value it brought to citizens' lives.

The Permanent Representative said that the difficulties which confronted Europe when France and the Netherlands both said 'No' to the Constitution, and now the difficulties in Ireland over the Lisbon Treaty, showed the need for Europe to reaffirm its identity.

"We must be more sensitive, more perceptive of the needs of citizens, we must define our interests. The European Union has a job to defend, reaffirm and protect its societies, people and enterprises. The imperative is protection, not protectionism," he insisted.

Discussion

Answering questions, Ambassador Sellal expressed no great optimism that a global trade deal in the Doha round of world trade talks was on the cards. The elements needed for a deal were "not there yet", although Europe had contributed a great deal and a trade accord was badly needed.

On France's defence ambitions, he emphasised that anything done in the EU's name would have to involve close consultation with NATO.

Javier Solana, the EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, is already consulting on this issue, with a view to increasing "complementarity" between the two organisations, with shared defence assets and increased defence spending.

Mr Sellal also emphasised the need to focus on EU relations with the rest of the world, not least by going ahead with a "Union for the Mediterranean", forging stronger links between the EU and its near Mediterranean neighbours. This new Union would help encourage the use of more resources, without which closer cooperation is not possible.

The French Presidency also has a dozen or more bilateral summits on its agenda for the next six months, the last probably being with Brazil. And – speaking before the 'No' vote in Ireland – Ambassador Sellal said there was the possibility of a final European Council meeting under the French presidency on December 31 this year, to sort out the final details before the new Treaty entered into force.



France also wants to push the EU's social agenda, something Ambassador Sellal said would require the provisions contained in the Lisbon Treaty.

However, he insisted the main issues on the French Presidency agenda would not be directly affected by the Irish result. "If the Treaty is rejected [by Ireland], we will need a rearguard action, an extra push to react with vigour," he said.

There would also need to be a new drive to meet the challenge of "explaining clearly the truth of Europe" to voters.

In the meantime, the 'EU mission' goes on, he said - including keeping up the momentum of negotiations with Croatia on membership of the Union.