

The Intergovernmental Conference

The main issue of contention as we prepared for the Intergovernmental Conference was not about codecision, which was then accepted, subject to the limits where the Council voted by unanimity. It was not about the Parliament co-ratifying treaties. It was about the budgetary power foreseen for Parliament. Several States had indicated at the level of Finance Ministers, one or two even at the level of Prime Ministers, that they had some issues around this. So at the very first meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference which was convened under the Italian Presidency of the European Union I put down that marker, that this for us was – dare I say (although I hope I did not use the language) – our red line, and we had no problem with that in the end.

The European Convention

Some time after Nice, Parliament actually voted for a report calling for future treaties to be made through the Convention and not through the intergovernmental method. There was a palpable sense of disappointment around Nice. It was a French Presidency, it was closing in Nice. They argued over this until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and then Jacques Chirac came here very tired to the European Parliament to make a presentation of Nice. There was a real sense of an opportunity lost, but it was what was available at the time, and so all these energies were there saying 'there has to be a better way'; and after the Laeken Declaration under the Belgian Presidency, which set out an ambitious agenda of what the European Union might like to look at for a future treaty, the Convention was called. Parliament then seized that moment to offer the Parliament as the working location. So even though Parliament was not the biggest number, it was a hugely active part of the overall chemistry, a kind of catalytic piece of the chemistry – not the biggest part but a very effective part in terms of capacity.

The biggest single failure of the period of the Convention was the unwillingness, particularly on the part of the participants of the Member States, to agree to more vigorous policing by the European Commission of the Stability and Growth Pact. The inability to do that has come back and bitten us badly. Perhaps in contemporary terms, as we do this interview in 2012, it was the biggest single omission that was not properly addressed at that time.