

## **The Berlusconi-Schulz confrontation**

I was chairing the introduction of the Italian Presidency in the second semester of 2003.

The President-in-Office of the Council at that time was Mr Berlusconi, in his role as Prime Minister of Italy and he had a good introduction. He gave a speech which was well received, and then the time came, after several hours of debate before lunch on the Wednesday, to respond to the debate.

Unhappily, off-script, and a bit off-colour I might add, Mr Berlusconi launched a verbal attack on Martin Schulz and remarked – in a way not appreciated, as you might imagine, in the European Parliament – that the tone of Mr Schulz's contribution had reminded him of a capo in a concentration camp, and this is not a language we would use here to each other at all. So the place illuminated in front of me and my first job was to find a method to calm it.

I permitted first Mr Schulz to speak – he was the offended party and he had a right under the rules to do that – and then one representative of each Group. Having heard the contributions, I turned to Mr Berlusconi and, in a very parliamentary phrase, suggested to him that he might wish to change the parliamentary record, which was an invitation to step back. He took out a shovel and he dug deeper into this hole and so we had a big stand-off.

The Conference of Presidents met that afternoon and told me that until the issue was resolved with an appropriate apology Mr Berlusconi would be persona non grata on the premises of the European Parliament.