The men who run Europe

The exclusive male club which some think is more powerful than the European Commission

This article was first published in the Financial Times of March 11, 1995.

Around 10am every Thursday morning, the sleek black limousines draw up outside the Charlemagne building in Brussels. This ugly concrete block, far removed from Poitiers, Waterloo, and Verdun, is the contemporary battlefield on which the nations of Europe settle their differences. Their chosen instrument is an obscure body called the Committee of Permanent Representatives.

Coreper, as it is known by its French acronym, is made up of the ambassadors of the 15 member states to the European Union. Few of those attending the weekly meeting in the Charlemagne would stand out in a crowd. **The exception, perhaps, is Philippe de Schoutheete de Tervarent, the tall, silver-haired Belgian aristocrat born in Berlin who speaks English as if he has just stepped off the playing fields of Eton. (ED: FT obvious error – should read Runnymede)**

To observe how Coreper operates is to understand how the European Union works. It is an exclusive male club with an accent on classical diplomacy and intimate deal-making, usually over lunch. One of the best-kept secrets in Brussels is that 90% of EU decisions are resolved informally in Coreper before they even reach ministers.

In the last few months, Coreper has settled the terms of a new trade pact with Russia, agreed a work-plan for the countries of central and eastern Europe to join the EU, and resolved a mind-numbing legal and financial row over how to set up an EU administration in the Bosnian town of Mostar. Its next task is to lay the groundwork for the 1996 inter-governmental conference to review the Maastricht treaty.

The European Union is a community of sovereign states with elements of supranational powers vested in the European Commission, the EU's executive arm. The European parliament, although slowly accruing power, remains a largely consultative body with powers to block rather than to initiate legislation. Coreper's position inside this power nexus is unique: it has legislative and decision-making powers. Its permanent presence in Brussels, alongside the Commission, gives it an extra edge.

As Europe's business shifts inexorably to Brussels, Coreper's role as a bridge to national capitals will grow in importance, so too its function as a clearing-house for the Council of Ministers, the official forum for EU decision-making. Already it has spawned a second committee - Coreper 1 - made up of ambassadors' deputies, dealing chiefly with business issues. Yet questions are bound to be asked: is there enough political accountability, are ministers in effect being usurped by an elite group of high-powered diplomats?

The ambassadors argue, correctly, that they are civil servants acting under instruction from their capitals. But such modesty is unlikely to deter critics such as Claude Cheysson, the former French foreign minister, who claims that Coreper is more powerful than the European Commission.

So who are these shadowy figures, how do they work, and why is their role in European affairs so vital? Under protection of anonymity, a number of Coreper members agreed, for the first time, to talk about their work which is far removed from the familiar images of the EU, with its grinding bureaucracy and late-night ministerial confrontations. For Coreper is altogether a more collusive enterprise.

Like all clubs, Coreper depends on the strength of its membership. The present line-up is rich with diplomatic talent: Pierre de Boissieu, the French ambassador who is a distant relative of Charles de Gaulle and one of the intellectual forces behind the Maastricht treaty; Dietrich von Kyaw, the German ambassador born in a family of Prussian Junkers who fled the Red Army in a horse-drawn cart in the second world war**; Ambassador de Schoutheete, the Belgian eminence grise who is Coreper's most experienced member;** Francisco Javier Elorza Cavengt, the chunky, fast-talking Spaniard with a passion for American photo-realist paintings; and Sir John Kerr, the artful Scotsman addicted to political intrigue and Benson & Hedges cigarettes.

The first challenge for a member of Coreper is to master the technical detail.

Most can navigate around Spanish fishing rights in the Irish Sea or rum quotas for former French colonies in the Caribbean. But the real test is how to assess the detail in relation to the potential impact of EU decisions.

Every day in Brussels hundreds of working groups comprised of national civil servants, technical experts, and Commission officials are engaged in discussions on potential

legislation or rule-making. 'Someone needs to corral the debate, to judge each issue's importance, and to decide which must go up to ministerial level for a decision,' says a diplomat, 'that is Coreper's basic function.'

Second, ambassadors must be able to read the intentions of other member states, particularly those behaving oddly. When Greece intended to block EU economic aid to Albania last year, the first signals flashed in Coreper; the same applied to Italy's decision to hold EU business hostage to an increase in milk production quotas. Coreper serves as a forum for handling sensitive issues before they surface in the ministerial forum. 'It all goes under the heading what the minister knows but does not say,' says one diplomat.

Third, Coreper members must possess the ability to strike a balance between the naked pursuit of national interest and the need for compromise, without which the system would eventually break down. And here a dilemma arises for the ambassador: how to preserve the trust of political masters at home while maintaining good-faith negotiations with Coreper colleagues.

True, such skills are the stock-in-trade of diplomats. But this is to underestimate the degree of complicity which lies at the heart of the Coreper enterprise.

Committee members eat, drink, and breathe EU issues seven days a week. Every six months, they and their wives go on trips - to Greek islands, Scottish whisky distilleries, or to Goethe's home in Weimar - to cement the bonds with their colleagues. By dint of their permanent presence in Brussels, they are virtually condemned to succeed.

As ambassador von Kyaw has said, half in jest: he is known in his native Germany not as the *standiger Vertreter* (permanent representative) but as the *standiger Verrater* (the permanent traitor).

To understand how Coreper works in practice, it is necessary to put aside the stereotype stories about Britain's lone war against an intrusive Euro pean Commission or Franco-German plots to dominate the rest of the EU. Nor does Coreper divide naturally between the big and smaller states. Apart from the Anglo-German free trade bloc, alliances tend to be tactical. The reality is that the ambassador with the best arguments has the advantage, whether he comes from plucky little Luxembourg or united Germany. 'It comes down to the power of the word,' says a participant.

The formal sessions take place when Coreper meets every Thursday, except in the week before a meeting of EU foreign ministers when the session shifts to Wednesday. Each ambassador is accompanied by a note-taker and national experts who rotate to provide technical support. The European Commission has a seat at the table; so, too, do staff from the Council of Ministers' secretariat. In the wings sit the interpreters.

The atmosphere is business-like, interspersed with high theatre, says a participant. Much depends on the skills of the chairman who rotates according to which country holds the six-month-long EU presidency. The current chairman is de Boissieu who loves to play to the gallery, mixing intellectual prowess with French hauteur which can strike down opposition.

The weekly plenary sessions are useful for countries to stake out positions, but they are dress rehearsals for the meetings when the real business is done. These occur once a month, occasionally more frequently depending on the flow of business, in a highly restricted setting over lunch on the first floor of the Charlemagne. No microphones, no interpreters and no note-takers allowed. French and English are the only spoken languages.

'Lunch is where you say what you cannot say in the room. Speeches are not allowed. It is the place where you can float ideas, and find out the possible areas of compromise,' says one participant. Another confirms the importance of the lunchtime sessions, noting that the absence of note-takers means that ambassadors and the Commission can be selective about reporting the contents to their national capitals. 'It's very simple,' he says, 'there are no spies.'

Two other participants play important roles in greasing the wheels toward a compromise: Carlo Trojan, the assistant secretary general of the Commission and Jacques Delors' trusted deal-maker; and Jean-Claude Piris, the French head of the Council legal services, who helped to solve the political crisis created by Denmark's rejection of the Maastricht treaty in the June 1992 referendum. His proposals served as the text which secured a Danish 'Yes' to Maastricht in May 1993.

A Coreper member says the lunchtime intimacy is conducive to deal-making, but warns that it is not enough to play the nice guy. 'Only two questions count: can I trust my colleague, and how much weight does he carry with his national capitals?'

Coreper runs an informal peer rating. Kerr and De Boissieu are the best at spotting what will pass muster in Paris and London. Both have won respect because they serve governments which are divided over the pace of future political and economic integration in Europe, a

point which leaves them doubly exposed should they be seen to be selling out national interests in Brussels.

Kerr, who will shortly leave Brussels to become British ambassador in Washington, is a renowned deal-maker. In December 1992, he almost single-handedly pulled off a deal which saved several billion pounds in British contributions to the EU budget over the following seven years, against expectations.

'Kerr is brilliant at keeping the game alive,' says a fellow ambassador, 'he will put up a draft fast with lots of suggestions and always a little bit of poison, in the hope that others will bite. Some always do.'

Kerr's other favourite trick is to strike the 'double-deal'. It works roughly like this. The UK government faces a Brussels directive on harmonising widgets which is a nuisance, but which is far less important than a second directive providing for minimum excise duty on whisky.

The trick is to identify the issues blocking agreement, line up the opponents, and then strike a deal which gives away a little on widgets but gains a lot on whisky without anyone noticing in London. Sometimes it is necessary to take on opponents back home.

It helps that Kerr has direct access to 10 Downing Street and is also invited to attend cabinet committees on European affairs. Kerr has also continued the tradition set more than 20 years ago by Sir Michael Palliser, former UK ambassador in Brussels, of making a weekly visit to London to nail down his political base in Whitehall. Only Bernard Bot, the Dutch ambassador and graduate of Harvard Law School, makes a similar trek home; though de Schoutheete, the Belgian ambassador, enjoys 'home advantage' in Brussels.

A veteran participant in Coreper once joked that ministers in Europe are only capable of dealing with names, places, dates and figures; the rest is done by the permanent representatives.

National ministers who flit in and out of Brussels for monthly meetings of the Council of Ministers are invariably at a disadvantage; but it is debatable if matters would improve if, say, member states sought to 'renationalise' decision-making in the name of greater transparency and democratic accountability. Thus, French ideas for creating a new committee

comprised of 'ministers for Europe' which would supersede Coreper appear to carry more risks than benefits.

Such a 'Euro-ministerial' system might work in Belgium, where national politicians still look to Europe as the glue which keeps their country together. It might also work in Germany, where the reluctance to impose the national will usually outweighs the fear of being outvoted in Brussels. But in Britain, a Euro-minister who justified a deal reached in Brussels on the grounds that it was 'good for Europe' would be bawled out in the House of Commons.

The most effective argument in favour of Coreper and its closed-door decision-making is that it counters the power of larger states, and prevents the re-emergence of the 19th century cabals which were the hallmark of 19th century diplomacy.

'The value of Coreper is that rape becomes very difficult because of the witnesses,' says a committee veteran. 'You can do deals behind closed doors with other people, but to get them adopted you need to get a deal in broad daylight with everybody present.'

The final argument in favour of the system is that it serves to take the steam out of issues which European politicians find too hot to handle in public.

One of the most telling cases occurred last year when Coreper agreed new rules allowing citizens of the EU the right to vote or stand for political office in municipal elections in their EU country of residence. Here was an issue of immense sensitivity.

The French were nervous about allowing 'foreigners' the right to stand as candidates in local elections. The Belgians, notably the Flemish, insisted on restrictions to avoid the risk of foreign residents voting for Francophone candidates around the Brussels metropolis. Similarly, Luxembourg insisted on a time-lag so it could adjust its rules to cope with the large numbers of Portuguese immigrants.

In the end, Coreper single-handedly drafted and agreed a text which was rubber-stamped in the Council of Ministers without discussion, in spite of the highly political nature of the deal.

'If you want smooth decision making in Europe,' concludes a Coreper veteran, with no trace of irony, 'you must keep it away from the politicians.'