



[Comment] The real arrogance is keeping decisions from the voters

08.03.2004 - 17:47 CET | By Richard Laming

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - Denis MacShane, British minister for Europe, has denounced Hans-Gert Pöttering, leader of the Christian Democrats in the European Parliament, as "arrogant" for saying that he wants to see a Christian Democrat chosen as the next president of the European Commission.

"The choice of the Commission President is not for factional party political manoeuvring in Strasbourg", said Dr MacShane.

Quite right. But it shouldn't be the subject of national government manoeuvring in Brussels, either. It's a decision that should be taken by the voters. I presume that Dr MacShane would not consider this suggestion by me - that voters should take the big decisions - as arrogant.

So how will the decision about the next president of the European Commission actually be taken?

The initial nomination will be made by the European Council, representing the heads of state and government. This is a decision that - now that the Nice treaty is in force - will be taken by QMV, so it is possible for any individual member state to be outvoted. Dr MacShane might do well to remember this before flinging around more accusations.

However, the nomination itself is not the end of the story. The European Parliament will have to approve that nomination at its session in July. This is the first big decision that the new parliament will be asked to take.

Of course, rather than being given only one nominee, it would be better if the EP were able to choose between a range of candidates - one from each party, perhaps - in a series of votes. The EP used this method to elect the Ombudsman last summer and it worked very well. In an ideal world, the Commission president would be chosen in the same way.

That would put the views of the voters at the heart of the debate. It would ensure that one of the highest-profile and most important political posts in the EU would be filled by democratic means. It would also encourage more people to go out and vote. In 1999, Romano Prodi was nominated as a Commission president six weeks before the elections took place. Given that the election results had already been announced beforehand, it is not surprising that not many people voted.

But the world is not ideal. The EP will be given only one candidate, but it still has the right to accept or reject the nominee. And that is a role it should take seriously.

So, a plea to all readers of EUobserver.com.

When the election comes round, or before then if you can, ask each candidate in the European elections who he or she hopes to have the opportunity to vote for as president of the Commission. Or if a candidate doesn't want to mention a precise name, what kind of nominations would be acceptable and which would not?

Elected MEPs will have to make this decision for real within six weeks of being elected. So candidates can hardly say that they haven't decided, or they don't know, or that it isn't a matter for the MEPs.

If they can't say, then they're not competent. If they won't say, then they're not honest. Neither of these is the characteristic of a good MEP.

The choice of Commission president is a good and serious question. You have the right to an answer.

Denis MacShane is wrong. The leader of the Christian Democrats in the European Parliament, in calling for a centre-right Commission president, may be guilty of optimism but not of arrogance.

The worse sin is displayed by those who campaign for a seat in the European Parliament without telling the voters how they will vote on the key issues if elected. A party that won't say who it wants to be Commission president - that's the real arrogance.

Richard Laming - is Director of Federal Union, the British federalist campaigning organisation, and works in public affairs for commercial interests in London and Brussels. He writes here in a personal capacity.

© EUobserver.com 2007

Printed from EUobserver.com 12.11.2007

The information may be used for personal and non-commercial use only.

This article and related links can be found at: <http://euobserver.com/9/14697>