

## [Comment] European politics comes out of the Commission crisis strengthened

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Now that the Barosso Commission has finally received the approval of the European Parliament, it is time to survey the wreckage. Which parts of the European system have emerged stronger, and which weaker?

The European Parliament has shown how powerful it is becoming. Its objections to a proposed Commissioner were enough to prevent him from taking office.

Some critics had previously objected to the fact that Parliament could only accept or reject the Commission as a whole rather than making decisions about individual Commissioners. That criticism is shown to be hollow. The parliament does have the power to judge individuals. The treaties may not say so explicitly, but the power is nonetheless there.

### **EU: political community**

Perhaps the point is that the EU is more than just its rules. It is no longer a simple political organisation. It is turning into a political community. Without understanding that, it is not really possible to understand the EU.

In that light, what does the saga of the European Commission say about the power of the member states?

At the outset, they demonstrated their power over the position of President. The nomination of the President is, according to the Nice treaty, made by qualified majority and no longer by unanimity. However, it proved possible for an individual member state to veto a nomination, on the grounds that no-one could credibly assume the post without the support of the entire European Council. Again, we have a community and not just a set of rules.

As an aside, Jacques Chirac might reflect on whether using a veto in this way turned out to be such a wise idea after all. Who is more Atlanticist: Chris Patten, whom he did not support, or Mr Barosso, whom he did.

The next Commission President, if the constitution comes into force, will be chosen "taking into account the elections to the European Parliament", so that the power of the member states on this issue may be short lived in any case.

### **Buttiglione affair**

Finally, we should turn our attention to the Buttiglione affair. What effect has this had on the EU?

It is wrong and even malicious to present the Parliament's opposition to Mr Buttiglione's appointment as an opposition to Catholicism. It is nothing of the sort. There are many positions throughout the European institutions filled by persons of active religious faith. This is as it should be: Europe itself is home to religious belief.

The point is the job to which Mr Buttiglione had been appointed. It was the wrong job.

He was to be charged with the task of promoting and extending the principles of equality throughout the political and public role of the EU. This is a task which he himself did not agree with. He personally opposed the policies that he was supposed to be advocating.

Nobody can be asked to take responsibility for issues without also being committed to their

success. That would be neither effective, credible, nor honest. Politics cannot work on this basis.

And this is the heart of the matter. Members of the European Commission are politicians. They are not colonial administrators, sent abroad to do the bidding of their national governments. They are in Brussels to take responsibility in their own right for their own opinions and their own actions. Mr Buttiglione might well have turned out to be a fine member of the Commission, but not in charge of policies in which he did not believe.

### **Personalities matter**

A last observation about how the Commission got into this mess in the first place. Mr Barosso himself said that he had first met some of his new Commissioners only after they had been appointed. He was given them by the national governments: he did not choose them himself.

Now that we see how much the personalities and records of the individual Commissioners matter, it is clear that those personalities and records must be chosen for the contribution they can make to Europe. That choice can only be made by the President of the Commission.

This means that any candidates nominated by their parties for President of the Commission in the European elections of 2009 will also have to have in mind a team of Commissioners too. The party political leaderships in the different member states will have to work together increasingly closely in the future. We have the rules: we need to build a political community, and European politics will be strengthened as a result.

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