

Backroom presidential 'polls' underline European Union's democratic deficit

As political unknowns ascend to EU power, horse-trading highlights need for reform

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Thursday, November 26, 2009



How has the largest congregation of states in modern history become so uninspiring, despite the unprecedented European peace with the establishment of the European Community in successive treaties since 1952? With 27 members over a continent famed since the Roman Empire for continuous domestic and interstate wars until 1945, the European construct has been an extraordinary success by any standards.

How could it become so dull for its citizens, so dull indeed that a fraction of its 460 million inhabitants will have heard of its just appointed new president, Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy, and an even smaller fraction its new foreign affairs face, Catherine Ashton, an obscure member of the House of Lords and of the Labor party?

Outside Belgium's 10 million citizens, few know who the new president of the EU is (official title: President of the EU Council of Ministers). Even in her native Britain, perhaps a few thousand know who Catherine Ashton is, to which a mouthful of a title, "High Representative for Foreign Affairs," does not add much comfort.

We have been used over the past decade to lackluster characters in the shape of Javier Solana and Jose Manuel Barroso, respectively the high representative for external affairs and the president of the commission. It is hard to associate any memorable success with their tenure.

The Constitution failed in 2005, bringing the last identifiable success to the euro as legal tender since January 1, 1999. Solana was appointed in 1999, Barroso in 2004, just as the formidable Convention for an EU Constitution was wrapping up its work, only to witness French and Dutch citizens reject it.

Ten years later, EU foreign policy continues to be as pedestrian as ever, and Solana and Barroso always fall in the shadows of the leaders and foreign ministers of the more important nation-states, Britain, France and Germany.

The crisis is real, and Europeans are now familiar with the mantra of their democratic deficit: the EU leaders do not represent them.

Lest I be tagged as a traitor to European ideals, an accusation I heard from EU ambassadors and aides thereto in Beirut on account of “criticizing” the hand that allegedly fed me as holder of the first EU Jean Monnet Chair in the Middle East, I should perhaps anticipate some of the apparatchik blabber: the EU is the most extraordinary achievement of modern non-violence, and Jean Monnet has now outdistanced Charles de Gaulle in his imprint on history.

I suspect Jacques Delors will remain a far more impressive statesman than Francois Mitterrand. This is no mean feat, and is well deserved, especially since it was an extremely conscious calling in both cases. Indeed Delors snubbed the presidency of France, which was offered to him on a silver platter, and Jean Monnet left us in his “Memoirs” a classic of statesmanship. Monnet’s 1976 Memoirs stand as a guiding beacon to effectiveness of one individual with a visionary mind and the right contacts.

To the EU apparatchiks therefore, the Monnet message is more ambition, more encouragement to criticism, less navel-gazing, and, yes, more self-deprecation. I have even argued once that to remedy Europe’s democratic deficit, perhaps we need to get altogether rid of the European Commission. This was written only in half-jest.

The Commission has always been a profoundly undemocratic institution, and its president and members appointed in a horse-trading exercise which has now extended to the newly conceived presidency of the Council, and to the foreign minister.

The Lisbon Reform Treaty, which becomes effective on December 1, needs to be decoded to better understand the depth of the EU’s democratic deficit. Article 9b of the Lisbon Treaty says that “The European Council shall elect its President, by a qualified majority, for a term of two and a half years.” Article 9d says that “the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members.”

In both cases, the European Council (read the heads of the executive branch in each of the 27 member-states) engineers the “election” of the president.

What election is this which is a) co-option; b) not openly competitive? Any competition takes place in dark rooms, with the worst type of horse-trading between the national governments. With no genuine contest between openly declared and campaigning figures, this so-called election is anything but.

There are no official candidates, no deadlines, no campaigns, and the vote is “consensual”. Could one really imagine people as unknown as Van Rompuy and Ashton emerging from the ranks if any electoral process had been respected?

This is not an issue of individuals, and one will hopefully be surprised by the performance of the two newcomers. The problem is the process, which leads to the lowest common denominator as the consensual choice, with no election. Without a poll, and without an open contest between official candidates, there is no democracy. The European citizen will remain disenfranchised until this basic

requirement of democracy, an openly contested election, is put to his and her disposal as voter. Until then, the EU will remain the sick man of Europe.

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