



[Comment] No surprise if the Commission has an end-of-term feeling

01.04.2004 - 09:41 CET | By Richard Laming

EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Reports filter out that European Commissioners are starting to think about political jobs in their member states. This is hardly a surprise.

For who are the Commissioners but senior national politicians who have been seconded to Brussels for a while? They are not the bureaucrats of Eurosceptic myth but significant political figures in their own right.

The issues they deal with are the European-level equivalent of those dealt with by national government ministers. They deal with economic policy, the fight against terrorism, environmental protection, social policy: all the things that governments in democracies actually do.

And there are still many items of unfinished business. The Lisbon agenda for competitiveness needs a lot more attention, the trade war with the United States is still going on, the sugar regime in the CAP is still scandalously unreformed.

The problem isn't the things they are doing or the people chosen to do them, but the way in which they are chosen to do them.

The selection process for the members of the Commission is seriously at fault. The approach of the end of their term of office only highlights this. For there are two main differences between the European Commission and a cabinet government in a member state.

First, continuity. Any normal political executive contains members who intend to carry on after the elections. They have to fight for their right to do so by convincing the voters. The political temperature rises as the elections come close; it doesn't fall. Those members of the European Commission who want a renewed mandate have to convince their national governments, not the voters. That leads to a completely different attitude.

Secondly, there is the question of coherence. Even those members of a national cabinet who do not intend to stay on themselves want to help their successors. All members of the government subscribe to a shared political programme which they have worked to implement and that they want to see continue. The European Commission, by contrast, has no such political coherence - the deliberate pursuit of balance across the spectrum actually robs it of purpose. Members of the Commission do not have the same need or desire to stick together.

All in all, it is not surprising if the Commission loses momentum. But it is not a good thing for Europe.

There are several things that need to be done to put this right and the draft European constitution contains some of them. But there is one proposal that need not wait.

One of the first tasks of the next European Parliament to be elected in June will be to endorse a candidate for president of the Commission nominated by the European Council. The political parties that will contest the election could say now that they want to see a political president and not an administrative one. They could go further and each nominate the individual they want to see as that political president. That would then make the choice of the next Commission

president a central issue in the coming election campaign.

It would be hard - not so say outrageous - for the European Council to ignore a potential Commission president who had just won the elections, particularly as the Council decision will be taken, for the first time, by majority rather than unanimity.

A political president would then be in a position to create a more political Commission, with all the benefits of coherence and continuity that would result.

If political apathy arises from the narrowing of political choices available to the voters, the European Union is a perfect example. A political Commission president will reverse this trend, giving voters the choice over who should be in government and what they should do.

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Printed from EUobserver.com 26.02.2005

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