

[Comment] Günter Verheugen: enough already

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - European Commission vice-president Günter Verheugen hit the headlines again last week, questioning the right of smaller EU states to nominate members of the Commission in future. The present Commission has one person from each country, large and small. Mr Verheugen comes, of course, from a large country.

There has to be a debate about the future size and shape of the Commission – the Nice treaty still in force specifies that now we have 27 member states, the next Commission has to have fewer than 27 Commissioners – and there is no agreement yet on how this is to be achieved. It is important that the European Commission as a whole takes an interest in how this issue is resolved: members of the College of Commissioners are perhaps in the best position of all to judge how the Commission works.

If there is a trade-off between efficiency (a smaller Commission) and representation (a larger one), the opinion of those who have taken part in the meetings is surely valuable. But there is more than one way to express an opinion.

Members of the Commission are the guardians of the common European interest. As such, they are not beholden to their countries of origin, nor are they merely bureaucratic functionaries. Their role is political, not administrative, and it is collective.

Such a collective spirit risks being undermined when one member of the Commission openly questions the right of his colleagues to be there. By all means have such discussions in private, before they reach a common view, but Commissioners should not hold such a debate through the newspapers. They should show more responsibility than this.

Mr Verheugen has a track record of unfortunate statements. In October last year, he indulged in a public attack on the European Commission's permanent staff. Again, this kind of thing may need to be said, but not to the newspapers. Public criticism of one's department may help provide insulation against its failures – perhaps Mr Verheugen feels in need of that political comfort – but it also undermines staff confidence and morale. It is not generally thought to be a good management technique.

When he was Commissioner responsible for enlargement, he suggested that the then 15 member states should hold referendums on admitting the next 10, which would have meant going back on the commitment made at the Luxembourg summit in 1997. Fortunately this idea was rejected at the time; I suspect that his latest proposal will go the same way.

There is a debate to be had about the European Commission, as I said earlier, and Mr Verheugen's behaviour gives us a clue about what should be done.

The Commission has a political responsibility, but its members are not subject to the normal political discipline. In any normal government, a cabinet member who undermined his colleagues in this way would risk being sacked. Because Mr Verheugen is the nominee of a large member state, which itself has a delicately-balanced coalition government, there is no risk of this happy fate happening to him. That is the problem.

The next Commission will be, thanks to the Nice treaty, smaller than the present one. When deciding how much smaller it should be, we should also agree that it should be more political than the present one. In fact, how political it is matters more than how big it is.

Nominees for the Commission should be chosen by the president and not by the member

states. The president has to be approved by the European Parliament and the European Council, and the whole Commission has to be ratified in office by the EP after detailed and extensive hearings. That is enough. The further intervention of national governments weakens rather than strengthens the Commission.

One of the most profound and perceptive criticisms made by Eurosceptics is that the European Commission exercises power without responsibility, and it is partly true. The solution is to demand more responsibility, both in how the Commission is chosen and in how its members behave. And that includes Mr Verheugen.

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