

## **[Comment] The Socialists should oppose the nomination of Barroso**

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Commission president José Manuel Barroso's campaign for re-election cleared its latest hurdle at the end of presidency European Council meeting earlier this month. Mr Barroso was unanimously, if provisionally, nominated by the assembled heads of state and government to serve a further five year term.

Unanimously? There were no other candidates. Mr Barroso has been modestly successful, if not outspoken or visionary, in the post and there was no other name being seriously mentioned.

Criticisms of Mr Barroso for not having been more visionary and outspoken as a leader miss the point. As long as the European Council remains the place where the main decision about who should be Commission president is taken, and as long as the members of the European Council want to see the Commission as a whole remain relatively weak, "outspoken" and "visionary" are likely to be negative attributes as much as positive ones. Mr Barroso cannot be blamed for that.

And provisionally? The transition from the Nice treaty to the Lisbon treaty is still underway – indeed, is still not assured – and it is not entirely clear under which set of rules the new Commission should be established. Most of the differences are procedural, and no doubt can be overcome somehow, but one of the differences is political and is the cause of an interesting debate.

One of the virtues of the Lisbon treaty is that it gives a stronger role to the



"To be the opposition in a democracy is not a negligible role, in fact it is an important one" (Photo: EUobserver.com)

European Parliament in the choice of Commission president. There must be consultation with the political parties after the European elections, which themselves must be taken into account by the European Council in making its choice. The Socialists object to the rubber-stamping of Mr Barroso's nomination without the proper involvement of the EP, in particular because he was the nominee of the centre-right EPP group.

As has been observed in these pages before, the Socialists are on difficult ground when they object to Mr Barroso's nomination now, given that they did not put forward an alternative candidate of their during the elections.

The whole world knew that a choice of Commission president was coming, but the Socialists chose not to share their thoughts on the subject with the voters. The election results were most notable for a swing away from the Socialists towards the EPP: perhaps these two facts are connected.

But even if they lost the election, there is still a role for the Socialists in the European Parliament. That is the role of the opposition.

To be the opposition in a democracy is not a negligible role, in fact it is an important one. It is perfectly legitimate – indeed it is essential – for there to be a group within the political system that disagrees with the policies being pursued and that wants to see different ones followed instead. If there is not such a group, it is likely that the hard and difficult choices are being dodged rather than confronted.

The discussion about how to make the European Union more democratic tends to focus on the mechanical aspects of the institutions, such as what powers the MEPs should have, rather than the human aspects, such as how they should use those powers. The development of an opposition within the European Parliament is a good example of a human aspect of the institutional system that needs to be developed and which will make the whole EU system more democratic.

Even though they did not put forward their own candidate at the time of the elections, and even though there is only one obvious person to be president of the Commission, the Socialists still have the opportunity to do democracy a service and vote against Mr Barroso when his nomination comes before the European Parliament.

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