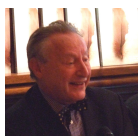


# Why the choice of Van Rompuy and Ashton is not such a bad thing for Europe

By Paul GOLDSCHMIDT



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The analyses published in the international press after the designations of the President of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs are surprising: the Heads of State and Governments are being mainly criticised for having selected personalities to which descriptions such as "faceless", "weak", "and inexperienced" (as well as sometimes injurious and offending qualifications of which their authors should be thoroughly ashamed) are gratuitously appended, when it is maybe precisely these nominations that Europe needs at this crucial moment of its institutional evolution.

Why? At the time that the Lisbon Treaty will finally enter into force after a long and chaotic process, the main challenge facing the Union is to make the new architecture work and thus give it the best chances to reinforce the EU in its fight against the economic and social crisis. The designation of strong personalities such as Tony Blair as first President of the European Council and Massimo d'Alema as High representative for Foreign Affairs would have created an explosive cocktail, guaranteeing EU paralysis and a further weakening of the Commission (which was probably the aim of the British euro-sceptics).

One should, therefore, not conclude that the Council came to an agreement based on the lowest common denominator; quite to the contrary, it chose personalities that are capable to get along together and work as a team without interference of personal ego considerations. This can constitute an opportunity for the Union because, if the designated trio is able to improve the efficiency of the EU, in particular by harmonising the work of the Council and the Commission under the watchful eye of the European Parliament, a most valuable precedent will have been established. When, in five years, it is time to make new appointments (the presidential mandate of 2.5 years renewable once should not be a hindrance if there is fruitful collaboration between the trio), the necessity to select a new "compatible" team will impose itself quite naturally.

This situation could offer the European Parliament the opportunity of playing a key role, especially if, during the EP elections that precede the renewal of the executive officers, the political parties declare themselves in favour of potential candidates.

Such a scenario could be of great comfort to Europhiles; they should recognise the wisdom of their political leaders who have opened up a new avenue for furthering EU integration while avoiding the pitfalls of new institutional negotiations that nobody wants. As to the Europhobes, after their squeals and expressions of "schadenfreude" I predict a rude awakening with a serious hangover.

All this leaves, of course, an enormous responsibility on the shoulders of the trio Van Rompuy, Barroso, and Ashton because from their ability to mobilise all the resources of the Union towards common goals will depend the possibilities of defending efficiently the interests of the 27 Member States in the international arena as well as ensure an optimal coordination of the difficult measures that need to be taken in managing the exit of the financial crisis.

All that remains for me is to congratulate each of the three nominees and wish them the best of luck and success.

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