



The Barroso Commission: Unfinished Business?

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Foreword

The European Policy Centre has long recognized that a key priority for the European Union in the years to come must be the building of a democratic, transnational EU democratic *polity*. The European Union institutions have already been given formidable decision-making and policy-proposing powers by the Member States. But there is widespread recognition of the dangerous gap in understanding between citizens and the EU institutions. That gap needs to be bridged and voters must be given greater ownership of the political process.

There is a particularly important need to engage the public in a more genuine EU wide political debate on the direction the Union should take in areas where it has powers of decision and what role it should play in world affairs. To help that debate come alive it is important for the European Parliament be seen to live up to its increased responsibilities in approving the taking of office by a new Commission.

In this context, therefore, it is no surprise that the EPC followed very closely the recent hearings of the new European Commissioner Designates before the relevant committees of then European Parliament. On this occasion it must be said that the European Parliament process really did attract widespread media and public interest. Of course we could not have known in advance of the hearings of the dramatic turn of events in the European Parliament on October 27 when the President Designate of the Commission, José Manuel Durão Barroso, withdrew his proposed Commission team. This followed a determined campaign by parties representing a majority of MEPs against designating the Italian Minister for European Affairs, Rocco Buttiglione, as Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs. This, in turn, followed exchanges at the earlier hearings of the Parliament's Civil Liberties Committee, when Mr Buttiglione expressed views on homosexuality and the role of women that many MEPs saw as in contravention of European values of non-discrimination.

During the hearings, some doubts about the suitability of a number of other candidate Commissioners for their particular portfolios were also expressed by European Parliamentarians. It will now be for Mr Barroso to restructure his Commission and re-present it to the November plenary session of the European Parliament for ratification. Further committee hearings will be necessary where new names are advanced for new posts.

Whatever the debate surrounding merits or demerits of particular candidate Commissioners it underlines a very positive development within the European Union: the increasing assertiveness not just of the elected European Parliament but of its constituent political parties. This must

surely augur well for the progressive evolution of a true, trans-national European demos. In the longer run this is something which will strengthen - not weaken - the authority of the European Commission.

There are other conclusions to be drawn. Firstly, this crisis might have been avoided if Member States had followed the advice of the Convention on the Future of Europe and proposed a shortlist of three names for each Commissioner (including at least one woman) thus giving the President Designate greater flexibility in distributing portfolios among those best qualified to serve. There is also a case for giving the European Parliament the right to withhold approval from individual candidate Commissioners without having to veto an entire Commission.

Despite this hiatus, a great deal can be learned from the hearings process as a whole which sheds light on the likely strategic policy direction the new Commission will take. Our Associate Director of Studies, Giovanni Grevi, analyses the outcome of the hearings process and what broad policy conclusions can be drawn at this stage for the likely evolution of the eventual new Barroso Commission. Certainly the starting point for the new Commission – when it is approved and takes office - will be the achievements and broad strategic goals set by the outgoing Commission led by Romano Prodi. However the economic and political environment within which the new Commission has to function will not be an easy one. Moreover the international situation in which the Union finds itself as it develops its common foreign, security and defence policy also poses some serious challenges for both the Commission and Member States.

Inevitably much attention has focused on the controversies over approval of individual members of the new Commission. Irrespective of the merits of individual cases the vigour with which European Parliamentarians have carried out their responsibilities is to be commended. Some fear the emergence of party political debates in the European Parliament and the gradual politicisation of the Commission. But these will, in the end, be healthy developments for the creation of a true EU demos. It is a process which the EPC will continue to monitor and analyse as part of its work in the coming years.

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Introduction

The Barroso Commission has failed to persuade the European Parliament that it is up to the job. The inadequate or controversial performances of a few candidate Commissioners did not help. Reluctance to accept the clear demands of the European Parliament to revise the distribution of portfolios, notably that of Rocco Buttiglione in the sensitive area of Justice, Freedom and Security, only made things worse. More generally, the College failed to convey a clear political message, and to show the sense of leadership and political ‘savvy’ required to successfully accomplish its mandate. It is essential that the Barroso Commission sharpen the definition of its priorities. At the same time, it should present a vision of what kind of Europe it wishes to build, in cooperation with national governments and the European Parliament.

At this precise point in time, the Commission must show a sense of direction, and not merely bend according to which way the wind of inter-governmental dialogue blows. **European integration has not yet reached the point of no return.** Enlargement has yet to be ‘digested’ and EU policies have to be adjusted to a more diverse Union. The Union is facing global challenges of unprecedented dimension, not only at the economic and social level, but also in the security field. Last but not least, failure to ratify the Constitutional Treaty would unleash unpredictable, centrifugal forces and weaken the already strained political cohesion of the Union further.

This is no time for new visionary projects. **The job of the new Commission** will be to equip the Union with the means to succeed in global competition, put in place much-needed institutional reform, and enhance a multilateral framework of global governance. Above all, the new Commission should turn European society into an open, innovative, tolerant and optimistic environment in which citizens can maximise their opportunities. In so doing, the Commission should pay special attention to preventing confrontation between Member States and between the latter and EU supranational institutions. An effort of collective leadership, driven by the Commission, is urgently needed to overcome the transition stage that the Union has entered into and steer the European ship safely into port.

With this goal in mind, the new Commission has been given a second chance to deliver a more convincing performance. It is possible – even probable - that one or more members of the prospective College will leave. New appointees will have to undergo parliamentary hearings, in the full awareness of the political relevance that this process has acquired. President Barroso should stand firm and only accept candidates of

outstanding calibre and impeccable reputation. At the same time, he should begin to fine-tune the message he has delivered so far.

The next plenary session of the Parliament in November presents Mr Barroso with the opportunity to present his political agenda for the next five years, and to win broad approval on that basis.

Continuity, but not business as usual

The recent parliamentary hearings of the 24 Commissioner Designates pointed to a considerable degree of **continuity** between the policy guidelines of the new Commission and the policy agenda of the previous College. A critical mix of adverse political, economic and security trends affected the performance of the Prodi team. Results have not always matched expectations, and the dialogue between the European executive and national governments has deteriorated. The last Commission, however, has delivered the broad policy framework within which its successor will have to operate.

- The **Lisbon Strategy** was adopted in March 2000. While much progress needs to be made in implementing the strategy and delivering tangible benefits, no major substantial or procedural review seems to be on the horizon, except an emphasis on enhancing ‘moral persuasion’ in relation to Member States. It remains to be seen whether the mid-term review of the strategy in March 2005 will mark a fundamental rethinking, but this was not reflected in the hearings.
- On **Economic and Monetary Union**, the controversial reform of the Stability and Growth Pact was triggered under the previous College, following the painful confrontation between the Commission and France and Germany last November. It is now essentially a matter of delicate fine-tuning of the concerns of different actors, with a view to shaping a more flexible formula to monitor the fulfilment of the Maastricht criteria.
- Budgetary priorities have been established by the Prodi Commission, which has submitted a moderately ambitious proposal to Member States for the next **financial perspectives**. While a deal is a long way away, none of the Commissioner Designates have questioned the (narrow) margins for debate, or the allocation of resources along different budget lines.
- Under the envisaged budget lines, the framework and also the objectives of **agricultural policy** and of **regional policy** are essentially set, although much work will be required to adjust their application to specific situations in the larger Union, and strike an acceptable balance between the requirements of different countries.
- The Commission has, potentially, more room for manoeuvre under the so-called second and third pillars, dealing respectively with

foreign and security policy and **justice and home affairs**. These are, however, the policy areas in which the Commission has the least powers. There was no strong sense of leadership to pursue an ambitious agenda in these domains at the hearings, although some interesting statements of intent were made.

- **Neighbourhood policy** will be key to ensuring a secure and prosperous environment for the Union. The Euro-Med dialogue is to be enhanced at all levels. In particular, the Union will define its position on **Turkey's** accession, and the Commission will play an irreplaceable role under any conceivable scenario. Relations with **Russia** need fundamental rethinking, although the approach of relevant Commissioners to this issue has been very cautious.
- Most importantly, work is to be undertaken to set up a **European diplomatic service** – the so-called European External Action Service – to underpin the position of the envisaged Foreign Minister. There is also no shortage of challenges on the **trade** agenda, where the Commission seems to have a firm grip of the EU position.
- The much heralded publication, later this year, of the Multi-annual Programme 2005-2010 on justice and home affairs – Tampere II – does not seem to entail radical innovation. There is no doubt, however, that the Commission should carve out an important niche here, and become the initiator and catalyst for a shared approach to **immigration and asylum** policies, with a special emphasis on cooperation with third countries and the integration of migrants.
- At the same time, the Commission should insist that Member States seriously enhance their cooperation in the fight against **organised crime and terrorism**, where a lot of ground still needs to be covered. In particular, the framework decision on the European Arrest Warrant should be complemented with legislation on the rights of defence, admissibility of evidence, and the progressive elaboration of a European *corpus juris*.

A cursory look at the policy priorities of the new College shows continuity with a sizeable package of strategies, programmes and initiatives inherited from the Prodi years. This is not to say, of course, that the next Commission can just sit back and watch the smooth evolution of ongoing policies: it will not be business as usual. Following enlargement, Europe has entered a delicate **transition phase** both in institutional and policy terms. The challenge of dealing with the Union's increased size (from 15 to 25 Member States) is compounded by the challenge of increased diversity. Growing diversity complicates policy making but, as a number

of Commissioner Designates have stressed, can also enrich the Union, and be the source of new strengths. It is a matter of sound management.

The **effective management** of this transition, towards a more cohesive and larger Union in five years time, will be the defining challenge of the new Commission. This is perhaps a sobering task compared to the visionary projects of the past, but it is a responsibility that has to be assumed with great care. Failure would probably unleash more political and policy fragmentation, with unpredictable consequences. Success, considering the obstacles ahead, would be no mean achievement.

The Commission and Member States: time for dialogue

President Barroso, as well as most of the prospective members of the College, seem reluctant to tackle Member States head on, in particular as national governments enter the delicate stage of ratification of the Constitutional Treaty. The new Commission has showed a conciliatory attitude, and indicated priorities that most governments can subscribe to. Of course, a dialogue with Member States does not necessarily amount to taking an apathetic attitude to their often erratic demands. On the other hand, the limits imposed on the Commission's room to manoeuvre seem to be clearly understood. Self-restraint and a sense of **sobering realism** seemed to pervade most policy statements during the hearings.

This is not, in itself, a negative signal. A constructive dialogue with national leaders is the starting point for re-launching a series of policy initiatives and pursuing ongoing debates – such as the negotiations on the new financial perspectives – while reducing acrimony and mutual accusations. Emphasis is put on the role of the Commission in mobilising **pilot coalitions of Member States** in the pursuit of key goals. From this standpoint, the Commission has to regain some credibility in the eyes of national governments, and the time may be ripe to do so.

Arguably, leaders across Europe sense that the moment has come to improve the level of debate on shared concerns and priorities. At an institutional level, they envisage the appointment of a new Chairman of the European Council for two and a half years, in order to better manage their meetings. President Barroso has a direct interest in pre-empting the establishment of this new position by demonstrating that he himself, and the new College, are trustworthy interlocutors. The new Commission has to work with Member States to gain its credentials, and has to provide a strong contribution to **multi-annual planning**, and to the preparation and the follow up of European summits.

The role of the Commission

That being said, the tone of some hearings justifies a **warning signal**. The scope for legislative initiatives is clearly defined by a multitude of legal bases in the treaties. Moreover, even where the Commission is competent to act, attention should be paid to the implementation of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. In a Union of 25, however, the **unique role of the Commission** in defending and pursuing the common interest is irreplaceable. Each of the individual Commissioners, and the College as a whole, must deliver **leadership** and must drive not follow the policy agenda. It would be a mistake to believe that the tensions and conflicts that have recently weakened the process of European integration will simply fade away if the Commission interprets its mandate narrowly and keeps a low profile.

Such a narrow interpretation emerged from some of the hearings. A pragmatic resignation to the opposition of national governments to more ambitious initiatives – from immigration and asylum to development cooperation, from budgetary politics to taxation – seemed to prevail over bold policy statements. Caution, not vision, was the name of the game. Undoubtedly, careful judgement of the political constraints on the scope of President Barroso's initiative and that of his colleagues will be crucial to their eventual success. But a timid approach will hardly boost the status of the Commission in the eyes of governments.

Vision does not exclude realism, but brings to it a clear sense of direction. Lack of vision has been, arguably, one of the key factors leading to the postponement of the vote of approval on the new College. Not only were many European parliamentarians unhappy with the performance of individual candidates, but they also questioned the lack of focus and political drive of the new executive: in short, its political quality.

Essentially, the College is there to punch its weight and to articulate a vision for policy developments. Binding and non-binding instruments enable it to fulfil this role. Personal skills will be pivotal. As Commissioner Wallström put it, the sum of 25 national interests does not necessarily amount to a European interest. Commissioner Designates should be very clear about their role, and show more determination to fill the gap between the sum of the individual interests, and the European total.

What is Lisbon?

President Barroso got off to a good start last summer, declaring that the achievement of the Lisbon goals will be the 'northern star' of his crew.

That was smart for two reasons. Firstly, because it is essential to make real progress on the Lisbon Agenda. Secondly, because making Lisbon the key priority is harmless: few would disagree. Predictably, the devil is in the details.

Lisbon includes **three pillars: economic, social and environmental**. The overall objective is to make the Union the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. The balance between the three dimensions of Lisbon is a matter for political judgement. With some simplification, a broad distinction can be drawn. Some put the emphasis on economic competitiveness and stress technological innovation, labour productivity and flexibility, and the liberalisation of services as the primary tools for fostering growth. Others take a more holistic perspective and maintain that social dialogue, inclusiveness, and environmental compatibility should not only be complementary strands of the competitiveness goal, but should be mainstreamed and become the benchmarks of a sustainable model for economic development. A balanced social model, they argue, is the most promising basis for long-term economic success.

Of course, things are not that simple. Hundreds of more specific initiatives and objectives are included under each pillar of Lisbon. The so-called **Open Method of Coordination (OMC)** is a buzzword concealing a rather messy web of different procedures established in the pursuit of different goals, depending on whether the Community method, or softer forms of inter-governmental coordination, applies. So far, the exercise has proved quite ineffective, although the economic performance of EU member states varies widely.

Arguably, the basic problem with the OMC is that implementing best practices and abiding by benchmarks critically depends on the good will of Member States. On a vast range of policy areas, the Commission simply does not have the instruments to take the initiative or to enforce compliance. Hence the vital importance of a constructive, and serious, dialogue with national governments. The latter, however, can easily elude the recommendations and the monitoring of the Commission by referring to different indicators or devising new proposals over and over again: there is plenty of choice. Lisbon is simply not in the public eye, which gives governments little incentive to deliver.

Commissioner Designate Vladamir Spidla (Employment and Social Affairs) vividly described the Lisbon Strategy as a 'Yeti' – everybody talks about it, but nobody has ever seen it. It is therefore a matter of catching the Yeti and seeing its face, thus delivering the results of the strategy. Janez Potočnik (Science and Research) sensibly stated that clearer priorities and a limited set of verifiable criteria should be drawn up

to ‘wake up the dormant patient’ and overcome the stifling complexity of Lisbon. In short, declaring Lisbon the paramount goal is politically correct. The controversy starts with the ranking of the **objectives** to be achieved, and with the selection of the most suitable **methods** for pursuing them. In other words, it is a matter of situating this Commission on the axis between the two approaches roughly sketched out above: social oriented or market oriented.

It’s competitiveness, stupid!

From this standpoint, the new team gave the impression of being broadly in agreement on one point: the number one objective of unleashing **sustained economic growth by boosting competitiveness and innovation**. Less emphasis, perhaps, was put on whether such growth will be sustainable over the long term. Structural reforms of labour markets and welfare systems, increasing productivity, liberalisation of services, public-private partnerships and enhancing competitiveness were the focal points of many of the hearings. After all, President Barroso defined the profile of his Commission by setting up a competitiveness working group, including an inner core of relevant Commissioners but open to others when their initiatives overlap with the all-inclusive Lisbon agenda. The powerful Vice-President Designate, Günter Verheugen (Enterprise and Industry), envisaged a ‘**competitiveness test**’ to assess the validity of each proposal from the Commission.

The new gospel was spread quite effectively. A number of Commissioners referred to Lisbon, emphasising the economic dimension of the strategy, as the overarching framework of their policies, including research and development (Potočnik), information society (Reding), budget (Grybauskaitė), education and culture (Figel), and regional cohesion (Hübner). The Commission services have apparently already been mobilised to stress the Lisbon-relevant dimensions of respective policy areas. Of course, the performance of the new College at the hearings was not monolithic. There were as many different nuances as prospective Commissioners, including slogans such as the three ‘Cs’ of Stavros Dimas (environment) – ‘clear, clever, competitive’ – and the goals of Viviane Reding – ‘innovation, inclusion and creativity.’

Moreover, some Commissioners maintained that growth and competitiveness were not goals in themselves, but instruments to improve the **living standards** of Europeans. Vladimir Spidla went as far as to argue that competitiveness should be replaced by quality of life as the end goal of the Commission’s work. However, when tested on how to enhance the social dimension of Europe, most members of the future College took shelter behind the inescapable principle of conferral, whereby their powers only go so far. The rest – such as social policy and the reform of the

welfare state – is in the hands of Member States. The interesting proposals advanced by Mr Spidla for a ‘**social impact assessment procedure**’ and for ‘European minimum standards’ notably including a minimum social income, deserve attention, but do not alter the overall picture.

The emphasis on the role of the private sector in boosting economic growth was paralleled by convincing commitments to focus on **better regulation** and co-regulation. Bureaucrats will apparently have a hard time surviving all the cuts in red tape suggested by the Barroso team. Impact assessment will be enhanced not only from a business angle, but also as a way of measuring the social and environmental consequences of regulation. Many Commissioners stressed that these goals could only be achieved with serious commitment of Member States who are responsible for implementation. Moreover, the next Commission will pay special attention to the needs of **small and medium-sized companies**, the backbone of the industrial system of many Member States.

All in all, it seems fair to argue that the tone is set: the collective brain of the Commission is programmed to achieve sustainable development, but its heart beats for economic growth and competitiveness. Hopefully, in the interest of Europe, the Barroso recipe will prove effective. Critics, however, argue that this is not ‘the’ Lisbon Strategy, but a distinctive interpretation of the all-inclusive, and perhaps all-elusive, initiative undertaken four years ago. Others insist that benchmarking and soft law have reached their limits, and there is little choice but to introduce binding instruments and the Community method to make real progress. In a Union where national governments are increasingly allergic to perceived Commission interference with their domestic priorities, however, that seems unlikely.

A (cautious) look at the world

The competence and authority of the Commission in the economic domain is sometimes put to a harsh test, but never fundamentally challenged. This is not the case in the field of external relations. While delegating the management of development policy and humanitarian aid and cumbersome enlargement negotiations to the Commission, Member States are reluctant to recognise the Commission as a serious player in international politics. At a closer look, however, the Commission and Member States share a much wider range of tasks under foreign and even security policy than the simplistic inter-governmental façade would suggest. Also, the Commissioner Designates responsible for external relations (Ferrero-Waldner), development (Michel) and enlargement (Rehn) seem determined to fulfil their role, and make a difference. Peter Mandelson, armed with the powers that the Commission wields in trade policy, is in a more comfortable position. He gave a convincing

performance at his Parliamentary hearing. Asked about his loyalties, he even declared that there was no contradiction between serving Britain and pursuing the interests of Europe as a whole. Proving it will be perhaps his biggest challenge.

The hearings highlighted a potential **coordination problem** between different portfolios. This is particularly the case for the burden-sharing between Louis Michel and Benita Ferrero-Waldner. On another front, Neighbourhood policy has been attached to the external relations portfolio, but links with the enlargement dossier are evident. Of course, trade cuts across almost all policy fields, starting with development. Relevant Commissioners maintained that coordination would be properly ensured through the **External Relations Working Group** chaired by President Barroso, but similar efforts in the past have failed to deliver joint-up policy making. Louis Michel, for example, was firm in stressing the need for coordination as he was insisting that he would defend the autonomy of development policy. Moreover, other Commissioners intend to play a distinctive role at the international level, notably Dimas (environment), Kovačs (energy) and Borg (fisheries).

To an extent, overlapping competences are inevitable, but some additional degree of coordination must be achieved. All the more so with a view to the envisaged establishment of a **Foreign Minister** of the European Union, a Vice-President of the Commission and Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Council. The Commission has a vested interest in ensuring that the future Foreign Minister – Javier Solana – can count on an efficient and reliable institutional structure when taking office. In this perspective, Benita Ferrero-Waldner cautiously referred to the work in progress to set up the European diplomatic service, potentially including officials from the Commission, the Council and national services. It would be a major achievement if progress was made in establishing a culture of cooperation between institutions, as opposed to fostering damaging competition between bureaucratic fiefdoms.

These institutional developments, however, crucially depend on the ratification of the new Constitutional Treaty, as consistently stressed by Commissioner Wallström. Preparations can, therefore, only go so far, although a lot can be achieved by reorganising existing services within the Commission. The innovations under the Common Foreign and Security Policy are one of the key achievements of the new Constitution. If this text does not enter into force, the perspectives for a serious Commission role in international affairs, beyond trade and indeed environment, would be bleak.

In terms of policy priorities, both Mrs Ferrero-Waldner and Mr Michel outlined an ambitious, although rather vague, vision of the role of the

Union in international relations, while acknowledging their ultimate dependence on the will of Member States. At a time when the Middle East conflict is spreading instability and hatred across the region, Iraq is slipping into chaos and Iran continues to reject the Union's proposals for cooperation, the hearings exposed the discomfiting limitations of EU powers in international affairs. **Effective multilateralism and cooperation with the United Nations** were often invoked but little detail was given on how actually to shape a better system of global governance. For example, both Commissioner Designates were somewhat hesitant when questioned on the use of conditionality and the defence of human rights. They argued that **'critical' dialogue** had to be pursued with difficult partners: populations would suffer the consequences of a tougher stance by the Union if it suspended or terminated existing agreements. No clear-cut position was taken by any Commissioner Designate on **transatlantic relations**. All paid tribute to the long-standing friendship with the US, to be underpinned and re-launched. Differences were acknowledged in passing, but no adequate response was provided on how to bridge them.

Turkey and the Western Balkans will, of course, be at the core of the enlargement portfolio. Arguably, Olli Rehn will face up to two historical challenges. Bringing the countries of the Western Balkans on the edge of accession, and working out a credible path towards the Union for Turkey, would be major achievements. Important decisions will also have to be taken on the 'final destination' of Ukraine.

Connecting with citizens: more than communication

The process of European integration cannot succeed if citizens do not take an active part in it. This was the basic line taken by Margot Wallström during the hearing, when she stressed that an **infrastructure for democracy** should be built in parallel to physical infrastructure for transport or energy. Citizens will be targeted by a new Communications strategy, launched to provide them with basic knowledge of European affairs and, in particular, of the benefits of integration. At the same time, a vast array of initiatives will be promoted all over the Union to involve civil society in regular debates on Europe. The first experiment of the kind is likely to take place in Terezín in the Czech Republic. The mandate and the resources of EU representations in Member States will be reviewed in order to make them hubs of democratic debate for national actors. In short, according to Commissioner Wallström, the road to **ratification** of the Constitutional Treaty is paved with objective information, mass communication and, ultimately, the confidence and allegiance of citizens.

Members of the future Commission seem well aware that, together with revamping the Lisbon Strategy, connecting with citizens is a top priority. The much-criticised, and perhaps soon-to-be-replaced Commissioner Designate Rocco Buttiglione performed best when he spoke of building a **Europe of Law** – the basis for the ordered coexistence of citizens in a society as complex and diverse as Europe. Beyond the Single Market, citizens need more legal coherence to be able to travel, work and reside in other countries – that is, to exploit their opportunities at a continental scale. Mr Buttiglione and Jan Figel (Education, Training and Culture) were acutely aware of problems such as the **mutual recognition of titles and certificates**. The former also insisted on the question of access to justice, and on the excessive duration of legal proceedings, as obstacles to the functioning not only of the market, but also of society across borders. In line with the mounting trend to maximise joint-up policy making in all sectors, Mr Buttiglione argued that much more inter-service coordination was required to ensure that various aspects of civil law harmonisation (whether by legislative or non-legislative instruments) are developed coherently.

Mr Buttiglione was more controversial, and definitely less convincing, on other policy domains in his portfolio, including **asylum and immigration** as well as **judicial cooperation in criminal matters and the fight against terrorism**. The potential for expanding the European remit and intervention in these policy areas is widely recognised. The would-be Commissioner, however, outlined an agenda directed at defending Europe against a range of threats, from terrorism to illegal immigration. Crucial issues such as the integration of migrants in European societies did not feature prominently in his hearing.

The impact of these strategic policy choices on European societies should, however, be a matter for deeper reflection. This question is essentially about **what kind of society Europeans want to build**. Are Europeans on the defensive, concerned about global trends and afraid to lose their economic, social, environmental and also physical security, as well as their identity? Or are Europeans ready to take on new challenges, absorb and integrate migrants, compete at a global level and export as many goods, services, ideas and culture as they import? These are the critical, multi-dimensional issues, underlying the well-being of citizens, that the new Commission should address. A credible, holistic solution for injecting renewed confidence in society did not emerge from the hearings.

Interesting ideas only emerged in a somewhat patchy way. **Education and culture**, as well as **research and development** are key elements in the new Commission's strategy to re-launch growth and provide citizens with more opportunities. Commissioners Figel (Education, Training and Culture), Potočník (R&D) and Reding (Info Society and Media) stressed to

differing extents the need to invest in a knowledge based society, and claimed that much progress would be attained if the budgetary demands of the Prodi Commission were met. The budget for R&D would double and the resources for education and training would triple. Additionally, Member States should fulfil their commitment under Lisbon to bring the level of R&D investment up to 3% of EU GDP. These targets go to the heart of the future of the economic and social system which is of such importance for all Europe's citizens.

Prospective members of the College have all committed themselves to fairness and inclusiveness in shaping new education and research programmes, and to uphold equal opportunities. Jan Figel particularly emphasised the preservation of **cultural diversity** as a key commitment, and pledged his support for renewed intercultural dialogue to overcome barriers within the Union and between the Union and third countries.

Following the hearings, it seems fair to point out that the new Commission has not yet developed a vision of the model of European society it wishes to promote. This is perhaps not surprising, considering that the College has only met twice and that it focussed on the Lisbon Strategy in these meetings. However, if citizens are concerned with their well-being and security, they will hardly become attentive interlocutors in an effort to connect with them. Widespread pessimism towards the future, and mistrust of politics are two sides of the same coin. **Connecting with citizens** is a massive challenge that needs to be carried out at different levels, using different means, and needs to be integrated into all EU policies. It requires not only proactive leadership by the next Commission, which it rightly considers it a top priority, but also serious commitment by the Member States.

Conclusion

The Commission has outlined two basic priorities: **fostering sustainable growth and connecting with citizens**. Under the current political circumstances, this is perhaps the most that can be achieved. Visions of political integration will be temporarily put on hold, notably during the campaign to ratify the Constitutional Treaty. On a practical level, success in delivering the stated policy goals would bring considerable benefit to Europe, and to Europeans. In those policy areas where the Community method does not apply, progress can be made by establishing a constructive dialogue with Member States, and persuading them of the need to deliver results so as to enhance their own credibility, and the credibility of the European undertaking, at the same time.

In the aftermath of the withdrawal of the new College, under threat of rejection by the European Parliament, the policy priorities of the Commission need to be better defined, and promoted more assertively. Most importantly, the **political vision driving the initiative of this Commission** needs to be articulated and announced. A number of Commissioners Designate seemed to take a rather restrictive view of their tasks. With regards to the Lisbon Strategy, the emphasis is put on economic growth. A coherent approach for reconnecting with citizens has not been outlined, with communication receiving more attention than strategic policy initiatives of direct relevance for citizens. There is nothing wrong with competitiveness and communication. But the Commission is hardly likely to be successful if it regards these objectives as separate goals, rather than as parts of a single, larger project: **shaping a model of European society** for the next decade and beyond.

This is the biggest challenge for the Commission over the next five years. Of course, the new College does not have the means to establish a new social and economic balance across Member States. Nor is it in the power of the Commission to generate a major shift in the way in which Europeans perceive the challenges facing them. On the other hand, the Commission has some **unique assets**. Members of the College are not constrained by national electoral cycles: they can ‘think big’ in the longer term. The Commission can experiment more than national governments. It can shape new geometries within the College to pull Commissioners together to come up with original policy outputs, which can be passed on to governments increasingly at pain with defining strategic policy options. That way the Commission can prove its worth in the eyes of Europeans. A successful communication strategy should reflect concrete policy initiatives in the pursuit of a sustainable, open and innovative model of society. Ultimately, the Commission is respected in so far as it pursues the

common interest independently from, but in constant dialogue with, Member States.

The Union has achieved major successes – the single market, monetary union and enlargement. However, time is not ripe for a quantum leap towards further political integration. In this context, the new Commission can leave its mark on the history of the Union by promoting a new model of society for Europe that is alert to new challenges but confident in its values and aspirations. In that perspective, Europe's chances of achieving competitive economic performance, and of reconnecting with the citizens, will be much higher.

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