

Political Leadership for the European Union

When we talk about political leadership in the EU, we first have to define what the concept means. To be effective, leadership requires:

- strategic thinking,
- a preparedness to confront problems head-on,
- the courage to propose solutions that may entail risks and
- the ability to persuade others to accept the need for change.

Managing the European Union is, at the best of times, a particularly difficult task. Its decision-making structures do not resemble the pyramidal organisations of a nation-state or a large business. In the EU, various supranational institutions share power with the member states: the lines of authority are mostly horizontal rather than pyramidal. There is no single institution clearly in charge and able to give orders to the rest of the organisation. Nothing happens unless a broad coalition of institutions and governments agree that it should, which is why decision-making is so slow.

The Commission ceased to play a pivotal role since the time of Jacques Delors.

The EU Council is supposed to provide the Union with leadership. Following the Maastricht Treaty, it should set the agenda of European politics and promote plans for the future. Yet, in the past years, the Council has not met this expectation. The rotation of the presidency entails a lack of continuity in the agenda-setting procedure; the Summit agendas are overloaded with gritty details and each presidency pursues more or less specific topics ('shopping lists'). This is why the Council currently fails to fulfil its original strategic purpose.

Thus, the EU definitely needs a reform of its institutions, especially the Council and its working mechanisms, in order to restore political leadership. For that to be efficient, the EU must in very basic terms:

- speed up its decision-making procedures,
- acquire more legitimacy and

- overcome the three-pillar structure.

Further, restoring political leadership in the Union requires the maintenance of a balance between two sets of opposing approaches:

1. The **balance between inter-governmentalism and the federalism/supranational approach**. We need to avoid any theological battle between the two. Far too much energy and ink has been wasted on the battle between inter-governmentalists and advocates of the Community method. No plan for reforming the institutions will be viable if it seeks to tilt the balance strongly in one direction or the other. Instead, the very specific triangular equilibrium of the EU institutions need to be brushed-up and strengthened.
2. The **balance between the small and the large member states**. Small states fear that large ones will try to impose some sort of *Directoire* that runs many EU policies without their involvement. Big states worry that small states do not understand that the CFSP will not be credible unless those with more diplomatic and military clout are allowed to take the lead. In the coordination of macroeconomic policy, too, different standards seem to apply to small and large states (see Germany and Portugal's 'Blue letter' from Brussels). And it is the very fact that mostly small states will join the EU with the forthcoming enlargement that has the potential to threaten the hitherto equilibrium of the EU-institutions as regards the number of Commissioners and the weighting of votes in the Council.

In order to cope with the problem of political leadership, the idea has been proposed to appoint a Chairman of the Council for either two or five years. This idea goes back to a proposal from Mr. Aznar earlier this year. Not surprisingly, most of the smaller states have been against or reluctant to accept this proposal. Therefore, if that is to happen, something will have to be given to the smaller countries in return.

The internal task of the Chairman would be to set a coherent agenda for the EU for a couple of years and to focus discussion on it. This would put an end to the 'shopping-list' principle as regards EU priorities, which characterises the rotational system of the presidency. Externally,

the Chairman would be *'the European voice'*. It would be the task of the Chairman to express the common EU position in all policy fields.

The creation of a European Chairman does not necessarily mean that the EU would have to renounce a 'High Representative' for CFSP. Hence, the 'High Representative' would rank at the level of Foreign Ministers more than on the level of Heads of State and Governments. There is room for both of them, the 'High Representative' being responsible more for the daily management of CFSP; the Chairman more for the overall representation of the Union when it comes to high-level talks.

The EU certainly would benefit from a single voice at the highest level!

Of course, the creation of a Chairman position would create some problems with the Commission. But these could be handled if one succeeds in drawing clear lines of power delimitation and competencies for both of them. The delimitation could go along with the pillar structure of the EU, the President of the Commission being responsible for the 1st pillar (single market, including EMU), and the Chairman of the Council for the 2nd (CFSP), assuming that the 3rd pillar (Justice and Home Affairs) merges with the 2nd. Basically, the idea is one of **'twinned governance'** for the EU. The political system of the EU would have two major persons/presidents: the President of the Commission, in the future elected by the European Parliament and therefore more powerful and more legitimate; and a Chairman of the Council, appointed by his/her colleagues of the Council.

This system would be similar to the current system of the 5th French Republic, having one President and one Prime Minister at the head of the administration. The Council/Chairman of the Council would sketch out the grand strategy; the Commission/President would work on a clear mandate given by the Council, but would keep the **sole right of initiative** within 1st pillar issues, where its pre-eminent authority would reside. The President of the Commission leads in the 1st (3rd) pillar issues; the President of the Council in the 2nd pillar issues.

In order to obtain support from the small countries, the reform of the Council should be connected with the reform of the Commission. The goal of **'twinned governance'** is to strengthen the Council without weakening the Commission. It is also necessary for the Convention to link the strengthening of the Council to the future of the Commission

(reinforcement through election of the Commission-President) for tactical reasons: it seems that reform of the Council will be done anyway – also Heads of State and Governments are in principle free to engage it without asking the EP or the Commission for agreement. Therefore the reinforcement of the Commission can only come from the Convention. If not, we might have to face a situation in which the Council is reinforced *without* the necessary strengthening of the Commission. More than just proposals for a reform of the Commission, the Convention thus has to guarantee some sort of damage limitation as regards the Commission.

The first trade-off with the small countries in exchange for their agreement to the requested Council reform is the strengthening of the Commission as indicated above. The second element of such a trade-off could be the fusion/merger of some of the main positions in the Council and the Commission. If the Commission is to be reduced to 10 Commissioners, the EU will see for the first time a radical break with the principle of national representation, which most likely will not be welcomed by the small countries. Therefore, the small countries could be offered presidency positions of the sectoral Minister Councils. Today, there are 9 Council formations. Add these nine ‘Presidencies’ to the 10 available positions of Commissioners, and the EU would dispose of 19 high-ranking positions. The merger of the Commission/Council positions would thus facilitate the breakthrough of the principle of national representation and at the same time make the Council and the Commission much more efficient.

Pushing this reform even further – which means a further elaboration of the ‘twinning element’ between the Council and the Commission – one could imagine that the sectoral Commissioners would participate in the meetings of ‘*their*’ Council. Then, the EU could establish three ‘Super-Ministers’ (Euro, CFSP and Justice and Home Affairs), who would go along with three ‘Super-Councils’.

Another approach of reforming the Commission together with the Council in the idea of ‘twinning’ could be to stipulate that the Commissioners (the countries they come from) should in any composition of the Commission represent at least 66% (2/3) of the EU-population. The other countries would be submitted to rotation, but this rotation could also be compensated with a presidency of one of the sectoral Minister Councils for the countries not represented in the Commission.

In any case, the 'federation' of the Commission (= breakthrough of the principle of national representation) should come along with the strengthening of the Commission (election of the President by the EP). This might be the only solution for obtaining the support of the small countries. The incentive for the small countries to follow this path could be the very fact that, if the Convention doesn't succeed in strengthening the Commission as sketched out above, the Council could be the only winner of reform, and with it the larger countries.

Germany especially won't be in favour of strengthening the Council, without, in parallel, strengthening the Commission and the EP at the same time.