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A New Crew Takes the Helm in Europe

On 31 October 2004, the term of office of the current European Commission will expire. Last week President-designate José Manuel Barroso, formerly Prime Minister of Portugal, announced his new team. This issue of Europe in Brief will look at what the Commission does, how the new Commission is constituted and at some of the headlines surrounding the announcement of the new Commissioners.

Setup of the Commission

The Commission's function within the European Union can be described as that of an executive government, with very wide powers for each Commissioner to run his/her portfolio as he/she sees fit. As a whole, the Commission has the power to enact most of the European Union's legislation and then enforce it, with the directly elected European Parliament more often than not reduced to an advisory function. Personnel questions at Commissioner level are therefore hotly debated across Europe.

The new Commission will consist of 25 Commissioners, one from each member state of the European Union. Each Commissioner will have one vote in Commission decisions. As mentioned in Europe in Brief issue 5/2004, this is a major change from the old-style Commission of 20, which gave two votes to Commissioners from each of the five largest EU member states. In the new Commission, however, the vote of the Slovenian Commissioner (population: 2 million - a quarter of the number of people living in NYC) will count just as much as the German Commissioner's vote (population: 80 million).

Building the Commission

The appointment of a new Commission takes place in several stages. Firstly, a new President of the Commission is nominated by the heads of the member states, and then confirmed by the European Parliament. At this stage, political muscle-flexing is very much the order of the day, as the President's nomination has to be unanimous, and member states wrangle over the nationality and perceived national allegiances of the candidates.

While President-designate Barroso certainly has the credentials for the job, but he is not very well known outside of his home state, and his name was only put forward as a compromise candidate when the appointment of either of two more high-profile nominees was blocked by fierce resistance from individual member states.

The appointment of Barroso who, against strong opposition in his own country, had joined Prime Minister Tony Blair of the UK and former Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar in supporting the Iraq war, was welcomed by George W. Bush.. It is reported that President Bush phoned Barroso shortly after his nomination to congratulate the former Georgetown University lecturer.

Nominating the Commissioners

In the next stage, the government of each member state nominates a Commissioner, usually after lengthy in-fighting by the national political parties. It is up to the President-elect to allocate a portfolio to each nominee Commissioner. At this stage, national governments lobby hard to get one of the more influential posts. But the decision is up to the President and, in a final step, the nominee Commissioners are interviewed and confirmed by the European Parliament.

Once confirmed, each Commissioner is independent of directions from his/her national government. In practice, this has certainly worked for the current Commission - some of its

members have even been accused of making a point of voting against the interests of their own nation state, simply in order to affirm their independence.

The Commission as a whole is responsible to the European Parliament. However, the Parliament's day-to-day powers are limited, and its supremacy over the Commission is mainly exercised by the ability to dismiss the whole Commission. During the nearly 50-year history of the European Union and its predecessors, this power has never been exercised. In practice the Commission therefore has a substantial degree of independence.

Barroso's team

Seven of Barroso's new Commissioners are "old hands" who are currently holding a Commission post, although always with a different portfolio from the one they are set to take over. Four representatives from the new Eastern European member states have served an "apprenticeship" sharing the post of one of the existing Commissioners since 1 May 2004.

However, it is the appointment of some of the "new faces" which has triggered the majority of newspaper coverage. The Commission has long had to deal with the image of providing cushy and well-paid semi-retirement jobs for national politicians whose careers at home have come to an end, in particular for ex-government ministers. At first glance, this may appear true in view of the biographies of the nominee Commissioners, only five of whom have not been a government minister in their home states, and three of whom - including Barroso himself - are even ex-heads of government.

However, in the past many appointees have surprised commentators by proving more than capable in their European jobs, and even by fulfilling their duties with more zest and success than in their previous national offices. Most of Barroso's team bring impressive credentials to their new jobs, including two whose appointment has provoked much raising of eyebrows.

The headline-grabbers

The first of these two is Benita Ferrero-Waldner, currently foreign minister in the Austrian coalition government. Ferrero-Waldner is widely regarded as tired of her office after losing out in the election for the post of the representative head of state. The Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel is alleged to have given her the Commission appointment with scant regard for his ministers' or party's opinion, in order to keep his close ally in a responsible position. Ferrero-Waldner is also very loyal to the Chancellor, so her appointment may well put an end to the frequent criticism of the Austrian government levelled at it by its own current appointee, the influential Austrian Commissioner for Agriculture Franz Fischler.

The second hotly debated appointment is that of Peter Mandelson from the UK. Mandelson's political career has been eventful to say the least. He has held various important offices within the ruling Labour Party and has been credited with masterminding the party's return to power in 1997 by radically reforming its image and policies. Nobody was surprised when Prime Minister Tony Blair appointed his close advisor as government minister. However, after only one year Mandelson had to step down after being embroiled in a financial scandal. Arguably this was due to misguided handling of publicity rather than through actual misbehaviour. In any case, as a result, Mandelson's front-rank political career was widely regarded as over.

To everyone's astonishment, the Prime Minister appointed him again a few years later, to the difficult and sensitive post as Minister for Northern Ireland. However, after a brief but successful tenure Mandelson got caught up in yet another scandal, and yet again had to step down. At this stage, his reputation was regarded as beyond resuscitation.

Throughout all of this, Mandelson remained close to Tony Blair as an advisor and trusted ally. Therefore, when Blair put him forward as Commissioner, many commentators called Mandelson

one of "Tony's cronies", and alleged that he had got the job simply as a reward for services rendered.

However, Mandelson may well prove his critics wrong. Despite his colourful background, he has exactly the kind of skills, beliefs, and last but not least the right kind of connections, to be a very efficient and successful Commissioner. He is one of the avid and competent economic reformers who have been given influential portfolios by Barroso, whose declared aim is to push economic reform in Europe by any means necessary.

From a US point of view, Mandelson's politics and efficiency will be of crucial interest, as he is set to take over the external trade portfolio from the uncompromising Frenchman Pascal Lamy. Mandelson will therefore be responsible for fighting the European corner in the various ongoing trade disputes with the US, which have been discussed in earlier editions of Europe in Brief.