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Pragmatism Prevails: Barroso's European Commission

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- In January 2005, the European Commission President presented his five-year Strategy to the European Parliament. The headline goal is the revitalization of the Lisbon Agenda.
- The Commission Strategy includes no new initiatives. It emphasizes the importance of managing and implementing existing programmes and policies effectively. Such an approach would not have been possible without the Kinnock reforms of 1999–2004.
- The strategy pursued by the Commission to date is primarily pragmatic.

Introduction

The appointment of a new European Commission always provides a fertile source of debate and speculation for those commenting on 'Brussels' politics; the arrival of the Barroso Commission at the end of 2004 was no exception. There were many interesting questions to address – for example, what kind of role would the new Commission be able to play in post-Constitution Europe? Would the new Commission President be able to manage his team of Commissioners effectively? What type of agenda would the Commission promote, and what policies would it prioritize?

This briefing paper considers the way the 2004–09 Commission differs from previous ones, and the context in which the Barroso Commission Strategy was developed. The pragmatism of the Commission lies in its ability to capitalize upon the range of functions it performs. This means that it must be able to manage and implement existing policies effectively, and to cooperate with national governments, individually and through the Council, and with the European Parliament (EP). However, the Commission needs to have the administrative capacity to perform well the gamut of functions attributed to it by the Treaty. Recent reforms, administrative and institutional, may be enabling it to do so. As such, even if Barroso is simply making a virtue out of a necessity, this new pragmatism provides an opportunity for the Commission to redefine its place in the EU system.

The paper explores how this new pragmatism has emerged. It sets the scene by examining the appointment of the Commission in October/November 2004. It then considers the reform context inherited by the Barroso Commission, assessing both the internal administrative reform and the wider institutional reforms, insofar as they altered the formal structure of the College and the powers of its President. The final section takes a preliminary look at the Barroso Commission's policy agenda, arguing that the administrative reforms introduced by Vice-President Neil Kinnock during the Prodi Commission of 1999–2004 were instrumental in providing the necessary conditions for the new Commission pragmatism.

The appointment of the Barroso Commission

In October 2004, the Commissioners-designate each had to present themselves before a European Parliament Committee. These hearings were at times tense affairs often lasting several hours. Not all of the EP hearings went well. There was substantial criticism of the Dutch Commissioner-designate, Neelie Kroes, led in particular by Paul van Buitenen. Nominated to the competition portfolio, Kroes had faced difficult questions about conflicts of interest relating to past and present business relationships, which some MEPs believed would undermine her role as arbiter of European competition issues. The independence of the Danish Commissioner-designate, Mariann Fischer-Boel, was also challenged on the grounds that she owned a number of farms in Denmark. Even more serious, however, were the criticisms levelled at the Latvian Commissioner-elect, Ingrida Udre, who had been implicated in funding irregularities within her party, and of the Hungarian Commissioner-elect, Lázló Kovács, who lacked expertise on energy policy.¹

It was the Buttiglione case, however, that resulted in the deadlock between the Commission and Parliament which was to spark the crisis that delayed the appointment of the new College by three weeks. Before the EP's Civil Liberties Committee, Rocco Buttiglione, the Italian Commissioner-designate, made a number of remarks about homosexuality and the role of women which were considered by a substantial proportion of MEPs on the committee to be unacceptable, not least as the justice portfolio included responsibility for anti-discrimination policy. Although committee votes are non-binding, the fact that a majority of committee members voted against Buttiglione cast doubt upon his candidature. Following the committee vote, the political groups met separately to discuss the candidates and then liaised with both the EP President, Josep Borrell, and the Commission President-elect to try to identify a way forward. With the EP vote due to be held on 27 October, it was expected that some kind of compromise between Barroso and the large political groups would be reached before that date.

The crisis deepens

Barroso seemed to have a number of options before him: he might remove part of Buttiglione's portfolio (those that dealt with social affairs); he could, with some difficulty admittedly, reshuffle his entire Commission team to accommodate Buttiglione in a less sensitive post; or he might try to persuade the Italian prime minister to withdraw Buttiglione's candidature and propose an alternative. It was accepted that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get Berlusconi to agree to this, however. Barroso stuck firm in backing his Italian Commissioner at this point, but he did agree to take personal charge of EU policies on anti-discrimination and civil liberties. This was clearly not enough to ensure the support of the major political groups in the EP. Realizing that a successful vote was unlikely, Barroso withdrew his Commission on

the very day the vote was due to be held.

These events were about much more than the quality of Commission candidates. Various interpretations have been advanced, including accusations of anti-Catholicism or political correctness on the part of MEPs. Claims that the crisis was at least in part a consequence of a misjudgment on the part of the new Commission President are quite common. In continuing to act not as a Commission president but as though he were still a head of government, the former Portuguese prime minister had not bargained for the proactivism of the EP's political groups, keen to make use of all opportunities to flex their muscles *vis-à-vis* the Commission, and to confirm that their scrutiny function was anything but toothless. One might also interpret the events of 2004 from the perspective of Commission–Council relations. As Barroso himself has noted, the Commission President does not select his colleagues in the way a prime minister usually can. Although he has the freedom to allocate portfolios, his influence over appointments is limited. Thus one might even see the crisis as less over the Commission and more over Parliament–Council relations.

The Barroso Commission eventually took office on 22 November 2004, three weeks after the date originally planned. The appointment by Berlusconi of Franco Frattini as a replacement for Buttiglione placated the Parliament, and led to a respectable 66 per cent of MEPs voting in favour of the new Commission. In spite of this, there can be no doubt that the events surrounding the confirmation weakened Barroso's hand in the first months of his new post. It remains to be seen whether the events of October and November 2004 will have a longer-term impact on the Commission.

The post-1999 administrative reform of the Commission

On taking office, Barroso inherited the Presidency of the 'administrative' Commission (the Commission's services), as well as the Presidency of the 'executive' Commission (the College of Commissioners) (Cram, 1999). The former had been subject to a kind of permanent administrative revolution over the previous four years. By the time the new Commission was appointed all administrative and personnel reforms had been put in place.² Until the administrative reform was announced in 1999, the European Commission had never been subject to comprehensive reform of any kind. It is true that changes at the level of individual services or policies had been introduced over the years, and that enlargements, from the 1970s on, had impacted dramatically on the Commission. Yet, in spite of numerous complaints about the functioning of the Commission, complaints which often lead to the publication of reports proposing radical change, nothing much was done to alter the situation.

The Santer reforms and resignation of the Commission

The Santer Commission of 1995 was the first to enter office with reform as a specific ambition. Santer's much-quoted claim that the Commission should do

'less, but better' was a direct response to critics of European integration. These critics had become ever more vociferous since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in early 1992. As a consequence, Jacques Santer initiated two rolling programmes of change. The first, *Sound and Efficient Management*, had as one of its objectives the improvement of financial management in the Commission alongside the introduction of more effective planning and controls. The second programme, introduced later in Santer's term of office, was named *Modernisation of Administration and Personnel Policy*. MAP's aim was to simplify internal procedures and to cut administrative costs by delegating responsibilities in administrative matters to the level of the Directorate-General. Both programmes were unsuccessful, however, and as Santer's term progressed, interest in reform waned as other important issues were prioritized.

Santer's term ended badly, nine months early, in March 1999, with the resignation of the College. The resignation had been provoked by the European Parliament on the back of a report by a Committee of Independent Experts which had condemned the College and the President for failing to take responsibility for financial irregularities and other forms of misconduct within their services. Serious allegations were also made against one Commissioner, Edith Cresson, regarding the appointment of her former dentist in a research capacity within the Commission. Although the Parliament did not in the end censure the College, Cresson's refusal to resign and the belief of several Commissioners that resignation was necessary (if only to clear their names) meant that Santer had no alternative but to announce the resignation of the College in its entirety.

Although the College remained in post in a caretaker capacity, the search began immediately for a replacement. By June 1999, the former centre-left Italian prime minister, Romano Prodi, had been nominated. As a politician with experience of overseeing reform in an Italian context, his appointment was broadly welcomed. One of his first decisions was the announcement that he would be appointing a Vice-President for Reform. Neil Kinnock, an existing Commissioner and another highly experienced reformer, was later selected for the post.

The Kinnock reforms

By September 1999 Prodi and Kinnock had begun picking up on a number of initiatives taken in the last months of the Santer Commission. For example, one of the first reform-related texts to be widely disseminated was a Code of Conduct for Commissioners on relations with their departments, which had appeared in draft form in March of that year. Another initiative used the DECODE (Designing Tomorrow's Commission) project, a screening exercise completed during Santer's term, to inform the reorganization of Commission services.

These ad hoc efforts were supplemented by a more comprehensive strategy which involved the drafting of a crucial White Paper. This was done with lightning speed, by January 2000, with a final version published only a year after the 1999 resignation in March 2000.³ It drew heavily on the second of the Reports of the

Committee of Independent Experts (which focused more on the services than on the College), published in September 1999 (CIE, 1999). The White Paper spelt out general aims and detailed actions (in Part II) needed to accomplish the reform. It talked of building a 'culture based on service' and a world-class administration (European Commission, 2000a, 2000b).

The White Paper incorporated three reform strands, unified by a number of general themes. The first strand, under the rubric of '*the means to match our ambitions*', involved the introduction of a new way of setting priorities and allocating resources within the Commission. A decision-making mechanism, known as Activity-Based Management, was to be introduced; this would enable the Directors-General and their Commissioners to judge the extent to which resources matched responsibilities. In all, the plan was to develop a more holistic approach to strategic planning and programming, to prevent the Commission from being forced to take on new policy responsibilities without freeing up or allocating new resources for their management. This was a direct response to the overloading of the Commission, as a consequence of the 1995 enlargement and of the growth in policy responsibilities since the Maastricht Treaty.

The second strand in the White Paper and the subsequent reform package concerned revisions to the system of *financial management* operating within the Commission. Much of the emphasis under this heading was on altering the culture of financial management within the Commission, by making sure that individual officials took responsibility for the financial decisions they had to take – that is, by shifting to a 'culture of responsibility'. In practice this meant a complete overhaul of the financial management, control and audit systems, and the creation of a new Internal Audit Service,⁴ as well as the delegation of certain financial decisions to the level of the service.

The final strand in the reform package concerned *human resources*. This was to involve a whole-scale reform of management, career development and recruitment. While pay and pensions were also reviewed, these were not part of the reform package. The reform of the promotions system was perhaps the most controversial element in this strand of the reform, and its requirement of new Staff Regulations made it all the more difficult. In implementing the reforms, the Commission leadership recognized that imposing the content of the White Paper in a top-down fashion could lead to a substantial backlash against it. As such, a concerted effort was made to develop a communications policy on reform for staff working within the Commission.

Implementing reforms

Nevertheless, there were numerous problems that the reform team had to contend with during the implementation of the reform package. The very magnitude of the project was itself a challenge. It is possible that those initiating the reform had not really taken on board how complicated its implementation would be. Moreover, despite efforts by the Commission leadership to explain and convince Commission staff, perceptions of the reform and the motives behind it

were not always positive. Morale within the Commission had not been particularly high even before the 1999 débâcle. After 1999, with the Independent Experts and the media highly critical of the Commission, it seemed at an all-time low. Although reform was supposed to help the situation in the long run, it became associated, by some within the Commission, with an attack on well-understood norms. Reform meant uncertainty and insecurity for some existing staff. In addition, the practical implementation of the reform caused problems, exacerbating the problem with morale. The additional paperwork necessary as part of the reform process, and the fact that reform often seemed to lead to a more general increase in workload, made it easy for staff to forget the grander ambitions of the reform project.

By the middle of 2004 the administrative reform process was close to completion, however. The vast majority of the proposals set out back in 2000 had been translated into the new systems that would shape the newly enlarged Commission, in time to hand over to the Commission on 1 November. In this sense, a 'new' reformed European Commission was in place, even if 'new' in this context does not necessarily imply that the reforms have been successful or that attitudes and former practices have altered. The latter is a longer-term objective of reform, and a question on which the jury is still out.

The institutional reform of the European Commission

At the same time as the Commission was engaged in administrative reform, a broader process of institutional reform was under way within the European Union. This institutional reform would impact on the College of Commissioners only, although the Commissioners could not guarantee that their opinions would be taken into consideration. Institutional reform is, after all, primarily an intergovernmental process. How, then, has this reform impacted (directly) on the European Commission? While its impact has been largely organizational, it has also had, and is likely to have, an important political dimension, especially with regard to inter-institutional relations. The following paragraphs summarize the reforms introduced since Maastricht.

From Maastricht to Amsterdam

At Maastricht, it was decided to change the term of office of Commissioners from four to five years to bring it into line with the EP. National governments were to nominate the President by common accord after consulting the Parliament. Other nominees to the Commission would be appointed by national governments, but they should now consult the Commission President-elect too. It was confirmed that the Commission as a whole would be subject to a vote of approval in the EP before being formally appointed by the common accord of national governments.

The Amsterdam Treaty made a number of changes which affected the way in which the Commission

President and other Commissioners were to be appointed. It also strengthened the position of the Commission President. It gave treaty status to the EP's right to *approve* (rather than simply being consulted over) the Council's nomination for President, and confirmed that the nominations of Commissioners by national governments must now be made 'by common accord' with the Commission President-designate. It noted that the Commission would now work under the 'political guidance' of the President. A Declaration attached to the Treaty stated that the 'President must enjoy broad discretion in the allocation of tasks within the College, as well as in any reshuffling of those tasks during a Commission's term of office'.

The Nice Treaty

Finally, the Nice Treaty dealt with what had been labelled the 'Amsterdam leftovers', one of which was the composition of the Commission. The understanding was that the IGC would take a decision on the maximum size of the Commission, but this did not happen. It was agreed, however, that from 2005 the College would consist of one national per member state. This would mean that the five largest members would lose their second Commissioner. It was also agreed that once the EU numbered 27 a decision would be taken on the exact size of the College and on arrangements for a fair rotation system between the member states.

The Treaty also altered the way in which the College would be appointed, so that qualified majority voting (QMV) would henceforth be used in the EU Council and the European Council. Under Article 214 of the Treaty establishing the European Community (TEC), the President would be nominated by the European Council, acting under QMV and requiring the approval of the European Parliament. The Council would adopt the list of Commissioners (excluding the President) by QMV, in agreement with the President. The whole College would be appointed by the Council by QMV after the approval of the EP had been given.⁵

Finally, the Nice Treaty sought to strengthen the powers of the Commission President by shifting the Declaration agreed at Amsterdam into the body of the Treaty (Article 217 TEC). As well as confirming that the Commission would work under the political guidance of the President, the Treaty also spelt out that the President would now decide on the Commission's internal organization, allocate responsibilities to the Commissioners and if necessary reshuffle them during a Commission's term of office, appoint Vice Presidents after approval by the College and require a Commissioner to resign if the College was unanimous on this.

In addition to reforms directly affecting the Commission, other reforms, from the Single European Act to Nice, have impinged greatly on both the day-to-day work of the Commission and its wider role in the Union. The introduction of new policy competences has led the Commission to become involved in those new areas; the introduction and extension of the co-decision procedure has altered the way in which it interacts with the EP and Council within the decision-making process; and the setting up of intergovernmental pillars has led

to inter-institutional tensions, with the Commission vying for informal influence in areas where formally it has much less of a role to play than in the first pillar. Some implications of these changes were acknowledged in the design of the administrative reform agenda explained above. The consequences were also felt by the Barroso Commission.

What role for the new Commission?

The administrative and institutional reforms reviewed in brief above were necessary as foundations upon which the new Commission President could build a new role for the Commission, helping it to continue to play an active part in the EU's policy process, in spite of what many believe to be the reassertion of intergovernmental decision-making in Brussels. Yet even without the disruption of the appointment process, the extent to which the new President of the European Commission can shape the EU's agenda is questionable. There is an assumption that the Commission's broad agenda-setting role, taken together with its right of initiative in Pillar One, makes it possible for a President such as Barroso to influence, at least to some extent, the direction of policy, the priorities pursued at the EU level and the speed with which decisions are taken. Identifying the specific impact of the President, or of the College of Commissioners more generally, is difficult, however, given that the EU institutions are mutually dependent on each other and that informal practices govern much of the work of the EU. This was a point that Barroso hammered home very clearly in his first speech as President at the College of Europe in Bruges on 23 November 2004 (Barroso, 2004).

At first sight 'cooperation' seemed to be a key watchword of the new Commission. One can only speculate as to whether this was merely a reaction by Barroso and his team to the bruising events of the weeks before his formal appointment. Reinforcing what can only be understood as a conciliatory tone on the part of the new Commission President, his first speech on 23 November also emphasized 'consensus'. Although there was less emphasis on asserting Commission leadership than one might have imagined, the Commission's role was still closely allied to a defence of the European general interest.

The Commission Treaty

Tone and rhetoric are as important in EU politics as they are in domestic politics, but one speech hardly provides evidence of the start of a 'new' phase in the Commission's history. A change in direction might be more readily identified in the policy priorities adopted, the agenda-setting pursued and substantive initiatives taken by the Commission early in its term of office. Where are we, then, six months into the Barroso Commission? Although there had been a great deal of speculation beforehand about what Barroso's priorities would be,⁶ it was not until 26 January 2005 that the Commission President introduced and delivered the Commission's five-year Strategy paper (European

Commission, 2005a), and its 2005 Work Programme (European Commission, 2005b), to the European Parliament. The Strategy spelt out the objectives that the Commission planned to pursue from 2005 to 2009. It identified three key objectives – prosperity, solidarity and security – under which a broad range of policies were discussed. On the day the strategy Communication was published an article by George Parker and Raphael Minder appeared in the *Financial Times* headed 'Barroso sets out a pragmatic agenda for EU'. In it they summarized the EU's Communication, arguing that the Commission's plans for the next five years were 'pragmatic'. For those who consider the notion of a 'pragmatic Commission' a contradiction in terms, this account of the Commission's five-year Strategy begs further investigation.

Prosperity and the Lisbon Agenda

Prosperity takes pride of place at the top of the Communication, identifying this objective as the Barroso Commission's main priority. To Commission-watchers this came as no surprise and had been highlighted in speeches and press reports at the end of 2004. Under the rubric of prosperity, which Barroso went as far as calling (explicitly) his 'number one priority', the central pillar is clearly the Lisbon Strategy. There is even a reference to 2010 (the Lisbon deadline) as well as 2009 (the end of the Commission's term) in the title of the Strategy Communication.

When first conceived, the Lisbon Strategy was intended to provide a framework for turning the EU into 'the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment by 2010'. It was adopted by the European Council in 2000, but halfway through the process it had become clear that very little had been achieved. Indeed, having been asked by the European Council to review the Lisbon Strategy, the Commission reached initial conclusions, delivered in the Kok Report of November 2004 (European Commission, 2004), that were far from positive. The Report argued that the delivery of results had been 'disappointing' largely because of an 'overloaded agenda, poor co-ordination and conflicting priorities'. Above all, however, it blamed the lack of progress on an absence of political will within the member states. In presenting his own Strategy for 2005–09, Barroso acknowledged these problems. He spoke of finding a way to revitalize or 'renew' the Lisbon Agenda at this mid-term point.

The priorities outlined in the Commission's Strategy under the heading of 'prosperity' are little different from those that appear in the original Lisbon Strategy. They emphasize the need to prioritize economic growth and jobs and to enhance European competitiveness and productivity. Reform is to lie at the heart of this agenda, understood as necessary if Europe wants a more dynamic economy. The Commission's Strategy places emphasis on the need for economic growth based on sound macroeconomic foundations, alongside a legal framework that will encourage entrepreneurship (and support small and medium-sized enterprises), more investment in the

knowledge economy, and the creation of more *and better* jobs. As in the Lisbon Strategy, this is a wish-list, which provides no real indication of *how* the Commission intends to deliver these goals (though it is after all a *strategy* paper). However, it does unequivocally make the Lisbon Agenda the Commission's primary objective over the next few years. Barroso has committed himself to picking up and running with this Agenda, which proved so problematic for the member states the first time around, and which (perhaps because of its vagueness) was never really an objective of the Prodi Commission.

Solidarity

Although prosperity is to be the number one priority, the other two objectives also provide some insight into how the Commission sees its future role within the EU system. A second set of priorities under the rubric of '*solidarity*' emphasizes social justice, the environment and common European values. These are rather tenuously linked together in one section of the Strategy document. First, the principle of cohesion is highlighted in the now conventional sense of reducing regional disparities (which, according to the Commission, have increased threefold since enlargement) and diminishing the gap between rich and poor in the Union. This is already an EU commitment, of course, and there is little that is new here, but it matters all the same that the Commission has prioritized it (to some degree) in its Strategy. There is also discussion of a revised social agenda, which would be the tool used to address these issues. On the environment, the document picks up on another Treaty obligation, stressing the need to ensure that the growth promoted under the 'prosperity' banner is growth of a sustainable kind. The 'solidarity' rationale here relates to the relationship between present actions and future generations. In this section, climate change policy is identified as a particular priority, but so too are the competitive gains in environmental technologies and eco-efficiency efforts of which the EU might take advantage (again, linking back to the earlier 'prosperity' objective). Finally, the solidarity goal also incorporates a commitment to 'European' values (fundamental rights, anti-discrimination policy, gender equality, cultural diversity and so on). Again, there is little that is new here, though there is some indication in the Strategy that the Commission is flagging up aspects of the Constitutional Treaty. Indeed, at one point in the Communication, there is even passing reference to the fact that EU actors might start to behave *as though* the Treaty were already in force!

Security

The third and final objective spelt out in the Strategy paper is '*security*', defined in both a military sense and also more broadly to include security of energy supply, security against natural disasters, security of transport links, and security in public health matters. This section begins with what we have come to expect: references to terrorism and crime (especially organized crime).

Following on from this, the document highlights the importance of implementing the Hague Strategy, a five-year multi-annual programme agreed in November 2004 which has as its aim continuing efforts to create an area of freedom, security and justice within the EU, focusing in particular on the setting up of common immigration and asylum policies.

Further priorities and themes

Although not specified as an objective as such, there is a fourth 'theme' in the Strategy which is presented as a cross-cutting priority, affecting all three objectives above. This relates to the EU's *international dimension*. As Barroso put it when giving his speech to the European Parliament on 26 January, 'The border line between our internal and external policies is gradually vanishing' (Barroso, 2005). As such the EU can not divorce what might once have been considered internal or 'domestic' EU policy from its external relations; it must act as a 'global partner' in all areas of its work. Alongside this general point, specific policies are highlighted: the need to remain attentive to the next round(s) of enlargement and to the EU's relations with its 'new' neighbours (for example, Ukraine). Other priorities mentioned include the promotion of multilateralism (and of the United Nations); and the reinvigoration of relations with Africa and the United States. To those interested in EU-US relations, it is worth noting that the Strategy document contains little more than a sentence on transatlantic relations.

Two further themes in the Strategy are particularly worthy of note, as they provide two overarching 'narratives' which might help to account for the Commission's priorities over the next five years. The first of these is that 'prosperity' is a prerequisite for social solidarity and is not at odds with it. Barroso has made the point before that he does not want the EU to go down the American road of sacrificing social justice for economic growth. As he told the European Parliament: 'Growth and jobs in a dynamic competitive economy, and a modernized social protection and solidarity, are the key to our model of social justice and sustainability.' The economy serves the people, and not the other way round!

The second theme concerns implementation. One dimension of this concerns what is clearly a preoccupation: money. There are frequent references throughout the speeches and documentation that the Commission (and the EU more generally) must be given the necessary resources to match their ambitions. More specifically, the Strategy document makes the point that resources are a prerequisite for delivery of the Strategy. This picks up on a key theme in the Commission's administrative reform agenda: that the Commission should act only where it is given the resources to do so effectively. Clearly, reaching an agreement on the multi-annual Financial Perspective (2007–13) was much in Barroso's mind as he started the first full year of his Presidency. This almost came across as pleading when he presented his Strategy in person to the Parliament: 'All the Commission is asking is to

endow the Union with the financial translation of the commitments made at various European summits over the years ... one cannot have more Europe for less money' (Barroso, 2005).

There are, however, other, interrelated, perspectives on this theme of 'implementation'. What the Strategy report tells us is that the Commission is going to spend the best part of the next five years delivering policies that have already been agreed. Moreover, these policies have, for the most part, been agreed by actors other than the Commission (usually the Council). There is virtually nothing in the Commission's five-year strategy that is new or innovative. The rationale behind this, as set out in the Commission's own documentation, seems to be that the only way to ensure the support of EU citizens, at a time when the EU is characterized by a disconnection between the EU's institutions and elites and the 'people', is to demonstrate that the EU can deliver on its promises (rather than by taking on, and being seen to take on, new obligations). This point is interesting in its own right as it seems to suggest an understanding of Commission legitimacy based less on democratic accountability and more on effectiveness or efficiency. Although Barroso suggests that vision is important in regaining the trust of the people, he also makes it clear, at the start of the Strategy document, that 'the priority should be to bring to fruition the grand projects that have been launched'.

Conclusion

The Strategy adopted by the Barroso Commission becomes feasible only as a consequence of the administrative and institutional reforms pursued during the Prodi years. While Barroso may be right to focus at this time on the implementation of existing strategies and policies, the problem for the Commission is that in delivering on its commitments it is dependent on the EU's member states. Without a commitment from national governments there is little the Commission alone can do to see its Strategy through to completion. Only by making use of its softer functions of brokerage and consensus-building will the Commission be able to persuade and cajole national governments into implementing key elements of its Strategy – especially when it comes to Lisbon. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that this implies an inevitable weakening of the Commission. These functions are no less political than the more traditional application of the 'Community method', to which Barroso remains committed, and may even require greater political skill on the part of Commissioners and their senior officials.

Yet to say that the Barroso Commission's new Strategy is all about implementation is, in effect, to imply that this Commission will be one of consolidation rather than innovation (though the Barroso team itself does not appear to use the word 'consolidation'). Assuming this to be the case, does this also imply a lack of vision on their part? Is this an abdication of the Commission's leadership function, a recognition that

recent attempts by the Commission to set the EU agenda itself have backfired, leaving the Commission weaker (or perceived as weaker) than it would otherwise have been?

It would be wrong to say that there is no vision in the Commission's Strategy. There is a vision, albeit one which the Greens and the Socialists in the European Parliament have criticized for being or bordering on the neo-conservative or neo-liberal (the former being an accusation made on 26 January by Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, President of the Party of European Socialists). It is a vision of an economically strong, competitive Europe, able to use that economic strength to provide social justice and security for its citizens and to influence the global agenda. But this vision originates outside the Commission. What Barroso seems to be doing, then, is transmitting a clear and simple message while identifying a set of priorities upon which the member states *might*, over the next few years, be able to agree. They did, after all, agree to the Lisbon Strategy in principle – even if their commitment to it in practice has been less than wholehearted. This is not so far removed from what Delors tried to do with the single market agenda at the start of his first term, though the parallel cannot be drawn too closely. It is debatable whether Delors was any less dependent than Barroso on member state compliance, although the role played by the European Parliament has changed dramatically since the mid-1980s. Clearly, no Commission President can afford (practically or politically) to privilege relations with national governments *at the expense of* good relations with the Parliament.

A pragmatic strategy

Is it, then, correct to define the Commission's Strategy as pragmatic? Yes, but not in the way the *Financial Times* journalists cited above used the word. The Strategy is pragmatic not in the sense that it is without 'vision' but in the sense that it plays to the Commission's strengths. The new Commission has started to recognize that its status and influence in the EU system do not begin and end with the 'Community method'. Even if Barroso continues to make frequent references in his speeches to the importance of this method of decision-making, the Strategy itself tells a rather different story. It flags up the centrality of functions other than that of initiative and initiation to the Commission. The administrative reforms in place, together with the institutional changes introduced at Nice, mean that there already exists a firm basis on which these other, particularly managerial, implementation and consensus-building, functions might be developed. It may be premature to conclude that this in itself marks a new era for the Commission. But if it can capitalize on the reforms introduced during the Prodi Commission, the Barroso Commission should be able, at the very least, to redefine its role together with, and not in opposition to, the EU's member states and the European Parliament, without this new pragmatism being interpreted as a sign of weakness.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Ultimately Barroso refused to remove Neelie Kroes from her post, and the concerns regarding Mariann Fischer-Boel were not considered too serious. However, a reshuffle was instituted which meant that Kovács moved to take up the taxation and customs union portfolio (after a new hearing), and which led to the removal of Udre. She was replaced by a more acceptable Latvian candidate, Andris Piebalgs, who picked up the post of energy commissioner vacated by Kovács.
- ² Accounting reforms were implemented on 1 January 2005, with the proviso that the move to accrual accounting would be introduced gradually because of its complexity.
- ³ It took only 19 working weeks to compile, followed by four weeks of staff consultation. Staff typically worked 80-hour weeks to achieve the 1 May deadline.
- ⁴ The Internal Audit Service was created as a full Directorate-General with auditing autonomy under the political responsibility of a Commissioner (Kinnock) and it was accompanied by the establishment of Internal Audit Capabilities (IACS) in every Commission DG.
- ⁵ The Constitution confirms that the Commission will continue at least until 2014 to comprise one national from each member state.
- ⁶ See, for instance, 'What "Big Idea" for the Barroso Commission?', Report reflecting the highlights of the roundtable meeting organized by 'Friends of Europe' and Euractiv.com to review the priorities for the EU's 2004-09 agenda, 15 October 2004 (Brussels: La Bibliothèque Solvay).

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