

GIVE THEM A CHANCE

Herman Van Rompuy is a veteran Christian Democrat politician, who has been in frontline Belgian politics for more than twenty years: and whose reputation has soared in the last three, as the quiet, consensus builder who tackles the most intractable issues with steely determination. It was almost affecting to hear Socialist, Green and Liberal politicians, from both sides of Belgium's linguistic divide, expressing in rare unanimity their admiration for Van Rompuy's intelligence, humanity and probity- and regretting the loss to Belgian politics. Without great personal ambition, those who believe that he will be a pushover for whatever Berlin or Paris do not know the man.

Catherine Ashton has had a much shorter political career, but she was a competent junior minister at various departments in the Blair government. She showed determination and effectiveness in steering the ratification of the Lisbon treaty through the House of Lords. In the year since she came to Brussels, taking on the very complex trade portfolio, she has impressed officials with her grasp of detail, developed good relations with colleagues, with the other EU institutions; and has notched up some serious successes in trade negotiations. She has also proven her stamina- not a superfluous quality for the head of a massive External Service, who chairs the Foreign Ministers, while being No 2 in the Commission.

Van Rompuy and Ashton are not household names in the UK, or in other parts of the Union. In part this reflects on the rather narrow horizons of the media in most member states. Jacques Delors, albeit Finance Minister in France, was largely unknown beyond the hexagon until he came to Brussels. When appointed as Commission President he was viewed by many as a colourless technocrat. Baroness Thatcher, among many others, subsequently changed their view.

So the nominations from the European Council of November 19th, while unspectacular, should not be so glibly dismissed as representing a lowest common denominator.

And the idea that there is something untoward or undemocratic in the decisions being made by just 27 people should also be knocked on the head. These 27 happen to be the duly designated heads of 27 governments in 27 democratic states. They have their legitimacy. They were electing someone to chair their meetings, and organise their work, and represent their decisions for thirty months.

They were not electing a President of the United States of Europe. It is a strange paradox to have eurosceptics pleading for direct elections for any of these posts, which would give an authority to the successful candidates beyond what most people would want, and beyond what the Treaty says.

For the High Representative, it was not even a decision: it is a proposal, now submitted to Parliament, which will hold a public hearing with Catherine Ashton, and will take the final vote on the Commission as a whole, including her as its designated vice-President. And, as we have seen in the past, these hearings can sometimes upset the apple cart.

If this first procedure has produced decent nominees for the two posts, many will find fault with the way that it was handled in the weeks leading up to the decision. There was an excessively mechanistic approach; the President had to be Christian Democrat from a small member state, participating in all common policies, and politically of the centre right. Therefore the High Representative should be a woman, from a large member state, and from the centre left. At times, these factors seemed to outweigh the consideration of personal qualities.

And it is a matter of regret that the UK government appeared to walk backwards into supporting Tony Blair, believing that his global reputation would suffice, that there was no need to campaign, that it could all be left in the first instance to diplomats. Stardust memories were never going to do the trick on their own; there was too much baggage and opponents quickly mobilised with some killer arguments- not least the UK's non-participation in the euro, and in Schengen. The early and full engagement of the Prime Minister was required. The Labour Party is also now paying the price for years of having kept a certain distance from the other European Socialist parties. Once it was clear that Berlin on the one hand, and Europe's Socialists on the others were opposed, the candidature should have been immediately withdrawn. The former Prime Minister did not deserve this indignity, and the flagging campaign only served to obscure the significance of the decisions to be taken.

A future selection could be handled differently, without changing the Treaty. The East Europeans are right; there should be public discussion, candidates should have to declare themselves, and make known their vision of Europe's future. And why not present themselves before the decision to the European Parliament? The processes of the Union are never static: lessons should be drawn from the more uncomfortable aspects of this first procedure.

But for now we have the team, more or less in place. Van Rompuy should reach out particularly to the other smaller member states that live in constant fear of a directorate of two or three larger member states calling the shots. Ashton should seek to build an External Service of the highest quality, and work patiently on the larger member states, including her own, which need to develop a European reflex so that there are more common positions for her to represent. They should be given a chance to succeed.

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Waterloo, November 20th 2009.