

'The new Barroso Commission moves towards its investiture' from the Bulletin Quotidien Europe (9 November 2004)


Caption: In his editorial of 9 November 2004, Ferdinando Riccardi, Chief Editor of the Bulletin Quotidien Europe, is optimistic about the chances of the second proposed Barroso Commission receiving the approval of the European Parliament. He also reviews the cases of Commissioners Neelie Kroes and Franco Frattini.

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Unanimous prognostics. This time, everybody agrees: a clear majority of the European Parliament will approve the second line-up of the Barroso Commission. All the institutions have declared themselves satisfied: the Parliament, for having exerted its authority and active, not theoretical, involvement in determining the Commission, a necessary counterpart to its increasing role as legislator; the European Council, which can see a new Commission which is in line with the political orientations currently prevailing within the Union, with a reasonable balances between all the different leanings; the Commission itself, in the person of its President, who feels that he has had the opportunity to better his team, even though he has, in reality, made very few changes to it. We should bear in mind that in July, the EP conferred upon Mr Barroso the responsibility for deciding on the composition of the Commission, by a sizeable majority, and nothing is taken away from this personal mandate by any conflict surrounding any of the individual Commissioners.

Just one member of the new team is still the object of considerable misgivings: Ms Kroes. But the Treaty is quite clear on this: the EP's approval relates not to the separate Commissioners, but to the Commission as a College. The Socialist group, which repeated its negative judgement on whether Neelie Kroes should be assigned the competition portfolio, acknowledges that reservations about one Commissioner does not justify voting against the lot, and it is likely that the cast majority of Socialist MEPs will vote in favour.

The nature of the reservations about Ms Kroes. Whilst I am fully aware that my opinion doesn't count for much, I would like to confirm that my doubts have nothing to do with the role Ms Kroes has played in the past within various businesses and organisations; from this point of view, I am rather more inclined to Mr Barroso's view (also shared by Mr Monti, which is quite a recommendation), which is that experience acquired "on the inside" in management and seeing how the business world works, including within multinationals, is a very valuable resource to understand what's at stake and to shape decisions to be made. This does not preclude respect for the principles of the Treaty and the rules for its application, nor consumer defence, nor the taking into account of the legitimate interests of European industry against world competition, if the ability to resist pressure and intellectual rigour are present.

So where's the problem? It lies in the breadth of sectors which the Commission's legal service feels should be removed from Ms Kroes's competency to discount all risks of a conflict of interest at source. If they are few and relatively secondary in nature, limiting the competences of the Commissioner is acceptable. But if they are many and important- as I felt was the case after the indications on the opinion of the legal services- this is a cause for concern for the authority and prestige of the person called upon to take up one of the most incisive, and also most high-profile, of the duties entrusted to the Commission. The Competition Commissioner has to speak to her counterparts throughout the world (especially the United States), and with the main industrial and financial powers of the planet, and will be heard and listened to everywhere. Is this possible for someone who will be sidelined from the analyses and decisions which relate to a sizeable chunk of the European economic fabric? We are now being told that this would apply to just 1% of the "Competition" dossiers the Commissions is overseeing. This was not the impression gleaned from some of the earlier indications, and we need to know whether the assessment quoted takes account of the essential State aid plank. **A welcome deletion.** As for the most controversial dossier, which led to arguments and stirred up public opinion, all the parties involved now seem satisfied. Rocco Buttiglione is delighted to have been given the opportunity to launch within his country a movement to defence the values and ideas he holds dear. His replacement, Franco Frattini, welcomed "with enthusiasm" (his words) the prospect of becoming a Commissioner in Brussels, which confirms that European jobs are just as highly sought after these days as the post of Foreign Minister for a large Member State. And Community circles are aware that Mr Frattini is the most strongly pro-European member of Italy's ministerial team (in which European fervour is not shared universally), and his appointment was most warmly welcomed.

Mr Buttiglione's removal should also dispel the controversy about this so-called anti-Christian intolerance within European political and intellectual circles, or, conversely, claims that Catholics want to take freedom

of thought and expression back a couple of paces. Compared to what goes on elsewhere, Europe is a haven of freedom and tolerance. If this is threatened, the threat comes from outside. We should bear this in mind instead of fuelling ridiculous squabbles. I will come back on this.

(F.R.)