

Interview with António Vitorino: how the European Commission works (Lisbon, 24 October 2007)

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[Miriam Mateus] And, from an internal point of view closer to your personal experience, how does the Commission work? How is the principle of collective responsibility translated into practice?

[António Vitorino] The Commission takes the form of a pyramid. It has a bureaucratic structure which isn't as large as certain Eurosceptics often like to suggest. It isn't as large as the bureaucratic structure of Lisbon City Council, which manages around 700 000 people every day, and the European Commission doesn't have as many staff members as Lisbon City Council. At the top of the pyramid is the College of Commissioners. The political strength of the College derives primarily from the fact that the Commissioners are appointed by the Member States and are approved by the European Parliament, which therefore means that they have a dual legitimacy, as it were, a basic democratic legitimacy, derived from the support of the states and approval in the European Parliament, and a political strength derived precisely from its collective responsibility. In other words, each decision is discussed and shared and binds each Commissioner. Naturally, it's more difficult for a Commission with 27 Members to assert that principle of collective responsibility than it would be for a smaller Commission. The Treaty of Lisbon therefore provides for the Commission to have fewer members in 2014, when it will be composed of representatives of two thirds of the Member States whose nationals will rotate on a strictly equal basis.