



EUROPE, THE WORLD'S SWITZERLAND?

1. Changing everything so everything can stay the way it was?

The coverage of matters European in the Austrian and Belgian press these last two months of 2009 inevitably hinged on assessments of the new institutional set-up of the EU, especially the *troika* that is now making the running: Barroso, Van Rompuy and Ashton. The subject of Europe's new institutional geography, prompted by the Treaty of Lisbon coming into force on 1st December 2009, alternated with the twenty-year jubilee for the end of the Berlin Wall which was an opportunity to pick up the threads of a still-relevant European identity issue (1). Other prominent features were the Copenhagen Conference on Climate, an important trial run for the new Europe, and in late December a revival of the "Balkans question" as Croatia went to the polls and Serbia formally applied to join the EU (2).

The final act in a complex parturition of the 'new' Union was hailed by the press with a mixture of satisfaction and concern – concern as the awareness dawned that "the time for playing is over". Europe no longer has any excuse for not picking up the global challenges that face it. "The time for narcissistic contemplation has finished"; the "new score" that comes with the Treaty of Lisbon must be interpreted by the three main European institutions in "virtuous and dynamic counterpoint" so that Europe can resume centre place in international politics (3). Assessments of the EU destiny in a multi-polar world mix with appraisal of the new nominations and the genuine possibility that new institutional dialogue among Parliament, the Council and the Commission may really shake European politics out of the doldrums it has been in for quite some years (4).

The verdict on the appointments is basically of two kinds. Those who are cautiously optimistic, with a pinch of realism and, in Belgium's case, no little chauvinism, see Herman Van Rompuy as the epitome of the "Lisbon spirit" in which consensus must be sought among the Twenty-Seven. In this he represents Europe's own role as a "civil power" adopting the Van Rompuy "gradual and consensual method" as a guiding compass in tackling major international crises under the banner of soft power. Judgments are more critical when it comes to Van Rompuy's ability to represent the EU with authority on the international

scene. The real doubts seem to attach to Catherine Ashton; not so much the woman herself as that by this appointment Great Britain has heavily mortgaged EU foreign policy: there is a concrete risk that many prerogatives of the High Representative will remain so much paper. Yet there is also a broad desire to credit her qualities, and a positive judgment on her previous experience as secretary of state for education and European commissioner for trade (5).

The adverse judgments focus on the low profile of these appointments: the EU seems yet again to have wasted a big opportunity by abdicating all intention of forming into a single political entity. Once more we see intergovernmental thinking to the fore: this is summed up by the “man of compromise” that the new permanent president of the Council so perfectly is. What suffers by this ‘playing safe’ approach is Europe’s capacity for taking on a significant role in a multi-polar world in which tomorrow’s China-America relations will count for more than yesterday’s trans-Atlantic ones (6). Some have even tried their hand at irony, like the editor of *Presse* who praises “the salutary release from delusion these appointments deliver”: the delusion of those who dream of a state-like dimension to Europe or that parliamentary democracy may make itself felt beyond the confines of nation-States (7).

Belgium’s former prime minister is to preside over formal and informal meetings of the Council of 27 heads of state and government. He must likewise ensure continuity of the European project in liaison with the President of the European Commission, and represent the Union in the world concerning foreign policy and common security, whilst respecting the powers of the High representative for EU foreign affairs, Catherine Ashton (8). The months to come will show decisively how well the new institutional architecture of the Union is working, and it is by no means certain that things will run more smoothly. It will be a two-headed presidency: the stable head of the European Council will have to cohabit with the rotating president of the EU Council and his specific teams on Agriculture, Ecofin, Justice and Internal Affairs, etc.

Madrid has already announced that Spain’s will be a “transitional presidency”: the Spanish prime minister, José Luis Zapatero, will maintain some roles that have already devolved on the president of the European Council such as chairing the USA-EU, EU-Latin America and EU-Mediterranean summits, and will be working “at the service of the President of the European Council and the High Representative” (9). So Zapatero will not be playing a secondary role and the

Spanish presidency has an ambitious agenda of its own: shaking off the economic crisis, where Spain is one of the worst hit, revising the European socio-economic model, and updating the strategy of Lisbon (10). In short, we shall see whether strengthening the European Council and the spirit of inter-governance, as intended by the new Treaty (11) will simultaneously be offset by Parliament being empowered and a new depth given to the community method of the Commission, the definitive composition of which the next few weeks will show. Possibly, even hopefully, the kind of patient mediation everyone expects of Van Rompuy may here serve to reduce member countries' ability to condition the Commission. This would give Barroso some of the room for manoeuvre he had lost (12).

2. The lesson of Copenhagen and the crisis of world governance

The contrast between express intentions and reality is a glaring one if we examine the Copenhagen summit. On the one hand, we have Van Rompuy and Zapatero claiming that two of the incoming two-headed presidency's priorities are bolstering the European leadership in the campaign against climate change and making Europe the benchmark for democracy; on the other hand, the failure of the Copenhagen Conference lays bare all the EU's political shortcomings. The harshest criticisms come from Guy Verhofstadt, liberal group leader at the European Parliament, who inveighs at the absence of the EU from the table of "big boys" when it came to drawing up the definitive agreement at Copenhagen. This is a sign that Europe is no longer heeded by the big powers and runs the risk of becoming "the world's Switzerland". The "new empires" – the new geopolitical poles forming around the so-called emerging countries (China, Brazil, India, etc.) – will soon muscle Europe out of the picture if we don't manage to forge a consistent political unit, which is to say, become a federation endowed with a proper foreign policy and a common economic strategy (13).

Europe's weakness, in that it still fails to speak with one voice at international meetings, even on subjects close to its heart like the campaign against planet-wide warming (14), is also an acid test of the world crisis of governance (15). The first cause of this crisis is the uneven balance of economic and political power among the various countries and the reluctance of the richest to commit to helping the developing countries. The second cause is governance in the poorest countries, i.e. the problem of democratizing them as the only way of

getting them to use aid properly. The third is the sluggishness with which even the industrialized countries are redressing their socio-economic structuring towards ecologically sustainable development and more commitment to changing the whole paradigm of economic "growth" (16).

The immediate future of the Union will be played out between these two priorities: applying the Treaty of Lisbon and hence creating a new European political order bolstering Europe as an international political actor, and meanwhile reaffirming Europe's leadership in areas strategic for the planet's future, beginning with the environment. What is at stake is not Europe's future but the planet's; only on the wicket of global emergency can the EU weld into a "macro-regional" power.

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(2) N. Mappes-Niediek, *Eine Stimme gegen Europa*, Der Standard, 29-12-2009; V. Dzihic, *Ein Wintermärchen auf dem Balkan?*, Der Standard, 23-12-2009; P. Lendvai, *Serbiens Stunde*, Der Standard, 24-12-2009.

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(4) M. Perterer, *Die EU ist ein Staatenbund und kein Bundesstaat*, Salzburger Nachrichten, 10-11-2009.

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(8) O. le Bussy, *Herman I^{er} entre en scène*, La Libre Belgique, 31-12-2009.

(9) J.L.R. Zapatero – H. Van Rompuy, *2010, une bonne année pour l'Union*, Le Soir, 4-1-2010; M. Labaki, *L'exception Zapatero*, Le Soir, 11-12-2009.

- (10) G. Bontoux, *Priorité de l'Espagne: la sortie de crise*, Le Soir, 31-12-2009.
- (11) P. Goossens, *La Belgique et la montée inexorable du Conseil européen*, Le Soir, 1-12-2009; J. Wyles, *EU needs a new dawn to deal with old fears*, European Voice, 12-11-2009.
- (12) O. le Bussy (interview a P. Defraigne), *"Van Rompuy, c'est la chance de Barroso"*, La Libre Belgique, 14-11-2009.
- (13) G. Verhofstadt, *L'Europe risque de devenir la Suisse du monde*, Le Soir, 23-12-2009.
- (14) *Result to be fought for in Copenhagen*, European Voice, 19-11-2009.
- (15) W. Bourton (interview a S. Lacarrière), *"Copenhague n'est qu'un énième révélateur de la crise de la gouvernance mondiale"*, Le Soir, 22-12-2009; J. Raabe, *Die Fehler der Europäer*, Der Standard, 19-12-2009.
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