



END OF THE LINE FOR *INSTITUTIONAL FATIGUE*. WHAT NOW?

ITALY'S PRESS MONITORS EUROPE-BUILDING AS 2009 COMES TO A CLOSE

Twenty years on from the demolition of the Berlin Wall and with it the start to reunification of the Old Continent, Europe has ended a long and wearing chapter of institutional development. After the Treaty of Lisbon was finally (and reluctantly) ratified, we have had some important appointments: the stable President of the European Council, the High Representative for foreign policy and security, and the line-up for the second Barroso Commission. Pending the green light from the Euro-Parliament (expected to pronounce on the new Commission members sometime in the month of January), one can safely say this is the end of a long cycle that began way before the Declaration of Laeken – which is generally assumed to be the starting date for reforming the EU institutions. On closer inspection the Lisbon Treaty which came into effect on 1st December 2009 sets the seal on a process that began in 1986 when the Single Act was signed (spurred on by the Delors Commission) and then was more or less consistently pursued by the Treaties of Maastricht (1992), Amsterdam (signed in 1997, effective as of 1999) and Nice (signed in 2001, in force since 2003).

1. A twenty-first-century Union amid a new form of multilateralism

For all the no doubt legitimate criticisms as to the final outcome of a process that has taxed the Community for some twenty-five years – and some feel the mountains have brought forth a ridiculous mouse -, one fact stands: amid the major plight of multilateral models (like the UN) and systems of regional integration, the EU has given the rest of the world a clear signal. Its brand of strengthened multilateralism is unique, it has given itself an overhauling and it stands as a virtuous model in the geopolitical evolution of this incipient twenty-first century (1).

But if we pass from form to substance, the four-horse team of a new stable President of the European Council, new High Representative, Commission President and rotating President of the Council (which has not completely disappeared) will have to pull smoothly together if the new-look institutional framework is to pack any operational punch.

Barroso and Ashton have made declarations of intent to this effect. Our second-time Commission President thinks the Treaty of Lisbon has just the tools needed to enable the Union to manage crises swiftly and compactly (2).

For her part, Lady Ashton seems well aware of the mutterings surrounding her appointment and proposes a 'low profile' approach. Hers is to be "discreet diplomacy" towards concerted action, based on deeds and not show. Without underestimating the need for the EU to be a stronger global player, the first High Representative under Lisbon consciously echoes a remark by a founding father of functionalist Europe. As Jean Monnet was fond of saying, her ambition is for doing, not being. The message is clear, from two angles. Neither the two new institutional figures brought in by Lisbon nor Barroso can afford to forget that in recent years Europe has taken a distinctly intergovernmental turn. Their mandates are strictly tied to promptings from the continent's big Administrations. On the other hand, the most influential members (especially the so-called Paris-London-Berlin directory) can no longer shield behind the alibi of institutional shortcomings to cover their personal problems or their blatant defence of national interest (3).

Being an active player in structuring the new multipolar world, and demonstrating that multilateralism can bring objective results, will set the European Union two further challenges, each connected with the need to renew Euro-Atlantic relations. First, can Europe prevent the rise of an economic G2 between Beijing and Washington? Objectively speaking, the EU is still the main world trading power and the Euro has a role of its own to play, if only the European common currency can extend from EU-zone politics to global strategy (a thing it has so far failed to do) (4). Secondly, the EU will have to pay close attention to relations with the new Obama administration. The first African-American to be elected to the White House is also the first "post-Atlantic" President. Relations with the Old Continent and EU in particular are no longer as automatic as they were through the Cold War and immediate aftermath. Washington sees Europe as a partner to be trusted according to her operational capacity, not according to her past significance. In the period 2001-2008 Europe was full of multilateral talk, but that presupposes shouldering two burdens: the US administration is going ahead with "America first" in all major decisions affecting national interest, yet international commitment and intervention in crisis areas are to be shared by Washington and the Old Continent (5).

2. Appointments: a first review of optimists and pessimists

Coverage of the new Lisbon appointments in the Italian press has dwelt on how Europe's role is to develop now that the "institutional alibi" has been removed. It divides between disappointment on the one hand, and qualified satisfaction with the substance despite disapproval of the method.

Thus various writers have pointed out that the choice of Van Rompuy and Ashton just shows how much national interest and intergovernmental tactics now dominate the Union. The most disappointed commentators are those who hoped that famous high-profile names would be chosen so that the EU image would shine more brightly in the world (6). The choice of Lady Ashton was especially contested since the job of High Representative is doubly significant: it enjoys dual legitimacy (national, as being chosen by the European Council; community, since as Vice-President of the Commission it receives the Strasbourg vote of confidence); and also because the Lisbon Treaty is quite clear about its broad-ranging powers. This is not so with the stable Presidency on which the text is vague, leaving it to the discretion of the first incumbent how to play the role (7). However, there are some past or still active European authorities who have spoken up in appreciation of the nominations. Monti, Delors and Bini Smaghi have stressed how both the President and the High Representative know how to mediate; they have the right skills and belong to the inner community circle (8). It was right, they say, to set substance and the ability to take responsibility before any talent for expressing this outwardly. For once, in short, solid worth has outweighed leadership and charisma (9).

The two viewpoints clearly enshrine elements of truth, yet opposite as they are, both have the same shortcoming: they quite disregard the democratic side to how the Union is evolving. The June 2009 elections gave a message of acute disaffection; a purely technocratic approach and devil take democratic legitimation seems not to bother either the defenders or the critics of this last decisive round of nominations.

3. Copenhagen 2009: first defeat for the 'new' or last for the 'old' Europe?

The UN Conference on Climate coincided with a kind of EU interregnum between Nice and Lisbon. It displayed Union virtues (we turned up armed with a common project) and vices (flimsiness when we should have stood up to the G2). Whether the mermaid city staged the last defeat of an 'old Europe' or the first of the 'new' is unsure. That Europe was worsted, all agree. As a whole the Conference was deemed a flop (all it brought was a promise to cut emissions by 80% within far-off 2050). The EU must be reckoned a loser thereby, since it had invested more than anyone else. There are two reasons for concern. The downward trend of the EU goes on anabate (10); and we have the first proof that though high-handed intergovernmental tactics of the kind that chose Van Rompuy and Ashton may ensure hiccup-free management of the humdrum, it is not enough for global-level negotiation (11).

4. Italy within the community: the wane of a middling power?

It is early days to judge the new appointments and new institutional mechanisms by facts rather than opinions or first impressions. The Italian press has made do with soul-searching on the role of our country in this delicate phase of EU life. After a trouncing in the Euro-Parliamentary stakes, we saw D'Alema stand for the job of High Representative, and likewise fall. So is Rome right out of the game of *Risk* when it comes to any appointment that counts? and must Italy be seen as standing on the fringe of the real European Olympus?(12) Do the Paris-Berlin axis (now heavily tilted Berlin-wards) and London's peculiar brand of Euro-activism exhaust all scope for creative management of the EU? The next few months will tell whether Italy is or isn't ranked in the second league of the so-called 3+3 (in company with Warsaw and Madrid, and distinctly behind the London-Paris-Berlin troika). So far one fact is certain: one can no longer simply brandish the status of a founding nation. Wishful posturing is out; what counts is concrete proposals and swift decisions. "Strengthened top-level cooperation" (13) seems a more pragmatic and maybe more efficient version of Europe.

As the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, recently reminded us, it is now up to the EU to make it plain what it intends to be: a traditional alliance among States, or a system of integration based on joint wielding of pooled

sovereignty over basic issues? (14) Within this critical alternative our country cannot play a fringe role, unless it wants to be marginalized inside the community, let alone in the wider world.

(1) Cfr. G. Bonvicini, *Un anno di svolta per l'Europa?*, 28-12-09, www.affarinternazionali.it.

(2) J.M. Barroso, *Europa forte solo se multilaterale*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 24-12-09; C. Ashton, *Diplomazia discreta e azione concertata*, La Stampa, 22-12-09.

(3) S. Micossi, *Senza Unione non c'è Europa*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 06-11-09; C. Bastasin, *Euro forte sola virtù dell'Europa debole*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 07-11-09.

(4) E. Bonino-M. Dassù, *L'Europa, il rapporto con gli Usa e la scommessa di un G3 economico*, Il Corriere della Sera, 06-11-09.

(5) M. Dassù, *Il Presidente domestico e globale*, Il Corriere della Sera, 18-12-09.

(6) F. Venturini, *La responsabilità di Parigi e Berlino*, Il Corriere della Sera, 20-11-09; C. Martinetti, *A Bruxelles vincono Merkel e Sarkozy*, La Stampa, 20-11-09; G. Riotta, *Perché Van Rompuy non sarà Churchill*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 24-11-09.

(7) A. Manzella, *Il pasticcio dell'Unione europea*, La Repubblica, 27-11-09.

(8) J. Delors, *Mediatori cercasi per il bene dell'Unione*, Il Sole 24 Ore, 20-11-09; M. Monti, *Un Presidente per il consenso*, Il Corriere della Sera, 22-11-09; L. Bini Smaghi, *Personalità "interne" e competenti. Un metodo efficace per l'Unione*, Il Corriere della Sera, 28-11-09.

(9) A. Puri Purini, *D'Alama non aveva chances*, La Stampa, 26-11-09.

(10) E. Bettiza, *Gattopardi d'Europa*, La Stampa, 19-12-09.

(11) M. Zatterin, *Il flop dell'Europa: troppe prime donne e nessun leader*, La Stampa, 20-12-09.

(12) A. Bonanni, *L'amara disfatta dell'Italia nel Risiko del potere europeo*, La Repubblica, 21-11-09; C. Merlini, *L'asse franco-tedesco, la cabina di regia dell'Ue e il ruolo dell'Italia*, 04-11-09, www.affarinternazionali.it

(13) F. Venturini, *L'Olimpo europeo? Non è perduto*, Il Corriere della Sera, 12-12-09.

(14) G. Napolitano, *L'Europa nel mondo di metà Novecento e nel mondo d'oggi*, 14-11-09, Lectio Magistralis del Presidente Napolitano in occasione del conferimento della Laurea Honoris causa in "Politiche ed istituzioni dell'Europa", www.quirinale.it