

”Leadership in the European Union”

By Jean De Ruyt

Today more than ever, the European Union needs strong leadership. Jobs and growth, the Greek debt, Ukraine, the Islamic state, TTIP, climate change. These challenges need to be addressed at EU level. But in whose hands does leadership rest? This question is usually met with embarrassment or cynicism. But it is fundamental. Nobody will openly admit that we all rely on Germany to lead. But was anyone else given enough power to represent the common interest and to fight for it?

Leadership at the level of the institutions is developing but it is developing too slowly in view of today’s growing challenges – in a world where Europe has become just a pole of power among several others.

When the institutions of the European Community were put into place, national governments were careful not to give them real leaders. In the early decades, the president of the European Commission was only a *primus inter pares*, having no authority over the commissioners. Management of the Council was entrusted to a rotating presidency of six months, with continuity resting in the hands of a silent Secretariat. The Parliament could only give non-binding opinions.

The system was – and still largely is - managed at distance by the bureaucracies of the Member States represented in Brussels by “Coreper” and its working groups. And from the outset, France and Germany were supposed to lead the process, since it rested on the Franco - German reconciliation.

It took the war in Yugoslavia and the perspective of the enlargement of the Union to the East to realise that continuity in action was key to the success of a political Europe. The first step in that direction was the creation of the position of High Representative/Secretary General of the Council; he was subordinate to the rotating presidency but he could act over the long term, which Solana did brilliantly. His success paved the way for the Convention for the future of Europe, which in 2002 developed the profile of a real European Foreign Minister.

It was on the crest of the same wave that the Convention accepted the larger Member States proposal of a new position, that of a permanent President of the European Council. The mandate as defined in the treaty, remains modest and Herman van Rompuy when appointed insisted that he was not “the President of Europe”. Yet, as Solana before him, he demonstrated the unexpected potential of his role. It is widely recognised that without him, the euro crisis would have been much harder to manage.

Will the new leaders chosen recently follow that path ?

In electing Donald Tusk as its president, the European Council opened the position to the new Europe and a strong outward personality, quite different to his predecessor. Tusk will probably let Jean-Claude Juncker deal with the economy and increase the role of the president of the European Council in Foreign Policy – whatever the treaty says about this. But one can hope that, like his predecessor, he will be able to manage the power games between Member States - and make the best possible use of the undeniable current leader of the Union, the German chancellor Angela Merkel.

Europe would not be what it is today if Mario Draghi had not exerted a more than convincing leadership at the head of the ECB. His luck is that he is supposed to be independent but, the world being what it is, even when his independence was challenged, he was able to decide, to make his decisions acceptable, and to explain them to the public. He is the best model for the demonstration I want to make.

Federica Mogherini was greeted with scepticism when Matteo Renzi “imposed” her as High Representative. Since then, she has demonstrated her competence in Foreign policy – she needs now to demonstrate that she can obtain the indispensable consensus of the Member States for her initiatives.

Will the leadership of the European Commission be reinforced by the procedure used to elect its President in 2014? Doubts can be expressed about the legitimacy of the “spitzenkandidaten” procedure but the 2014 spring’s saga demonstrated that there is at least a real political will within EU political circles - and even in parts of public opinion - to reinforce the power of the institutional leaders of the Union.

Indeed, many in Europe and in third countries, when asked, seem to consider that the Union would work better if it had real leaders at the level of the institutions. Delors had very limited powers but everyone looked at him for solutions. Solana, with even less power, led European defence and prevented a war in Macedonia. And Henry Kissinger did not mean anything else when he asked for the famous telephone number in Europe.

When the Lisbon treaty entered into force, Tony Blair, one of the most prominent European leaders of the time, was the clear candidate to become the first permanent European Council president. And a majority of citizens, when asked at the time through the “Euro barometer”, declared themselves in favour of a real president of Europe.

However, when the time came for the Member States to choose, Tony Blair was not selected; and electing a President the American way remains at best a distant perspective. Mentioning this perspective in the current institutional context is even seen by many as a provocation.

Why is this step so difficult to make?

The answer is in the famous compromise between an “ever closer Union” and the respect for national sovereignty, key to the success of the Communities and later of the European Union, but which implied that “supranationality” would remain diffuse and under strict

control, and for that purpose that it would be managed at distance, from the Member States capitals - notably by a few.

The problem with this leadership 'from behind' is that it no longer sits well with current challenges. Contrary to eurosceptic's wishes, the Union has more responsibilities than ever. The common interests of EU citizens have become much more important than that which divides them - and the European regulations are increasingly impacting the everyday lives of the people. It is quite logical thus that people are suffering from being ruled by leaders they did not choose - or cannot well identify.

This is one of the main reasons for the disenchantment of the EU and its citizens, regrettably confirmed by the recent European election results of 2014. To be more popular, the EU needs real leaders, but given it is not popular, more power to its institutions is not what the citizens will deliver willingly.

How escape this vicious circle?

The challenge for institutional leaders is to demonstrate daily their added value.

Delors could overcome extraordinary obstacles in order to have the internal market completed and launch the path for the Euro. The high Representative role was created to manage crises at our borders which could not be dealt with by the rotating Presidency - or individual Member States. A clever Permanent President of the European Council was indispensable to manage the Euro crisis.

It is not for the institutional actors to take over the competences of the Member States exerted through the Council and the European Council; they can only assert their authority if there is consensus and recognition that their actions allow the Union to function to greater effect. We are not talking about governance of a Federal Europe.

The opacity of the decision-making process at the European level is bound to continue but it is indispensable for the citizen to better know what is at stake: national leaders usually only reveal what makes them look good - and tend to make the EU the scapegoat for their own weaknesses. Most MEPs remain far too distant from those who voted for them.

European institutional leaders need thus to be able to communicate directly and effectively with the citizens, in language they understand. But to be heard, they need to speak with the authority of someone taking responsibility for what he is saying.

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As is already clear with the 2014 change of the guard, the positions of president of the Commission and of the European Council largely overlap. Tusk will let Juncker lead in the economic field and concentrate on Foreign Policy but each of them will be involved in what the other does. One can hope that they will work in harmony – and the first signals are positive - but the reasons for friction are numerous and the system could become dysfunctional if the two started to fight in the European Council – or in front of the press.

Why not do at the top what has been done at the level of the High Representative and have one leader with two hats, acting with different powers according to the hat he or she wears? Leadership would be stronger and the leaders of third countries would be more impressed if they were confronted in summit meetings with one instead of two interlocutors.

In today's political context such a move is probably not feasible. Not that it would necessarily require a treaty change – it has been demonstrated that double hatting would not contravene the Lisbon Treaty - but it would well require a further step in democratic legitimacy ...and the best leadership skills for the incumbent.