

Editorial

Civil Servants or Kitchen *Cabinets*

The new Commission which takes office in January 1995 will be a very different beast from its predecessor. The nominee for President, M Santer, is unlikely to prove a man without ideas and perspectives, as he has been painted in certain journalistic circles, but there appear to be signs that a very different, less centralist, organisation will emerge. Already as far back as the Spierenburg Report it had been noted that the Commissioners *cabinets* had steadily enhanced their power at the expense of senior officials of the Directorates-General; that Report recommended a strengthening of the role of the Directors-General. Under M Delors the role of the *cabinets* has if anything increased apace and the services of the Commission have become more politicised. This tendency is to be regretted. The initial impressions in Brussels appear to indicate that, if confirmed, M Santer will pursue a policy considerably less attuned to deification or future political ambitions. If these impressions be confirmed by events, an end, or at least a diminution may be in sight for the unashamed political minding followed by *parachutage* which has characterised *cabinets* hitherto.

Of course, no-one suggests that the Commission should operate in a political vacuum – the very fact that politicians, rather than technocrats or specialists, tend to be appointed emphasises the political nature of the college of Commissioners – and the dividing line between political appreciation and the objective workings of the staff is less clear on the continent than it tends to be in the United Kingdom (as the recent appointment of top Dutch civil servants to ministerial positions in the new “purple” coalition government in the Netherlands demonstrates). However, the agglomeration of both power and influence to the President’s *cabinet* which has been exponential in

recent years has not always promoted healthy – or even consistent – decision-making.

The perception of the Commission’s presidency as more than simply a position of *primus inter pares* but rather the personification of Europe, together with the carrot of future political development has been at the very least something of a mixed blessing for the Community. On the one hand, there is no doubt that at least the early Commissions under the presidency of M Delors successfully dispatched eurosclerosis and remotivated Europe as a concept; on the other hand, the increased activism of the Commission has highlighted the democratic shortcomings of the Community and has perhaps ensured that the additional pillars of the European Union became intergovernmental rather than supranational in form. It is also clear that political colours play a much greater role inside the Commission than they did before. Indeed, even the EC Treaty itself is no longer politically neutral as between free markets and interventionism, having come down firmly in favour of an open market economy with free competition. In this perspective, some of the recent decisions by the Commission in the field of state aids become simply indefensible, explicable only on the ground of political advantage. Attempts to encourage rational and *communautaire* decision-making based on the legal and economic principles of the Treaty founder on the altar of political expediency. Whilst the Commission’s servants are undoubtedly there to serve the institution, both they and the institution deserve better than to become the mere servants of individual political ambition. A more transparently independent Community civil service is likely to remedy the decline in respect for the institution which certain recent events have occasioned.

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