

Who's Afraid of Two European Presidents?

From the Board

Two souls dwell in Europe's breast. The Community soul is that of the European Commission (the Brussels bureaucracy). The Union soul is that of the heads of state and of government in their powwow, called (confusingly) 'European Council'. Most small member countries champion the Commission and the Community soul for its 'legal order'. Most large and politically minded members champion the Union soul. In the current search of a single soul, which of the two shall prevail?

A compromise between France and Germany of 14 January holds that the future Union shall have two more or less personalized presidents: one for the Commission and one for the European Council. This seems to put two captains on a ship.

The Commission president is already personalized and known by name. Presently the name is Prodi. According to the Franco-German compromise, the Commission president shall be elected by the European Parliament; presently the person is only *approved* by the Parliament.

The European Council president is now a nameless function, rotating among the members. The compromise would render this function personalized, fixed for a period and (consequently) *not* to be held by one of the members of the European Council. This latter point is crucial: Benelux countries have all but agreed to limiting the rotation but they stick to the president being one of the members of the Council. This is not tenable. The European Council's membership is purely a matter for national politics added up. It would be an error to personalize the function for Europe yet let the actual office holder depend on the domestic politics of his country.

The better is the enemy of the good. In Europe, the ideal is the enemy of the deal. Can the conflict be resolved? First there is the help of words. In most countries, though not in France, there are two words for the same thing: president and chairman (or equivalent). Mostly the word chairman indicates a more modest function. Let there be a president of the European Council, called Chairman. This will further pacify the small countries. Give him or her no or few legal powers. Smaller countries are mainly concerned about legal powers. Stronger countries know that it is not powers that count but responsibilities, which do not need to be given but may be taken. The function's fate will then depend on the combination of the office holders' capacities and the future situations' demands. If in ten years the function is tested and a success, the name change to 'president' is a worthy step.

What about the other president? In the country producing most of the ideas for Europe, France, there is also a plethora of elected presidents in politics

and elsewhere. The present author is one of them, elected and called 'M. le président' in one of its thousands of municipalities. To tell a real president from a mere title-holder, the question is: is he there to take charge or only to serve a legal mandate?

The Commission president is presently authorized by legal mandate, not by an election. In order to shift from a mandated to a political president, he needs not only an election but also a partisan political programme and a simple ruling majority.

To push a partisan political programme does not come naturally to a Commission president who is explicitly required by Treaty to be non-partisan. To have him elected by simple majority is not what the French and Germans have in mind. Consequently, the Commission president, even if elected, is very far from being a real one. The fate of his function will depend on the same factors as the Chairman's plus one: the latter's failure.

The Chairman (of the European Council) being a 'presidential president' will not be dependent on the European Parliament or on an either left or right majority. His chances are better, though not assured, depending on the big members' getting their act together.

Having two presidents is not a recipe for contradiction but a way for Europe finally to put its cause to the test.

W.T.E., January 2003.