



FROM THE SINGLE CURRENCY TO THE SINGLE BALLOT-BOX

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1. In 1999 the European Central Bank will take up its functions, the European Parliament will be re-elected and the new Commission will be formed. This year, 1998, is one of intense political and technical preparation for these three major events.

The imminent advent of a powerful, truly European but “sectoral”, institution such as the ECB, together with the prospect of enlarging the Union to 20-25 members, is already generating serious concern about the ability of the institutional architecture of the European Union to meet the needs of the future.

2. In the new environment, the well-known shortcomings of the existing architecture (including lack of effectiveness and lack of democracy) may well be aggravated to the point of paralysing the Union and destroying its credibility vis-à-vis citizens, the business community, labor organizations and the outside world. Decision-making will be slow and inefficient, due to a plethora of Commission and a huge Council where unanimity is often required. The monetary government of the ECB will operate in a dangerous political vacuum. Democratic legitimacy will increasingly be the area where the EU is hopelessly inferior to the nation-state.

3. There is neither the time nor the political force to correct these shortcomings by amending the treaties. This has been tried twice, with modest results. Both the Maastricht and the (still-to-be-ratified) Amsterdam Treaties brought improvements. However, they both failed to give Europe an institutional structure that really embodies (in one or another of the many forms to be found in the world) the key constitutional principles of efficiency and democracy that distinguish the heritage of western civilization.

4. As in past periods of its history, the Union will have to be strengthened by working with the treaties after working on them. Ingenuity and determination will be required to discover and fully exploit the potential offered by the present constitution. Of the several areas where this potential exists, there is one that could produce a most powerful and positive change in the overall configuration of the Union. It concerns the process of selecting and confirming the President of the European Commission.

5. Imagine the following scenario for 1998 and 1999. The political groups of the European Parliament choose a candidate for President and declare that if they win the election, i.e. form the largest group in the new Parliament, they will give their vote of confidence to a Commission whose President is their candidate. Some heads of Government or State declare that, when the time comes, they will support this approach in the European Council, because they see it as a positive and natural development for the Union. Party leaders and the supporting heads of Government stress, however, that the multipartisan composition of the Commission will not be abandoned. Only the President will be consistent with the winning coalition. The European Council would retain its power to nominate the President but, as in any democracy, it would share this power with the electorate. The traditional procedure would be applied if, in the course of its term, a new Commission had to be formed after a negative vote by the European Parliament.

6. This scenario is fully consistent with the two institutional changes introduced by the Maastricht Treaty: the vote of confidence by the Parliament required for the Commission to take office and the synchronisation of the mandates of the Parliament and the Commission. It is also consistent with the further change foreseen by the Amsterdam Treaty: “approval” of the new President by the Parliament before the new Commission is formed and the vote of confidence is held. As a matter of fact, all these changes would make no sense if this scenario did not materialize.

7. Other scenarios could also be considered. There could be, for example, two votes in the European election: one for the Parliament and one for the President. Or, it could be envisaged to elect a President for the European Council. However, these alternative scenarios are not immediately applicable because they would require an amendment in the Treaties and an inter-governmental agreement, while the one proposed is based on an initiative of political parties.

8. Linking the President to an election is the missing piece in the European puzzle. By putting that piece into place, a number of difficult problems would be resolved or made more tractable.

9. The first and most important problem is the political gap between the considerable degree of “Union” already achieved and the still minimal participation of citizens and political forces in the European process.

An enormous transfer of legislative functions from member States to the EU; a powerful European judiciary that has the last word on fundamental matters; EU responsibility for critical external relations in the economic field; a single currency: these and other innovations have already created a political Union! Yet, citizens, political parties and national Parliaments, showing remarkable schizophrenia, combine basic support for these developments (which could not have been achieved otherwise) with a sense of frustration and a lack of participation due to the persistently national character of the political process. This fundamental contradiction emerged clearly in the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty and constitutes a very serious threat to the stability of the European political system at each of its different levels: regional, national and European.

If the European political gap is left open for too long, resentment against the Union will grow. Citizens will feel extraneous. Political leaders will lose interest unless they sit in the European Council. National parliaments and regional powers will become increasingly hostile to Brussels.

10. Political parties, in all democratic systems, are the indispensable agent of political life. They connect voters with politicians, select candidates, provide the “fighting machine” for political contests, shape programmes and ideas, serve as a school of politics, and organize the life of parliaments. Selecting and supporting a candidate for President would radically transform the attitudes of political parties. It would considerably encourage the emergence of EU-wide political groupings, going beyond the present practice of mere consultation. It would also encourage marginal political forces (parties that exist in only one country and hardly fit into one of the two or three key European political groupings) to seek international connections and to converge towards a more European platform. This would

also have a stabilizing influence on national politics.

As long as it remains a negligible aspect of otherwise overwhelmingly national party activities, Europe will not become “political”, no matter what the Treaties say. Even the election of the European Parliament will remain little more than a virtual exercise in national politics.

11. A candidate for President campaigning on television in all countries of the Union along with local candidates running for the European Parliament, would radically transform the psychological attitudes of voters and the media towards Europe. It would suddenly become clear that the Union already exists, with a solid democratic foundation; that there is not only a single currency but also a single ballot-box.

12. A President issued from this procedure could play a new and stronger role in the formation of the Commission, which is now the result of unilateral national decisions. Moreover, he would have the authority to exert, following the Amsterdam Treaty, “political guidance” over the Commission.

In an enlarged Community, the Commission is likely to become a weak body with members who are too many and too nationally-oriented, incapable of taking initiatives and enforcing compliance with EU legislation. A weak Commission will weaken the entire construction. As long as the composition and role of the Commission cannot be changed by amending the Treaties, only a politically stronger President can avoid the decline of one of the key institutions of the Union.

13. An “elected” President would have greater legitimacy. He would also have a programme, a policy backed by the voters because he would have campaigned on the basis of a political platform. This would constitute the basis of his action and have the support of the European Parliament.

14. With the new procedure, a number of now unrelated elements - the selection of the candidate, the campaign, the popular vote, the decision by the Council, the confirmation by the Parliament - would become parts of a single political process in which political parties, citizens, members of parliament and governments - today either excluded from or unable to interact with the process - will all play active and interrelated roles in the formation of a European Administration (to borrow a term from the language of U.S. politics). Inactive and disconnected pieces will become parts of a living body.

15. Of course, the "election" of the President would not be a panacea. The Union would still lack an effective foreign and security policy. It would still need institutional changes to cope with enlargement. It would still require an economic policy to complement the single monetary policy. It would still have to fully implement majority voting and codecision by the Parliament. It would still have to restructure the Commission. It will still be necessary to revise the working methods of the Council as a key decision making institution of the European Union.

Linking the President to the European election, however, would be a very powerful lever. It is entirely possible under the present treaties and fully consistent with the historic evolution of EU institutions over the past decades. It would give the Union what it most lacks: political contest and participation of parties and voters. This is also a necessary condition for any further development in the twin fields of institutions and competences.

Politicising the European debate

In 1999, the European Central Bank will assume its functions, the European Parliament will be re-elected and the new European Commission designated. 1998 is therefore a year for intense political and technical preparation for these three major events.

Yet, today the institutional architecture of the European Union is showing signs of wear. Everyone agrees that, in particular, the Union lacks efficiency and democratic legitimacy. At the same time, public opinion sees Europe as having an ever greater impact on everyday life. The arrival of the euro will demonstrate this in spectacular fashion.

It is for this reason that we think that the political debate at European level is as necessary as the national political debate, without eclipsing it. Urgent solutions must be found to bring citizens closer to the process of European integration.

The time has therefore come to put a face to European democracy, for the transfer of sovereignty has not been accompanied by a personalisation of political life for our citizens. That is the norm in our national democracies.

We are therefore making the following proposal, so that the subject can be debated publicly: each of the European political groups should choose a candidate for the position of President of the European Commission, who must be designated mid-1999, in order to assume his functions in the year 2000.

The national and European parties would campaign on their own platforms, but also for their candidate, during the forthcoming European elections in June 1999, on the basis of their political programmes for the next five years. The debate about the future president of the Commission would be one of the key points of the election campaign, giving the campaign a truly European dimension.

Let us not forget that the Commission holds a monopoly over the power of initiative in important areas, is the guardian of the Treaties, and guarantees continuity in the implementation of policies decreed by the Council of ministers.

This proposition does not imply any changes to the existing Treaties: in fact, it anticipates the choices made in the Treaty of Amsterdam with respect to the increased role for the European Parliament in the approval of the President of the future Commission and the growing role for the future President in the choice of Commissioners.

Note, however, given the political context, that the European Council nominates the President of the Commission. We therefore suggest that the Commission President be responsible to the European Council, as he already is before the European Parliament.

Naturally, our proposal will not resolve all the problems of the Union. Rather, it would inject an element of politics into the European debate by linking the nomination of the President of the Commission to the European elections, and make an important contribution to raising the quality of the debate. The members of the European Steering Committee of "Notre Europe" are convinced that the adoption of their proposal would play an important role in strengthening the Union's democratic legitimacy.

Signatories: the members of the European Steering Committee of *Notre Europe*

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Legal Mentions



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