

Reactions to Hix and Bartolini

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Two main arguments are put forward by Hix in favour of introducing « politics » in the sense of a left-right debate in European institutions: an ideological conflict with winners and losers would stimulate public interest in European political life and, by giving a clear “mandate to act” to the winner, it would break the “gridlock” which is preventing change in European regulations.

I don't myself see much of a “gridlock” in the legislative process so that I remain unconvinced by that argument: if a gridlock existed it could presumably best be solved by institutional change including an increase in majority voting.

The idea that ideological conflict could bridge the gap separating elite opinion (generally pro-European) from public opinion (more eurosceptic) is certainly worth considering, because the problem addressed is of fundamental importance, but I have serious doubts on the principle suggested, the instruments and their application to European institutions.

On the principle it seems obvious that ideology plays a weaker role in national politics than was the case some years ago. It would be difficult to find any continental socialist leader ready to consider Blairite policies as left wing. Is the present German government left wing or right wing? Or the Belgian? Is the debate in Italian elections about policies or about personalities? It seems a bit of paradox to believe that ideology, which has been declining for years in national politics, could somehow rejuvenate them at Union level.

The instruments proposed for this politicisation are the two main parties in the European Parliament: the EPP to the right and the ESP to the left. In fact a number of continental christian democrats are probably more left wing than a number of “New Labour” MEPs. To a large extent those two groupings are not ideological: they are coalitions put together to secure a large share of posts, power and patronage within the European Parliament. The introduction of ideological debate might well tear them apart, as Bartolini indicates. Personally I could welcome that evolution, because it would clarify party positions, but it would clearly not be conducive to the sort of bi-partisan controversial politics favoured by Hix.

Finally I oppose the idea that this type of politics should be extended to the Council and the Commission. The Council's task in the institutional set up is to defend the interests of the states and those are not mainly defined by ideology. Most ministers would strongly reject the accusation that their vote in Council is determined by their party political affiliation. As for the Commission, its task is to defend the collective interest, and that is certainly not based on ideology.

The demonstration attempted by Hix that such an evolution is already perceptible in both Council and Commission, I find entirely unconvincing.

As far as the Council is concerned, I would hesitate to draw any conclusion from statistics on negative votes and abstentions (Table 1, page 26), because they are based on a small minority (10% approximately) of decisions, most of these being reached by consensus (The fact that political scientists have no other numerical base to work on does not make the flawed base they have, relevant). Even so, I put in doubt the ideological interpretation given to Germany's place in the table. Because of its federal structure Germany has a cumbersome internal decision making mechanism: at times, faced with an imminent vote, it cannot get internal agreement and then abstains, or cannot get an agreed change to the previous position and then gets voted down. I can testify to the fact that this is also the case in the rare occurrences where Belgium gets voted down or abstains. Federal structure, not ideology, is the underlying reason.

As far as the ideological balance in the Commission is concerned (Table 2, page 29) we are told that it was established by expert political scientists from each member state. Here again I have some methodological doubts. Is it really possible to grade individual ideological positions on a scale, as if we were dealing with temperatures or body weight? Many people have conservative views on some issues and resolutely progressive views on others. In any case my reading of the table presented is the opposite of that of Simon Hix. To me it seems to demonstrate that individuals, when acting as Commissioner, do not follow the ideological preferences attributed to them by expert political scientists. Pascal Lamy is placed towards the extreme left of the table whereas, as Commissioner, he was pursued and heckled all over Europe by leftists who saw in him the incarnation of free trade, market liberalism and globalisation. Karel van Miert and Mario Monti are poles apart in the table whereas, in fact, they were successive competition commissioners with no perceptible ideological change in the policies pursued. I see no basis for the assertion that Commissioners act on the basis of their party political convictions.

To end on a more positive note, I would say that I share the view that more politics in the European debate might be useful, and, to that end, make two suggestions:

- As suggested some years ago by Jacques Delors, the nomination of the Commission's president could be politicised by linking it to the result of European Parliament elections. That would not have the same effect as a partisan Commission.
- European parties could open up their membership to individual citizens and gradually move from a conglomerate of national parties to real "European" parties. In the long run those parties (and not local bosses) would select candidates to European elections in the various countries and that might lead to a real European debate.