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Does Europe now have a parliamentary system?

On October 27, after a night of reflection, José Manuel Barroso, fearing to see his team rejected by the Parliament, threw in the towel and asked for a month's respite to make changes in his Commission. Does this mean that Europe now has a parliamentary system? Or is this just the result of ill-considered nominations by national governments? Here are the opinions of two Members of the European Parliament.

JOURNAL DE L'EUROPE: Which way would you have voted if the ballot had taken place on the planned date?

VÉRONIQUE DE KEYSER: "No" for the first team chosen by José Manuel Barroso, given its weakness, the inferior performances of Commissioners Rocco Buttiglione and Ingrida Udre during their hearings, but also because of the appointment of Neelie Kroes to Competition.

LAIMA ANDRIKIENE: On October 27, I was ready to vote in favour of the Barroso Commission, including Rocco Buttiglione. My compatriots – 12 other MEPs from Lithuania – were ready to support the Barroso Commission as well, except probably one of us who was going to abstain. I would have voted in favour due to at least three reasons: 1) Rocco Buttiglione, Professor of philosophy and ethics, has his values and beliefs and other people should be tolerant to his views as he is to the views and beliefs of others. All of us need more tolerance, a better understanding of each other; 2) My understanding was that not Buttiglione, but Barroso himself was the target of some political families. After his appointment, José Manuel Barroso proved he was strong, and an ambitious President of the Commission; 3) Buttiglione, in comparison to Mr Kovács, was competent, and in addition to this, without stories about conflicts of interest, etc.



Véronique DE KEYSER (PES, Belgium)

"He [José Manuel Barroso] thought that he could force the Parliament to approve his team, in this he underestimated its strength."

J.E.: Should José Manuel Barroso have put his mandate on the line? What do you think of his crisis management?

V.K.: José Manuel Barroso managed the situation very badly. He thought that he could force the Parliament to approve his team, in this he underestimated its strength. He preferred to postpone the vote rather than suffer a humiliating defeat. This was amazing for a politician renowned for the opportunism and

elasticity of his methods. It must be said that I had voted against his appointment to the Presidency of the Commission, because of his ultra-liberal policies. I also denounced the meeting organized, in the Azores, with George W. Bush and Tony Blair, concerning the Iraq war.

L.A.: I do not see any reason why José Manuel Barroso should have put his mandate on the line. It was not his fault if one, two or three Commissioners Designate did not fit the standards or policy of the parliamentary committees, political groups or lobby groups active in the European Parliament. It was clear to everyone that Barroso's space of manoeuvre was very limited: Commissioners Designate were delegated by the governments of EU member states and Barroso, as the newly appointed President of the Commission, did not have power to say "no" to anyone of them. That was for the Parliament to decide and to send a clear signal not only to Barroso, but to the governments whose Commissioners Designate were not competent enough or failed to prove to some parliamentary committees that they would be able to fulfill their duties effectively.

To my mind, José Manuel Barroso proved his managerial skills, crisis management skills, are good enough.

J.E.: What was Barroso's margin of manoeuvre where the governments were concerned? Don't they have to take a certain amount of responsibility for what happened, considering the possible choices for the position of Commissioner which they could have made?

V.K.: José Manuel Barroso, proposed by the Council, was not one of the strong personalities, like Chris Patten and Guy Verhofstadt, who had been suggested for the Presidency of the Commission. He owes his appointment to his clear allegiance to policies led by the Anglo-Saxon countries. He is a fragile personality and the European Parliament needs a strong Commission, independent of the Council, with, at its head, a man or woman capable of resisting outside pressures.

L.A.: My understanding is that the governments of EU member states should feel responsible for this crisis also. I do not have a solution as to how, in the future, the Commissioners should be selected and appointed, but I cannot imagine in practice that national governments propose lists of candidates to the President of the Commission for him to select one Commissioner per country. My understanding is that all of us are human beings and, no doubt, we will have similar situations in the future. So it is for the EU member states to find candidates who would meet at least certain standards of competence and transparency.



Laima ANDRIKIENE (EPP-ED, Lithuania)

"The governments of EU member states should feel responsible for this crisis."

J.E.: Are the changes made by José Barroso on his Commission significant?

V.K.: The changes are not sufficient. Rocco Buttiglione has been rejected but Neelie Kroes retained. The European Parliament had not raised many objections to the inclusion of Neelie Kroes. There was no red card for her, contrary to what happened to Rocco Buttiglione. Why then complain when the MEPs leave the choice up to José Manuel Barroso.

L.A.: I believe they are. The new Commission has started its work already, and for the benefit of the EU and my country – Lithuania in particular – I wish them a success.

J.E.: What will the legitimacy of the future Commission be?

V.K.: This Commission is totally legitimate, it was democratically elected. The strength of the Parliament is that it is now better able to control the Commissioners. José Manuel Barroso must now keep his promises, taking the sensitive dossiers out of Neelie Kroes hands, to avoid conflicts of interest. The Commission nevertheless seems more solid and can count on strong elements such as Benita Waldner-Ferrero in External Affairs, and Louis Michel in Development. We will now

be able to get to know the other Commissioners. Having said this, it is important to add that, in the future, it would be preferable for member countries to propose several Commissioners and leave the choice of electing the most competent among them up to the MEPs.

L.A.: The Barroso Commission received strong support from the European Parliament: 449 in favour, 149 against and 82 abstained. This result means the Commission has a powerful mandate in its hands. But at the same time it is clear: from the very first day the Parliament will watch the Commission carefully and will judge according not to the confidence shown on the voting day, but on the merits of each Commissioner individually and of the Commission as a whole.

J.E.: Does the fact that the date was put back indicate a parliamentarization of European politics, a democratic breakthrough?

V.K.: The Parliament has demonstrated that it has the instruments at its disposal to stand up to the Commission and that it can remain united despite enlargement to ten new countries. The reason is very simple. Several Representatives from the new countries have understood that their national or personal convictions should not take precedence over the requirements of the European Parliament. We are now 25. Political compromises are necessary to survive, and these have shown themselves to be effective.

L.A.: I would agree that the Parliament proved it was not a paper tiger. I hope this lesson will help all of us in the future: the Commission should take into account that if we want the European Union to be closer to its citizens then the Commission should listen very carefully to the voice of the Parliament composed of directly elected representatives of the people. And not only when the Parliament votes for the Commission, but first of all when we vote on the annual budgets of the EU, financial perspective, financing of different programmes, etc.

Interview by Didier ROSSIGNOL-FRANCINI