

Analyst: Barroso II needs 'vision', sense of 'history'

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With decades of EU institutional reform and eastern enlargement culminating with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Union is now "as close to the final EU institutional balance as we are likely to get in our lifetimes" and leaders can focus on pressing issues like climate change, energy and food security instead, Tom Spencer, executive director of the European Centre for Public Affairs, told EurActiv in an interview.

Former Conservative MEP Tom Spencer is executive director of the European Centre for Public Affairs (ECPA).

He was speaking to EurActiv's Georgi Gotev and Andrew Williams.

We have a new European Parliament. José Manuel Barroso has already been president of the European Commission for five years. He has shuffled his team so that he is in command and has very much the upper hand in the incoming executive. We also have a new Framework Agreement between the Commission and the Parliament. How will this new Commission be different from the previous one?

The first thing to say is that today is the first day in the life of the rest of the European Union, the continuing life of the EU. We've had this extraordinary nine-month period from the European Parliament elections, through to the parliamentary leadership taking Barroso hostage and having very substantial negotiations as to what shape the new Commission should be and who should get the portfolios. This all happened largely in the absence of member states, because they were obsessed by the Irish referendum result and couldn't decide who was going to get key jobs like the president of the Council or High Representative.

Autumn was dominated by the relationship between the European Parliament and Barroso, and it's that relationship which produces the construction of the Commission portfolios and who gets them, because here you have the situation where Parliament delayed the whole process by saying, 'if the treaty were in place, you'd need to find a simple majority in the European Parliament'. That's a much higher threshold than the traditional assumption that the presidency of the Commission went to the political party that won the largest share of the European Parliament seats.

For me, that's the key shift in the balance of power in the last nine months. When you say Barroso is in a powerful position because he reshuffled the portfolios, all those commissioners know that the reshuffle was actually dictated as part of the power balance with Parliament. So those who want to do another five years beyond will be very sensitive to parliamentary opinion.

Yes, Barroso comes out of this personally strong, but with the caveat that every one of those commissioners knows how the deal was struck.

Secondly, what became apparent in the autumn and culminated in Copenhagen is a major shift in the power balance of the world. A lot of this is clichéd – it's relations with Asia, it's China – but it has already produced a dramatic shift in American attitudes to Europe, symbolised by the summit exercise.

Every commissioner looking at their dossier is going to have to say 'what kind of world do we have in the five years of this Commission mandate?' Will it be more protectionist because Obama is forced to look inwards? There are a whole range of issues.

The picture is made up of three things: the significance of the Barroso-Parliament discussions in the autumn, the shift in power in the world, and the double-whammy of a new Commission and a new treaty, with all the inevitable personality complexities in that.

Someone in the institutions said to me, 'if you wanted to design a train wreck, you'd be changing Europe's foreign policy institutions at a time of foreign policy crisis,' and that's precisely what's happened.

There's also a lot of confusion over the new Council president and the High Representative. Some take the view that both are low-profile, which benefits Barroso again. It appears that the US president would rather speak to Barroso in many situations.

I think that's the wrong interpretation of Obama's attitude on coming to the summit. More significant here is that he clearly did not enjoy coming to the last summit in Prague.

Second is that he absolutely has to have a much stronger domestic focus ahead of the mid-term elections, as he's already travelled a lot internationally. This was also a very good way of sending a message to the Europeans about 'I'll come and talk to you, if you're for real'.

Looking at national European relationships with the US, we're all kind of closet lovers of bilateral relations. Given the revolution that Obama has produced in American foreign policy, he's not interested in a whingeing Europe that just wants to talk to him because he is famous. His relationship with China is much more important. We can't assume a special relationship, whether for the UK or any part of Europe.

I think there's a personal edge to this. Obama says in one of his books that when he came to Europe, he was unmoved, whereas when he went to Africa as a young man, he felt the energy of the whole thing. The assumption of an automatic priority for European views in America is substantially reduced under this presidency.

I regard that as good for Europe, because we now have the treaty institutions, we've got past the Irish referendum, we can talk openly about these things, and actually even on the question of 'why do we have summits?' Summits can just be a displacement activity.

You need an agenda.

I spent a lot of time last year on the EU-India summit. These summits are ridiculous. There is no institutional follow-up. People meet at a high level. There's a flurry of diplomatic activity so they can find some initiatives to be seen to talk about, and then they forget about it until next year. There's no mechanism for, 'what did we agree last year and what did we actually deliver?'

That's where I think Van Rompuy's position in all of this is underestimated. Because under the treaty, when you're dealing with another head of state, he represents the Union. So he's going to chair 21 bilateral summits this year, half of them in the EU, and half of them abroad. He's clearly going to want to actually improve the mechanism by which these summits deliver something.

This is a good moment for him to be doing that kind of thing, because Copenhagen was a defeat not only for the complexity of Europe and European foreign policy, but also for the French, the Germans and the British sides. This wasn't an exercise where the EU was doing one thing collectively and the big beasts were doing something else. They all had their prestige on the line in Copenhagen, and they all got a bloody nose.

There really is an opportunity for Van Rompuy to redefine how European foreign policy works. As we look at the detail of Barroso or the High Representative, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that Van Rompuy is – because of the treaty – a major player.

So that brings us directly to the essence of this: to what extent is Barroso II now a powerful, imperial presidency? My instinct is that Barroso spent much of the last two years changing the way he ran the Commission to be ready for the competition with an incoming president of the European Council.

You can see it in the way that the secretary-general was putting together the Commission's proposals and action plans. Instead of just saying 'send me your lists' and going 'tick, tick, tick', Barroso was saying he only wants things that are sufficiently developed and meet our political agenda. There were a lot of people saying, 'what do you mean I can't have this, that or the other?'

So there was a lot of preparation for exactly the situation he finds himself in now. From his own point of view, that was very wise, because I think that Van Rompuy will be a major player. He is exactly designed by fate to fit the opportunity. Blair or a high-profile president of that kind was never going to happen, but a clever, careful Belgian who is absolutely used to handling complexity is exactly what the Council presidency needs at this moment, and I think it will be a useful balance with the more assertive Barroso.

Won't the most important meeting of the next few days be between Barroso and Van Rompuy to decide who does what? If they don't sit down together, there'll be competition between them.

I agree with that, but I think the conversation is not so much about 'you take this policy, I'll take that policy', it's about how you integrate the two pillars on each issue, like the bilateral summits, which became sensitive because of the Obama refusal. That's a really important power balance.

So it's not about deciding 'you take that policy, I'll take this one'?

I suspect they will find a perfectly comfortable modus vivendi, because they're actually quite similar people in some ways. It's about who does what when. It's about sorting out the complexities of where their mandates overlap. I don't think it's about 'you take climate change, I'll take trade', because by definition they are both required to be responsible in different ways across all those sectors.

The story of how successful this Commission will be is going to be about how successful Barroso manages the relationship with Van Rompuy on one hand and the Parliament on the other. Delors didn't have that kind of challenge. Delors could use Parliament when he wanted to. Barroso is not a Delors.

But Delors was a visionary, and Barroso is not.

It was a different generation. As we move away from not so much the founding fathers but the founding 'sons' of the Union, the people who shaped the EU from the 1970s onwards, we're getting to a generation who don't have the same sense of ownership of the EU institutions – we've just come through a bruising seven-year argument over the constitution.

This generation's leadership, whether in politics, public affairs or business, is less heroic than the previous generation. But they face a more difficult global environment, where heroism, bravery and creativity are absolutely needed given the global power shift.

This goes to the core of the European Union domestically, because the only story that you can use to justify European unity now is the ability for the Union to represent Europe's interests in an increasingly complex and difficult world. In Western Europe you can't go back to 'we bring you peace between France and Germany'. That's kind of history. And you can't do the enlargement agenda, which says 'we are reuniting our continent', because that's done. The Western Balkans remain, but we've done the reunification story.

The key binding story is that only the European Union can bring you influence for the whole continent in a world dominated by the Chinese, the Indians and shifting partners. That's why Copenhagen was so significant. It wasn't just marginalisation from detailed negotiations. What was challenged in Copenhagen was the whole model of how the world would develop.

The Union has always assumed that the world would end up rather like the European Union, with global agreements and treaties, incremental negotiation and goodwill towards men. Suddenly they find this brutality, sitting in Copenhagen in the middle of the night and not even being asked anything while the Americans and the Chinese point fingers at each other, take a blank sheet of paper and create something new.

At the same time, Europe was a driving force ahead of Copenhagen and the assumption was that Europe can be a leader on climate change and saving the planet.

Absolutely. But then we got the negotiations wrong. We played all our hands early. We just behaved as if the world was in its normal state, when in fact we'd not learned the lesson of the G20 and the financial crisis, that if you now operate in a multipolar world, you have to play multipolar games. You can't just do it by goodwill. You have to work out where your alliances are – with the Japanese, the Australians and small-island states.

The Chinese played a brilliant, cold, intelligent negotiating game. I think they're embarrassed by their success, because their success took the edge off China's soft image. The Americans played a game entirely separate from the Europeans, because he was caught by not having anything to deliver in the Senate, and if not humiliated he was completely embarrassed and made to look ineffective by the Chinese.

Europe needs to work on its foreign policy, by itself. Being a nice guy and being on the good side of all the arguments isn't enough, whether the issue is climate change or anything else. That's an emotional realisation which this town still has to grapple with.

Europe doesn't think that it will be the most important militarily or economically, but it thinks it can be the strongest morally, and can set an example for high living standards and human rights. Is this enough?

It's necessary, but not sufficient. We shouldn't abandon our belief in the universal UN structure of total agreement. In the medium term, we have to behave much more brutally because that's what the other players are doing.

Precisely because we believe in all the values that you've just listed, we must not find ourselves outmanoeuvred again as we were in Copenhagen. Somebody somewhere in our complex foreign policy mechanism needs to be sitting down and saying 'this is how we behave on trade issues; this is how we behave on climate change and security issues'.

We need allies. Where do we go in the world for allies? Who do we talk to? We have an unrivalled set of contacts. We have huge trade. But our success is going to be based on our power as well as our values, and the belief that you can just be Mr. Nice Guy and expect the Chinese, Indians and Americans to go 'ooh yes, Europe's so right on this' is wrong.

We have the EU 2020 strategy to replace the failed Lisbon Agenda. That's obviously going to be a Barroso project. Why should EU 2020 be better than the Lisbon Strategy? Why should we believe it will make a difference?

I don't believe it will. It seems to be a weak acronym. What is the purpose of it? Take the acronym. PIGS: Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain. Pigs. That is so powerful. Once someone came up with that acronym, then inevitably the financial worries spread from Greece to Spain and Portugal.

Just coming up with the acronym 'PIGS' is politically very powerful, because it actually moves markets. PIGS is something you instinctively listen to and go, 'yes, I like that concept'. Like BRIC and BASIC.

If 2020 meant anything, we would immediately take something from its title, but I don't think I could sit down here now and tell you what's in the 2020 strategy. I'd have to go and look it up.

Now, if you have to go and look something up, something is wrong with the communication.

The 1992 campaign for the creation of the single market had power because people understood the nature of what we were doing. I don't believe that either at elite level or individual level people think the same way or attach the same importance to EU 2020.

Nevertheless, it's the pet project of this Commission and is designed to last longer than its term.

The Commission is a continuing institution. Its identity, its morale and its relationship with the other institutions is a longer-term story than the personalities of any given five-year segment.

As a communications device, EU 2020 is very weak.

How would you compare Barroso's presidency to that of Jacques Delors, Romano Prodi and Jacques Santer?

I think the emotional crisis over Santer and the role of the Commission took longer to heal than we realised at the time. That, rather than the personalities, has shaped how the Commission has developed.

The Commission has got much of its morale back. It felt as if it was constantly losing power to the Parliament and the member states, so it has developed mechanisms, a lot of the 'Better Regulation' impact assessment exercises are designed to push power back to the Commission and limit the influence of Parliament under co-decision.

The Commission is an immensely sensitive and creative political animal, and it had a huge emotional wobble at the end of the last century, because it looked around and said 'hey, we were responsible for creating all these new policies, and there aren't any left, so what are we going to do now?' It has largely got its morale back.

What makes this moment so interesting is that we have got as close to the final EU institutional balance as we are likely to get in our lifetimes. This is it! This is what the system is, and this is what the overlap between the Commission, Parliament and Council will be.

Yes, there are details to work out, but nobody is planning fundamental treaty change. You'll see the Parliament working out how to maximise its influence under the new system, likewise the Council and Commission.

Everything up to now has been prologue – the strengthening of the treaties, the election of the European Parliament, the growth in its powers, the increase in the EU's competences: well, here we are.

Barroso built strong relations with the major EU countries. Is this his strength?

No future enlargements will shift the core power balance between the member states. If we go from 27 to 33, we're looking at the same basic balance of power. We now know what the parameters look like.

The idea that you could reduce the president of the Commission to a secretary processing the decisions of the Council doesn't look realistic at all. The Council behaved like a political body at 15, but you can't behave in that way at 27 or 30, so you cede that collective power to Van Rompuy and his ability to coordinate what's happening.

For all three institutions, everything before today was prologue, but now we have a system that we asked for. Now we have to make it work, and we have to make it work under difficult economic and external conditions.

But the hidden advantage is that the European public knows that the recession and our global position are not easy, so this is the best opportunity the European institutions have had to reconnect with their publics for ten years.

We're not arguing about the details of constitutional change, which nobody out there understands and Eurosceptic politicians can pick up on. That's done. That's yesterday's news. We have that.

This is about policy. It's about unemployment, energy, climate change, food: issues that the public may have different views on but at least they understand it. When you're arguing about what the powers of the High Representative would be, you'd be hard pushed to find more than 5,000 people out of 500m who understand what you're actually talking about. When you're talking about jobs, relations with the Chinese or fuel shortages, people understand what you're talking about.

I think it's always useful to look at historical precedents, even including Delors and the visionary exercise. This was about creating the EU institutions, and from today onwards, it's about running the institutions of the Union. There's a subtle difference.

Less heroic, as you said, and perhaps more specialised. Many EU officials have spent years working in EU affairs.

We're now five years on from the great enlargement. Emotionally that enlargement dates from the 1990s onwards, in terms of preparing for it. So we're now perfectly comfortable with a Polish president of the European Parliament.

Everything before today was prologue. We've built this huge machine to test whether humans can actually cooperate in an intelligent way together, we turn it on, the thing flashes around and round, and bang, we end up arguing whether or not Baroness Ashton should have gone to Haiti.

If you could spend two minutes with Barroso, what would be your main recommendations to him?

I would remind him of the Portuguese Revolution, in order to help us to remember how far Europe has come. Barroso II is the first president of a Commission that operates under a mature, completed European Union structure. He has the courage and the political position to really deliver for Europe in the next five years.

I want him to position himself historically and look externally, because the key justification for the European Union if you were Portuguese at the time of the revolution was that this was to be the guarantee of democracy. Done! Tick!

He and Portugal have come a very long way. Now he needs to have that historical sense, but also he needs to have that global sense, which actually the Portuguese have. The Portuguese are encoded with Henry the Navigator, the *Lusiads*: we think of the British and the French of having world views, but so do the Portuguese.

So my advice would be: be yourself, look how far we have come, have a sense of history, have a sense of geography, and then be completely pragmatic inside that.