

Will the Swedes go Dutch?

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The first Finnish and Swedish Presidencies worked with the European Centre for Public Affairs. From these and other experiences we observe certain immutable rules on Presidencies. Small countries run good Presidencies – provided they appropriately balance ambition, preparation and prudence. Presidencies in the second half of the year are always under time pressure and such Presidencies in European Election years face constitutional challenges.

The Dutch Presidency in 2004 was the first after the ‘Great Enlargement’ that took the Union to 25 members. It started with low expectations; faced difficulties on the domestic front, including the illness of the Prime Minister; bought itself time by pushing tricky dossiers into the next Presidency; survived the controversy over Parliament’s refusal to endorse the first Barroso Commission, and ended with its reputation for administrative and political skills enhanced.

To what extent will the Swedes follow a similar path in 2009? Instead of Enlargement, they have the uncertainty of the Irish vote on the Treaty of Lisbon. Instead of an October fight in between Parliament and a ‘ready-to-take-office’ Commission, they have a July struggle between Council and Parliament over the re-appointment of President Barroso. If Parliament succeeds in delaying the start of the Commission-creating process until after the Irish vote, the Swedish Presidency will be defined by problems of timing. The Swedes are rightly reluctant to preside over a debilitating EU institutional log-jam in a financial crisis, just as the Obama Administration gets into its stride and the world attempts to negotiate on climate change at Copenhagen.

One largely unexpected consequence of the Enlargement to 27 has been the increased importance attached to six-month Presidencies. The European Council, even if it becomes an institution in its own right under the Treaty of Lisbon, is now too large to act as a hands-on cabinet for Europe. Intelligent Presidencies step into the breach.

The Swedes survey an interesting political landscape this autumn. The European Commission faces a period of extraordinary weakness leading to late appointment. Many members of the first Barroso Commission have already left and openly stop-gap figures have been appointed by some states. Member states both big and small are fighting over Commission portfolios and policies. The normal consolidation of the new Parliament has been disrupted by the Berlaymont ambitions of some political Groups and individuals. The Council is obsessed by the prospect of having its own President and is playing with gusto the great game of who gets the top jobs, including the High Representative.

Second half Presidencies are made or broken in October and November. I predict that the Swedish Presidency and the European Parliament will become each other’s ‘new best friend’ in this crucial eight week period. The Swedes have a strong parliamentary tradition and an instinct for workable compromise in government. Despite the changes to Group structure in the European Parliament, it is likely that the new House will mature rapidly in the interest of securing its institutional prerogatives, both before and after the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon.

Success for the Swedish Presidency, as for the Dutch in 2004, depends on avoiding the ‘big country fallacy’ that a Presidency can direct every aspect of policy. Historically both the Swedes and the Dutch can be tempted to do too much. The Swedes, though they would never admit it, have been irked by the praise heaped on two Finnish Presidencies. To succeed they need to pull off the Finnish trick of having few enemies and being tactically fleet of foot. I think they will succeed.

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