



CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM

briefing note

BARROSO'S GALACTICOS? THE NEW EUROPEAN COMMISSION

By Alasdair Murray

José Manuel Durão Barroso unveiled his new Commission on August 12th – confirming his burgeoning reputation as a deft political tactician. Barroso has crafted a carefully balanced team, which emphasises his own independence as incoming Commission president. The line-up appears to have satisfied the desire of the larger member-states for substantial Commission posts, with the key exception of France. At the same time, Barroso has ensured that commissioners from smaller countries will take on a fair share of important portfolios, such as external relations, competition policy, the budget and the internal market.

The new president has also indicated that he intends to adopt a more hands-on approach to managing the Commission than his predecessors, Romano Prodi and Jacques Santer. Barroso will personally chair two key groups of commissioners dealing with economic reform and external relations. The new president is also reversing Prodi's decision to base commissioners in their individual departments – the directorates-general (DGs) – rather than centrally, in an effort to improve the co-ordination of Commission policies.

A LIBERAL-MINDED ECONOMIC AXIS?

Barroso's main headache in the allocation of portfolios was how to divide up the much-coveted economics posts, such as the internal market and competition policy. France and Germany had made plain that they wanted 'their' commissioners, Jacques Barrot and Günter Verheugen, to get senior jobs. The German government, in particular, lobbied strongly for the creation of a 'super' commissioner, to oversee all economic policy-making including competition and state aid cases. Barroso's acquiescence in the German plan would have damaged the credibility of the Commission's economic policies: the German government had made clear its desire to water down competition and single market proposals that might threaten the short-term interests of German industry.

Barroso has handed Verheugen a senior economics job as vice-president of the Commission for enterprise and industry. Verheugen has also secured some extra responsibilities for co-ordinating the Commission's position in the competitiveness council (made up of member-state industry ministers). But this post falls short of the super commissioner role that the German government demanded. The enterprise and industry directorate-general has traditionally possessed only limited legislative powers. Moreover, it is not clear how Verheugen's co-ordinating job will work in practice – especially as Barroso has insisted that all commissioners have equal status. But few will object if Verheugen sees his task as assessing the impact of Commission proposals on the competitiveness of European industry.

More importantly, the three most powerful economic posts are in the hands of a trio of liberal-minded commissioners. Charlie McCreevy, the experienced outgoing Irish finance minister, is to become the new

internal market and services commissioner. **Peter Mandelson**, the former British trade and Northern Ireland secretary, will be seeking to get the Doha talks back on track as trade commissioner. And **Neelie Kroes**, the former Dutch transport minister, is the surprise choice at competition. However, Kroes arrives with a reputation as a tough-minded politician who also has wide experience in the business sector. Meanwhile, Barroso has emphasised the importance he attaches to economic reform by personally taking charge of the group of commissioners overseeing the Lisbon strategy.

Of the larger member-states, France has fared worst in Barroso's carve up of Commission posts. Jacques Barrot takes responsibility for the second tier post of transport, although he has also been granted the largely honorific title of vice-president (there are five vice-presidents in total). To put Barrot's new job in context, it is half the job that Loyola de Palacio, the Commission vice-president for transport and energy, is doing now.

The French government might take some limited consolation from the fact that Barrot will now take charge of a highly sensitive package of railway liberalisation measures – which are likely to provoke strong opposition from powerful railway unions. Moreover, a French director-general, François Lamoureux, will continue to oversee the (still unified) energy and transport directorate-general, in the short-term at least. **László Kovács**, the former Hungarian foreign minister, takes on the post of energy commissioner.

Meanwhile, Spanish socialist **Joaquín Almunia**, the acting economics and monetary affairs commissioner, continues in that post when the new Commission takes office in November. Almunia faces the difficult task of resolving the row between the Commission and the member-states over the stability and growth pact. The new commissioner has so far shown a willingness to allow a more flexible interpretation of the pact than his predecessor Pedro Solbes.

EVOLUTION NOT REVOLUTION

Barroso has chosen to make only modest changes to the institutional structure of the Commission to accommodate the increased number of commissioners (24 as opposed to 19). He has resisted the temptation to overhaul the Commission's directorates-general – for example by creating a new financial services DG. Instead he has limited himself to splitting up existing portfolios. Thus Barroso has separated information society from enterprise and handed the portfolio – along with media – to **Viviane Reding**, the second term Luxembourg commissioner. **Joe Borg**, the Maltese commissioner, will oversee fisheries, while the Dane, **Mariann Fischer Boel**, takes on agriculture. The internal market commissioner will no longer oversee the taxation and customs DG, which is handed to **Ingrida Udre**, who hails from low tax Latvia.

Barroso has also rebranded a number of long-standing Commission posts. **Rocco Buttiglione**, the former Italian Europe minister, becomes a vice-president in charge of the justice, freedom and security directorate-general, formerly known as justice and home affairs. Meanwhile, Slovak **Ján Figel** takes on the rump of the much-maligned education and culture DG – which also had responsibility for media and sport – as commissioner for education, training, culture and multilingualism.

One of the few institutional innovations is the appointment of **Margot Wallström**, the outgoing environment commissioner, as vice-president in charge of institutional relations and communication strategy. Barroso has repeatedly emphasised his desire to improve the Commission's communication record and has asked Wallström to oversee not just the Commission's press team but also its network of representative offices in the member-states. Barroso's desire to ensure a balanced Commission is further demonstrated by his decision to make Wallström – a (female) social democrat from Northern Europe – his replacement when he is travelling.

The final vice-president is former Estonian prime minister **Siim Kallas** who takes on Neil Kinnock's job in pushing forward internal reform. Sensibly, Barroso has strengthened this post by placing Kallas in full charge of budgetary controls and the Commission's anti-fraud efforts (which previously were the responsibility of the budget commissioner).

Barroso has also made some small but important changes to the responsibilities of the commissioners overseeing external relations. **Benita Ferrero-Waldner**, the former Austrian foreign minister, takes over from

Chris Patten as external relations commissioner. Ferrero-Waldner has the added responsibility for the EU's 'neighbourhood' policy – that is relations with countries such as Ukraine and Morocco which border the EU but have no immediate prospect of membership. **Olli Rehn**, the youthful Finnish commissioner, takes on Verheugen's old post as commissioner for enlargement. The issue of Turkish EU membership is set to dominate his agenda. **Louis Michel**, the former Belgian foreign minister and vocal critic of US policy in Iraq, becomes development commissioner. Barroso hopes to improve the co-ordination of the Commission's foreign policy efforts by chairing the group of external relations commissioners.

While the new member-states have not secured many of the heavyweight economic positions in the new Commission, they will have strong influence in the spending departments. **Danuta Hübner**, the former Polish Europe minister, takes over as commissioner for regional policy. Former Lithuanian finance minister **Dalia Grybauskaitė** is charged with the tricky task of leading the negotiations over the EU's next financial perspective as budget commissioner.

OLDER, WISER, MORE CONSERVATIVE?

Most commentators have welcomed the composition of the new Commission, stressing its high content of political heavyweights. Barroso himself has emphasised the "solid and politically experienced" nature of the new team. But how does the Barroso Commission compare with its predecessors?

The new Commission is certainly more right-wing than the previous two Commissions. As the table below shows, the Prodi and Santer Commissions both contained narrow left-of-centre majorities. Right-of-centre parties are now clearly dominant. However, this change in political colour is unlikely to make fundamental differences to the Commission's work programme. The right-wing commissioners hail from a myriad of different parties, ranging from very centrist Christian Democrats to populist agrarian parties. National differences will continue to matter at least as much as political colour.

The table shows that, in simple age terms, this Commission is no more experienced than those overseen by Prodi or Santer. The average age of commissioners has remained remarkably stable over the last three Commissions at around 53. In the new Commission, the youngest commissioner is Olli Rehn who is 42; the eldest is Jacques Barrot at 67 – the same age as Frits Bolkestein when he took up his post as internal market commissioner in 1999.

The table also contains a 'heavy hitter' index, which provides a rough guide to the political importance of the new commissioners. The index suggests that the new Commission has considerably greater experience of high office than its immediate predecessor. Nearly half of the new commissioners have occupied a senior ministerial position, such as foreign or finance minister, compared with less than a third during Prodi's Commission. Moreover, three commissioners – Barroso, Czech social affairs commissioner **Vladimir Spidla** and Siim Kallas – have been prime ministers, compared with just Prodi himself in the current Commission.

The presence of so many big names should help raise the Commission's profile with voters. It indicates that member-states are taking the Commission seriously and are willing to send able politicians to help secure the most attractive posts. However, a comparison with the Santer Commission suggests that big names do not necessarily translate into a successful Commission. The Santer Commission also scores almost as highly on the heavy hitter index. But this did not prevent its collapse in 1999 following a series of fraud cases and political scandals which embroiled senior figures, such as the former French prime minister Edith Cresson. Some of the most experienced commissioners may treat the Commission as a gentle pre-retirement post. Others, used to power and influence in their home countries, may not prove to be willing team players. Equally, many of the most effective recent commissioners – such as Mario Monti – arrived in Brussels little known outside their own country.

Barroso has made clear that he intends to adopt a more hands-on style than his predecessor to ensure all the commissioners work together effectively. Commissioners and their advisers (the cabinets) will be based together in the newly reopened Berlaymont building in Brussels. Barroso's decision to move all commissioners into a single location is understandable – the Prodi Commission has faced heavy criticism for its lack of co-ordination. Prodi himself failed to offer sufficient leadership on key issues such as economic reform. However, Barroso should again recall the lessons from the Santer Commission, which

similarly based all the commissioners in one building (the Breydel). This resulted in a loss of control over the directorates-general, with no apparent improvement in teamwork.

In short, Barroso has made a promising start as a Commission president – and assembled a strong team. But he will need all his undoubted political skills if he is to succeed where his predecessors failed and restore the Commission's political credibility. .

THE LAST THREE COMMISSIONS IN CONTEXT

Commission	Average age	Political colour*	Second term commissioners	Heavy hitter index**	Women commissioners
Santer (1994-1999)	53.1	Left plus 1	4	0.45	5
Prodi (1999-2004)	53.3	Left plus 2	3	0.3	5
Barroso (2004-)	53.4	Right plus 4	3	0.48	8

* Defined as majority of largest political grouping over all over parties (including independents).

** Defined as proportion of commissioners who have held senior ministerial office (prime minister, foreign minister, finance minister, interior minister) or led a mainstream political grouping.

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THE BARROSO COMMISSION

Name	Sex	Age	Country	Portfolio	Political colour	CV
José Manuel Durão Barroso	M	48	Portugal	President	C-Right (PSD)	Prime minister (02-04); foreign minister (92-95)
Margot Wallström	F	50	Sweden	VP; Communications	Left (SAP)	Environment com. (99-04); minister for social affairs (96-98)
Günter Verheugen	M	60	Germany	VP; Industry	Left (SPD)	Enlargement com. (99-04); minister for state, foreign office (98-99)
Jacques Barrot	M	67	France	VP; Transport	Right (UMP)	Regional com. (April-Nov 04); labour minister (95-97)
Siim Kallas	M	55	Estonia	VP; Administration	Right (Reform)	Prime minister (02-03); finance minister (99-02); foreign minister (95)
Rocco Buttiglione	M	56	Italy	VP; Justice	C-Right (UDC)	European affairs minister (01-04)
Benita Ferrero-Waldner	F	55	Austria	External Relations	C-Right (ÖVP)	Foreign minister (00-04)
Louis Michel	M	57	Belgium	Development	Right (MR)	Foreign minister and deputy prime minister (99-04)
Markos Kyprianou	M	44	Cyprus	Health	C-Right (DIKO)	Finance minister (01-04)
Vladimir Spidla	M	53	Czech Rep	Employment	Left (CSSD)	Prime minister (02-04); minister, labour and soc.affairs (98-02)
Mariann Fischer Boel	F	61	Denmark	Agriculture	Right (Venstre)	Minister of food, agriculture and fisheries (01-04)
Olli Rehn	M	42	Finland	Enlargement	Centre (<i>Eduskunta</i>)	Enterprise com. (July-Nov 04); economics adviser to PM (03-04); head of cabinet (Liikonen) (98-02)
Stavros Dimas	M	62	Greece	Environment	Right (ND)	Employment com. (April-Nov 04); minister of industry (90-91)
László Kovács	M	65	Hungary	Energy	Left (MSZP)	Foreign minister (02-04)
Charlie McCreedy	M	55	Ireland	Internal Market	Centre (Ffáil)	Finance minister (97-04)
Ingrida Udre	F	46	Latvia	Taxation	Right (ZZS)	Speaker of Parliament (02-04)
Dalia Grybauskaite	F	48	Lithuania	Budget	Independent	Finance minister (01-04)
Viviane Reding	F	53	Luxembourg	Info. society, media	Right (CSV)	Education, culture com. (99-04); MEP (89)
Joe Borg	M	52	Malta	Fisheries	Right (PN)	Foreign minister (99-04)
Neelie Kroes	F	63	Netherlands	Competition	C-Right (VVD)	Minister of transport and public works (82-89)
Danuta Hübner	F	56	Poland	Regional Policy	Independent	EU affairs minister (03-04)
Ján Figel	M	44	Slovakia	Education, culture	Right (KDH)	Chief EU accession negotiator
Janez Potocnik	M	46	Slovenia	Science, research	Independent	Minister of European affairs (02-04)
Joaquin Almunia	M	56	Spain	Economics and monetary affairs	Left (PSOE)	Economic and monetary affairs com. (April-Nov 04); Minister of public admin. (89-91); 2000 candidate for prime minister
Peter Mandelson	M	51	UK	Trade	Left (Labour)	Secretary of state for N.Ireland (99-01); trade and industry minister (98)