

EU PRESIDENT AND HIGH REPRESENTATIVE: HABEMUS PAPAM

Commentary by Riccardo Perissich*

(pubblicato in www.ispionline.it – 21 novembre 2009)

Habemus papam. In fact we have two, plus a lady cardinal. Much was said about Barroso's appointment. Contrary to many comments, I believe that Van Rompuy has the right profile for the job and may well prove to be a good choice. I always found dishonest the British inspired campaign for a "high profile" candidate, one that "would stop the traffic in foreign capitals". No European leader, least of all the British, has until now given any sign of being willing to play second fiddler to a European figure on the world stage. The campaign was nothing else than a desperate attempt to promote the name of Tony Blair: not because he is "big", but because it was seen as an opportunity to put the UK back at the centre of Europe.

The Brits would be well advised to bring home the news that Blair didn't lose because he was too "big", but because he is Blair: a politician that at some point was the most popular figure in Europe and then managed to waste this capital by retreating on his pledge to bring the country into the euro, by being Bush's strongest supporter in Irak and by failing to make an impact in his new job of special envoy to the middle east. The relatively low profile of Van Rompuy fits perfectly well with the wording of the Lisbon treaty, incidentally a job description that was strongly supported by none else than Prime Minister Blair at the time. It remains to be seen how he will be capable of working with Barroso.

My reaction to the appointment of Baroness Ashton is more cautious. Not because she is British. If there is one field where the UK can contribute a lot, it is foreign policy. The Foreign Office is probably the best diplomatic service in Europe and we shall all gain from their contribution to the common service that will be set up under Lisbon. They are by far the most "pro European" institution in the country.

They were programmed to run an empire and are clearly frustrated to be relegated to the rank of polite, albeit sometimes reluctant, supporters of whatever is decided in Washington. On the other hand, they have a healthy understanding of the common interest between Europe and the Us. In my experience, the best negotiators for Europe that I have worked with were British. Given a chance to wave the European flag they have no inferiority complex, but they don't share the obsession of the French to prove their manhood by saying no to everything that comes out of Washington. The problem with baroness Ashton is her lack of experience. Apart from being British and labour, her main asset seems to be that she is a woman: not glorious for Europe, or indeed for women.

A final word about the failed candidature of D'Alema. Like some others I had strong fears that he would have gone to Bruxelles leaving his heart in Rome with the future of his party. The problem is that he was rejected for the wrong reasons. Not because he was a communist (grotesque), or because he doesn't speak English (false). He was rejected because he is Italian. It would not have happened only a few years ago. The international image of some Italians like Mario Monti or Mario Draghi still survives, but it has become harder and harder for the country as a whole to be recognised as a major player. Whether this is related to the international image of Silvio Berlusconi, or whether the problem runs deeper than that, is of course an open question.

**Riccardo Perissich is former Director-General of European Commission*