

Interview with MEP Jean-Luc Dehaene (EPP, Belgium)

Two to three years to strike new institutional balance

By Célia Sampol

Jean-Luc Dehaene, former prime minister and vice-president of the Convention on the Future of Europe, drafted the report on the Union's institutional balance under the Lisbon Treaty, adopted in plenary on 23 April 2009. More than three months after the treaty's entry into force, the MEP notes that the main institutional players are still feeling their way into their new roles.

Could you give a first review of the situation of the new institutions?

I always knew that the text of the treaty is one thing and that its implementation would be another. When I see all the texts of interinstitutional agreements and regulations that we are discussing, I think it will take two to three years before the new balance is struck, especially for the new jobs, like the European Council presidency and the high representative-Commission vice-president. Some seem to be fully realising the content of the treaty only now. Apparently, the foreign ministers only discovered at the first meeting of the European Council that they were no longer part of it. All that creates frustrations, the defence of established rights and battles to make the most of the new functions. So it is much too early to draw any conclusions. The Commission president and the European Council president are also feeling their way and trying to position themselves in relation to one another. The good news is that they are meeting regularly.

What remains of the half-yearly rotating Council Presidencies?

We'll be hearing much less about the rotating Presidencies, which had a tendency to exaggerate the importance of their mandate. The fact that running the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council is no longer the responsibility of the country holding the rotating Presidency is the most visible change. If the rotating Presidency wants to keep playing a role, it will have to do so in the General Affairs Council (GAC). That implies, for example, that in several countries a clear distinction must be made between the European affairs ministers and the foreign ministers. The General Affairs Council should also be organised as a separate meeting from the Foreign Affairs Council and not take place the same day. Lastly, Coreper has to learn to refer problems to the GAC and not always to the European Council. The GAC must deal with coordination of the Union's internal functioning.

The informal summits sought by Van Rompuy are prepared by Coreper and not the GAC...

Coreper can take things forward but when it comes to reaching a political decision it needs a body of political leaders. Referring everything to the European Council risks overloading it and preventing it from carrying out its task of giving fresh impetus. What's more, not all problems can be sent to the European Council because the scope of co-decision has been tremendously increased and the Council co-legislates with Parliament, not the European Council. It remains to be seen whether Mr Van Rompuy will manage to organise as many informal summits as he would like. I'm not sure whether that will work or be to his advantage.

And where does Catherine Ashton come into all that?

It will be much more difficult for her to find her place than for the European Council president because she is in the midst of the institutions with a double role that did not exist before now. What she urgently needs is the European External Action Service on the one hand and a number of political deputies who can replace her, on the other. Her position is so multi-faceted that she has to be in several different places at the same time and for the moment she gets bawled out wherever she goes. On the External Action Service, Parliament will have co-decision on the budget and staff rules. Compromises will have to be agreed but it is clear that bit by bit the Commission and Council will have to take account of Parliament at an earlier stage of their work. They have not yet done so. They'll have to learn lessons from accidents like SWIFT. You'll have the same thing during discussions on the 2011 budget because Parliament now has full competence in this area and the instrument is in place to reject it if need be.

Does the Lisbon Treaty complicate the institutional machinery?

What is important is seeing how it will all work once the machinery has been well greased. The treaty has to be given a chance. That said, everyone knew in advance that this text is a compromise between two fairly different visions of Europe: the first wanting to place responsibility on a real EU president who would be president of the European Council, and the second preferring to stress the Commission's role. For the moment, we're still feeling our way. The personality of the people in office will play as great a role as the treaty per se.