

European Union selects president and foreign minister

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Following deliberations at a special “working dinner” on Thursday, the 27 leaders of the European Union unanimously announced the names of those appointed to the EU’s newly created posts of president and foreign minister.

Following months of speculation about who would fill the posts, which were established as part of the EU’s Lisbon Treaty, the assembled European heads of state selected two people little known around the world and even within Europe itself.

Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy was picked as the first president of the European Council, and Baroness Catherine Ashton, Britain’s European commissioner in the EU, was chosen as the EU’s foreign policy chief.

In many respects these are astonishing appointments. The 62-year-old Van Rompuy is an economist who had worked at the Belgian central bank in the early 1970s before taking over the leadership of the Flemish Christian Democrat party from 1988 to 1993. He has been prime minister of Belgium for only 11 months.

Van Rompuy’s language skills are appreciated by EU bureaucrats—together with a number of European languages, he is familiar with Japanese—but he has virtually no foreign policy experience. One newspaper notes that his main excursion into international politics was a dispute with Dutch authorities over the dredging of the River Schelde.

Catherine Ashton is an unelected British politician who is barely known in her own country. Ashton has never held a senior ministerial post. Prior to entering the House of Lords as Baroness Ashton of Upholland in 1999, she had run a local health authority in Britain.

In October last year, she took over the post of Britain’s European commissioner from Peter Mandelson, who was commandeered back to Britain to

revive the fortunes of the ailing Labour Party. In the position of EU commissioner, Ashton presided over a large bureaucracy and was able to develop close links to leading European business groups and lobbies. While Van Rompay has little foreign experience, it is generally acknowledged that the EU’s new foreign policy chief has none at all.

Even Ashton was taken aback by her nomination as foreign policy chief and declared as late as Thursday morning she had known nothing about her selection for the post. Expressing “slight surprise” at gaining the job, Ashton acknowledged that she had not had time to prepare an appropriate speech.

Van Rompuy only announced his availability for the post of president a few days before his appointment.

The selection process for the EU’s top posts was thoroughly undemocratic. In this respect, it was entirely in keeping with the traditions of the European Union and its Lisbon Treaty.

It should be recalled that the Lisbon Treaty was introduced through the back door by EU leaders as a replacement for the European constitution, which had been voted down in a series of popular referendums by the peoples of France and Holland.

A revamped constitution was renamed the Lisbon Treaty. It retained all of the free market hallmarks of its predecessor and was imposed on European electorates with the argument that it represented a step towards greater democratisation of the EU and its bureaucracy in Brussels. In fact, Thursday’s election reaffirmed the contempt of EU leaders for the European electorate. In a Byzantine process that excluded any external democratic input, the 27 EU leaders squabbled amongst themselves behind closed doors over who should get what job.

Describing the process of selecting a president for the EU, one east European diplomat told the British *Daily Telegraph*: “Trying to work out who is going to be president of the EU Council is not dissimilar to decoding who was in or out in the Kremlin in the 1970s. It seems strange to many of us that 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall we have to dust off our Kremlinology skills here in Brussels.”

While a number of political commentators have complained that with these appointments the EU “has missed an opportunity to boost its standing on the global stage” (*Der Spiegel*), there were definite political calculations involved in selecting two such colourless bureaucrats for the leading EU posts.

Originally in the running for the post of EU president was former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had been encouraged to stand for the job in 2006 by French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Throughout Europe, however, and particularly in Germany, Blair is regarded as a politician in the pockets of the US. Since his departure as British premier, Blair has concentrated on developing his own Blair Foundation, which has heavy backing from US political and business interests. Also in his role as Middle East envoy, Blair is regarded as a front man for American interests.

In the wake of last year’s financial crisis, both Sarkozy and the German government struck an aggressive tone against the US, declaring the crisis to be one “made in America.” In a series of recent meetings and summits, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, was able to persuade Sarkozy to abandon his support for Blair.

Other British candidates for the post of EU foreign affairs chief, such as Peter Mandelson and Foreign Secretary David Miliband, dropped out of the running, declaring their intention to concentrate on domestic politics. Miliband is preparing his own campaign to take over the leadership of the Labour Party following elections in 2010, which are likely to end in disaster for the present Labour leader, Gordon Brown.

Germany had decided against putting up its own candidates for the two EU jobs in order to ensure the country’s traditional claim to the top position at the European Central Bank. At the same time, Germany, France and Great Britain are in the process of putting forward candidates for influential posts currently vacant in the powerful EU executive, the European

Commission.

In the event, the selection of Van Rompuy is first and foremost a result of closer collaboration between the governments of France and Germany. Van Rompuy will now chair the quarterly meetings of the European Council, which bring together the heads of government, but is expected to play a secondary role to José Manuel Barroso, who was recently nominated for a second term as president of the European Commission.

The principal factors involved in selecting a new EU president and foreign affairs chief all revolved around national interests and egoisms. The process was summed up in a commentary in the British *Financial Times*. Under the headline “*Supremacy of the Nation State Wins Out*,” the newspaper wrote: “When the Lisbon treaty (originally the EU constitution) was first mooted in 2001 by the Belgian EU presidency, it was seen as one last push by European federalists to transfer power to Brussels, including national policies on tax and foreign affairs.”

At Thursday’s dinner in Brussels, the *Financial Times* continues, “That push was rebuffed... Europe’s leaders asserted the supremacy of the nation state: the new president and foreign policy chief would be the servants, not the masters, of the national capitals.”

Protectionist and nationalist policies have been the core response of all of the EU member states to last year’s finance crisis. The nomination of political lightweights to the top jobs in the European Union is aimed at creating favourable conditions for European states, with France, Germany and Great Britain in the lead, to increasingly pursue their own nationalist agendas.



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