

## How to pick a new leader for Europe

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After the ratification of the [Lisbon treaty](#), the search is on for the job of [president of the European Council](#). Rather than endorsing a candidate, I would like to look at the most pressing problems the new president needs to help resolve. That exercise alone might eliminate several of the candidates being discussed.

Three issues should have priority. The first, and most important, priority is fixing the European Union's inadequate system of crisis management. Last year economic crisis management failed at all levels. The European Commission was largely absent after the collapse of Lehman Brothers. This is partly a question of poor leadership and partly the result of the Commission's internal structures.

Largely absent also was the eurogroup of finance ministers, headed by Jean-Claude Juncker, Luxembourg's prime minister and one of the unofficial candidates for the council presidency job. The eurogroup would have been the natural place to co-ordinate fiscal stimulus packages among eurozone member states.

When the crisis hit, European leaders were left without an institutional setting that would have forced a co-ordinated response. When a summit of eurozone leaders finally got together, the preparations were mostly done at bilateral level, which meant that everybody ended up resorting to national policies.

It is these that have harmed Europe's internal market and ultimately Europe's global reputation. The overall economic stimulus that finally emerged was not necessarily too small in aggregate, but mostly structural rather than cyclical, badly co-ordinated and with no joint management of exit strategies – exactly what you would expect to get in the absence of co-ordination.

So one of the most important qualities we should be looking for in a president is the ability to spot a crisis, to analyse rigorously what action needs to be taken at EU level, to make detailed preparations ahead of council meetings, to sound out possibilities for compromise and to co-opt leaders such as Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, or President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, into joint action.

The second most important problem of the present system is a lack of strategic policy focus. The European Council is currently rebooted every six months. Each presidency pushes through its pet projects. And while there are some mechanisms to ensure continuity between rotating presidencies, there may not be enough strategic direction to implement policies beyond the short-term horizon. If, for example, there is ever a hope that the EU will move towards common external representation in bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, the council president is likely to play a leading role.

A related problem in urgent need of fixing has been the tendency especially for some of the larger member states to repatriate EU policies: witness [Germany's anti-competitive subsidises for Opel](#), the car manufacturer. The European Commission is clearly too weak to counter this trend. An important job for the first council president will be to sharpen the focus of the EU and to arrest some of the centrifugal tendencies.

The third problem to fix is poor presentation, internal and external. I rank it third because I think it is wrong to define the job purely in terms of representation, as some supporters of Tony Blair, the former British prime minister, have done. But it is still on my list because the opposite is not desirable either, as some of those who are seeking a small-country president suggest.

Ms Merkel's reception in Washington last week demonstrated impressively that Europe is not lacking in leaders who can "stop the traffic" in a foreign capital, as David Miliband, the British foreign secretary so vividly demanded in his recent [endorsement of Mr Blair](#). This discussion misses the point that our council president, who is not elected and has no constitutional backing, cannot be Europe's answer to Barack Obama, US president.

How about the argument that the EU needs to appoint a well known global figure to increase the EU's diplomatic pulling power? I think this argument exaggerates what a non-elected council president can do in the absence of a joint foreign policy. The Lisbon treaty establishes a joint diplomatic service and also the important new office of high representative for foreign policy, a job known in a previous version of the treaty as Europe's foreign minister. This is where we should be looking for more coherent and effective foreign policy leadership. The council president will no doubt add his or her voice to the EU's foreign policy, but it would be wrong for the council president to act as the EU's chief diplomat. We would end up with two ineffective and rival foreign ministers and no proper internal co-ordination.

The job thus defined is going to be very hard, perhaps impossible, to fill. It would require an exceptional political figure, and I struggle to put forward a name. I have my doubts about all the names in public discussion. The final decision will no doubt be some complex trade-off between left and right, north, south and east, men and women.

But I have no doubt that the first council president's success or failure will depend largely on those three factors.

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