

# ‘Useful role for European Commissioners leaving their posts for high-level national office’ from the Europe Daily Bulletin (6 April 2004)


**Caption:** As the term of office of the European Commission presided by Romano Prodi comes to an end on 1 November 2004, several Commissioners are leaving their posts early in order to take up new national positions of responsibility. In his editorial dated 6 April 2004, Ferdinando Riccardi, Editor-in-Chief of the Europe Daily Bulletin, takes a positive view of the situation.

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### Useful role for European commissioners leaving their posts for high-level national office

**Two interpretations.** There are at least two ways you can read the anticipated departure of a number of European Commissioners. Several commentators compare the current Commission to a boat adrift, which the crew are leaving as soon as an opportunity presents itself. Speaking to the European Parliament, President Romano Prodi chose instead to stress the increasing power of the Commission's prestige: it is among its ranks that governments come to cherry-pick new brains, or to get back politicians who had previously occupied national posts, and who have gained in authority and popularity in Brussels, conferring upon them such responsibility as France's Minister for Foreign Affairs or that of Economy and Finance for Spain. At the same time, for the new Commission, the only names being put forward are top notch: a Chancellor, Prime Ministers, former Prime Ministers...

**Precious witnesses...** Rather than getting back into this debate, I would rather underline what, for my money, is the most important issue: the use European can derive from comings and goings between European and national responsibility. How many times have I said that the Union's main internal enemy is not those who openly oppose it, but ignorance or misunderstanding of its objectives, its political nature, its functioning, its respect for national identities? Propaganda won't change the erroneous impression of the united Europe, direct experience will: to dive headfirst into Community reality, to help to shape it, to take part in its management, that's what changes everything. If you only know the European Union from the outside, listening to national political forces blaming it for their mistakes, distractedly watching television debates where the most worked-up seem to be right, or from reading a certain type of British newspaper, how are you going to get a correct or reasonably objective impression? How many new European Commissioners have I seen arriving in Brussels full of prejudice, and needing at least a year to understand that the real adventure these days is building Europe's unity! And once you're bitten, it's for good; even yesterday's confusion bears precious witness to Community reality, once back in national politics.

**... and well-informed ones.** And they are, overwhelmingly, well-informed witnesses. Taking up responsibility for economic policy in his home country, Pedro Solbes is fully aware of Spanish commitments and duties in terms of the stability of the euro, and will duly take account of them (in the interests, obviously, of Spain itself). The Stability Pact, with its shortcomings and its revision, is part of the luggage he will take with him to Madrid. Same goes for Michel Barnier: having been a member of the Convention Praesidium, having had direct responsibility for the EU's institutional reforms and the creation of its "Defence" plank, what baggage will he have for efficient and "European" participation in the final phase of negotiations on the Constitution, and to help get across the importance of concluding before the European elections! And having prepared the EU's new cohesion policy, after months of listening to interested parties, and having drawn up the draft almost word for word, will allow him to defend reasonable compromises for this policy, which is so very necessary for an effective Europe standing together.

It is, furthermore, a fairly general rule that when they go back to their countries, former Commissioners have a useful role to play. It is true that the contribution of a few has been weak and disappointing, but on reflection, I can only think of one who did his best to damage Europe, and that's, Ralf Dahrendorf.

**A President to be chosen with care.** It is clear that although outgoing Commissioners generally provide a useful service, even more important are the newcomers. The Commission which will take up its duties in the beginning of November will, in theory, be fragile, with: twenty new Commissioners out of twenty-five, the presence of large countries halved and that of small and medium countries doubled, and rules to be invented or clarified. The choice of President will be a determining factor: he or she must have vast experience of Community affairs, because they won't have a year to break themselves in: if they are indecisive or hesitant, the Commission will have foundered in a year's time, having lost prestige and authority.

(F.R.)

