

'Ghost at the feast' from The Irish Times (24 June 1994)

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Ghost at the feast

European Union leaders can point to some significant achievements when they gather on the Greek island of Corfu this weekend. The summit will see the formal signing of the accession treaties with the four applicant countries, Austria, Sweden, Finland and Norway. The EU will have been heartened by the recent decision of the Austrian people to support membership. It is now very possible that at least three of the four applicants will join the Union on schedule next January.

The summit will also see the signing of a new Partnership and Co operation Agreement between the EU and Russia, which will strengthen economic contacts and upgrade diplomatic links. The agreement is welcome evidence of the Union's willingness to advance the reform process in Russia.

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Ideally, the summit leaders would like to focus attention on these achievements. But there is a ghost at the feast, a potentially bruising debate on Mr Jacques Delors's successor as European Commission President. The two leading contenders, the Belgian Prime Minister, Mr Jean Luc Dehaene and the Dutch Prime Minister, Mr Ruud Lubbers, have each refused to withdraw their name in order to allow the summit rally behind a single candidate. The German Chancellor, Dr Kohl, has canvassed widely on behalf of Mr Dehaene. But Britain is reluctant to back a convinced federalist and some other countries, notably Spain and Italy, appear less than wholehearted in their support for the Belgian leader, who is, it must be said, something of an unknown quantity.

The Greek Prime Minister, Mr Papandreou, who will chair tonight's discussion has exhorted his EU partners to settle the issue swiftly. Failure to agree on Mr Delors's successor would, he argues, send a "negative message" to the people of Europe. But there is a far greater priority: to pick the right man for the job.

The presidency of the Commission is one of the most important posts in world politics. Since the Commission enjoys the sole right to table EU legislation the president can, as Mr Delors has amply demonstrated, set the European political agenda. The president controls a budget of over £60 billion per year and he is the public face of the European Union. At a time when the European Union is struggling to regain some of its old swagger, the Union needs to think long and hard about Mr Delors's successor.

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The next president will face great challenges. He – remarkably there are no female candidates – will be a key figure as the enlarged Union searches for a new institutional balance. He will have to rekindle public enthusiasm for the Union and, most critically of all, he will have to resolve Europe's chronic competitiveness and unemployment problems. The Corfu summit will review progress on the Implementation of the EU's much vaunted White Paper on Growth, Employment and Competitiveness. But there is little confidence that this well meaning and polite document will sharpen Europe's competitive edge.

The prospect of a stand off between Mr Dehaene and Mr Lubbers at Corfu has led to increased speculation that the EU may be casting around for a compromise candidate. Britain, Spain and Italy may all be willing to switch their support to the GATT director general, Mr Peter Sutherland. But everything could hinge on the signals that they receive from the Taoiseach, Mr Reynolds, around the table in Corfu. If a positive signal is not forthcoming, the prospect of an Irishman becoming the next Commission president will simply wither on the vine.