

'Prodi's team' from Le Monde

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Prodi's team

When he presented the new European Commission on Friday 9 July, its President, the Italian Romano Prodi, came out with a *mot juste*: 'It's a high-quality team.' Appointed following a disaster, namely the resignation of the previous Commission, led by Luxembourger Jacques Santer, the former President of the Italian Council of Ministers faced no easy task. He has come through this first test remarkably well, by opting for a blend of political and technical skill — the composition of the curious half-executive, half-legislative learned assembly, unique of its kind, that is the European Commission. He retained 14 men and five women who, from Christopher Patten and Neil Kinnock from the UK and the Italian Mario Monti to the Spaniard Pedro Solbes, and from Günter Verheugen from Germany to the Frenchmen Michel Barnier and Pascal Lamy, to name but a few, really are very experienced and 'high-quality'.

However, Mr Prodi is not unaware of the fact that, since the Commission is the day-to-day incarnation of the European Union, it has a problem of legitimacy. Rightly or wrongly, it is the Commission — a body that is, however, subject to multiple checks — that attracts the criticism most frequently aimed at the EU, namely that it operates in a ponderous and bureaucratic way and that it is undemocratic, arrogant, and remote from everyday life. The crisis in the previous Commission drew attention to certain indelicate practices on the part of some Commissioners, but, above all, it crystallised a kind of ill feeling among the general public about the way in which the EU works. Santer's Commission paid the price for this — although, bizarrely, nobody raised doubts about the opacity of many of the decisions taken by the EU's main centre of power, the Council of Ministers.

Romano Prodi knows all this. He has begun to learn lessons from Santer's experience. On Friday, he was careful to say that his team was a 'government' which, he added modestly, seemed to him to be superior to any national government, a government of which he would be in charge. He intends to institute 'strict rules' with regard to ethics. He reserves the right to require any Commissioner to resign. He states that he wants to reform the Commission's working methods. In short, being aware that the organisation over which he presides lacks legitimacy, Mr Prodi knows that he has a lot of fundamental work to do on its image.

This is just as important as knowing that France, like the EU's other 'big' countries, has been particularly well served in the allocation of portfolios or noting that the Commission has a small Social-Democratic majority. For the final say will now lie with the European Parliament. Much more powerful than it is said or believed to be, in September, it has to endorse Prodi's team. The MEPs, who will hear the 19 nominees one by one, will assess them initially on their lack of arrogance and their capacity to work transparently with Parliament, in short on their ability to participate in the democratic governance of Europe.