

The current EU fatalism underestimates the resilience of the system, and a focus on personalities obscures the real imperative for organisational reform

Blog Admin

Tony Blair recently spoke out on the need for Europe to have 'strong collective leadership and direction' through the creation of an elected president. His remarks come at a time of prevailing EU fatalism and, while it might be attractive to pin Europe's woes on personality dysfunctions, real leadership will not come in quick fixes. [Olaf Cramme](#) argues that only slow moving organisational adjustment will do the trick.



Today, all talk of European Union is shrouded in terms of crisis, decline, and the spectre of disintegration. An abundance of explanations are doing the rounds, with even remotely interested figures offering their play on doomsday. Jack Straw's most recent comments on the issue suggested that the Eurozone cannot last and he [urged ministers in the House of Commons to prepare Britain for alternatives to the European single currency](#). Needless to say, little consensus exists about the exact nature of the problem or the necessary remedy. But at least one theory does enjoy overwhelming support: it argues that the state of EU leadership is in dismal health, and if change is not forthcoming, any hope of resolution, let alone further progress, will fade away.

For those who subscribe to this diagnosis, the culprits seem easily identifiable: Germany's Chancellor Merkel is too indecisive; French President Sarkozy is all over the place; EU Council President Van Rompuy too low-profile; Commission President Barroso excessively tactical; and Eurozone superintendent Juncker too unreliable. Or so it is often presented. What all of these "leadership crisis" accounts have in common is an exclusive focus on personality – to the neglect of structures and circumstances. The thirst for outright success or failure dictates the rules of the game.

In the case of the EU this characterisation is highly problematic and hinders a more sophisticated debate on how its institutional organisation can evolve to tackle the current dilemmas. Discovering the leadership crisis may be simple, but understanding and resolving it are of a completely different order. Where are the well springs of decisive political leadership in the EU? And why do they all struggle to deliver? Four in particular require closer scrutiny.

Firstly, the European Commission. Its role as the driver and guardian of European integration was for decades virtually uncontested. But even changes in the Lisbon Treaty to boost the community method have not yet managed to stop the gradual erosion of its influence in setting the EU's course of action. Whereas the Commission used to be the central mechanism for reducing the transaction cost of any contested bargain between member states, it has become almost powerless in the face of a shifting political agenda which is now dominated by greatly sensitive policy issues outside of classical community business. In other words, increased politicisation of EU affairs is taking place at the expense of the European Commission, and this in spite of Mr. Barroso's attempts to "presidentialise" it.

Secondly, the European Parliament. Based on sound democratic foundations and endowed with wide-ranging legislative powers, its relevance and authority should be undisputed. But the problems of the EP are well-known: a consecutive decline in the turnout of its election have further damaged the reputation of an institution which struggles with visibility and recognition beyond the Brussels bubble. However unfair it might be, the rise in ideological contestation has so far done very little to revise this perception. As long as its relationship with member states and their populations remains on thin ground – as harshly pointed out by the verdict of the German constitutional court in 2009 – the EP can only be a leadership bystander.

Thirdly, the European Council. Like no other institution the Council's undisputed legitimacy allows it to set and define the strategic direction of the EU. Indeed, assuming this role was made possible by the diligent division of labour with the European Commission, which provided the indispensable brokerage. Yet both enlargement and progressive integration have left a defining mark, inasmuch as greater heterogeneity in preferences on salient policy issues has inevitably complicated the search for consensus, above all in the European Council where national interest is directly fought out.

As a result, the Council's leadership functions have vastly been reduced to that of an "entrepreneur",

responding to the diminished role of the Commission as well to the exponential rise of complexity in EU policymaking. In this light, the reasoning behind the appointment of Mr. Van Rompuy then becomes self-evident. And the scope for agenda-setting significantly reduced.

Fourthly, a coalition of member states. The “European project” started on the initiative of nation-states and its most spectacular advances very much depended on their readiness to take individual risks. The Franco-German axis is surely the best example, but history has witnessed a number of leadership coalitions involving varying member states in the quest for deeper integration, leading for instance to closer defence cooperation after St. Malo in 1998, or to the Treaty of Prüm in 2005. In addition, the Lisbon Treaty provided member states for the first time with the opportunity to define differentiated or flexible integration as a positive strategy.

What has changed dramatically, however, is the imperative to focus on economic and monetary union. Here, no one really seems to know how or whether a [‘two-tier Europe’](#) can work at all, given the deep entanglement of the Eurozone, the Single Market and its various decision-making processes. The unfortunate political saga of the “Euro-Plus-Pact” is only the latest evidence of this.

So what does this all mean for EU leadership? To begin with, no quick fixes can be expected. For that to happen, institutional changes, for example of the kind [Tony Blair proposed two weeks ago](#), seem inescapable and, yes, unattainable at present. Yet appreciating the impenetrable nature of the EU system can also lead to an alternative conclusion: namely, that what is in question is less the EU’s capacity to deliver in the end, but the time it will take. Writing it off too soon could therefore be a major mistake.

Of course, critics will argue that time is running out, and fast. But it wouldn’t be the first time that they were proven wrong.

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