

Did the possibility of a Brexit influence the shape of the new Commission?

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The UK's nominated Commissioner, Jonathan Hill, was assigned the financial services portfolio in Jean-Claude Juncker's proposed European Commission. As this was viewed as a positive outcome for British interests, some commentators have suggested the threat of a 'Brexit' may have factored into the decision. [Simon Usherwood](#) writes that while a Brexit might not have been foremost in Juncker's mind, it nevertheless played a role. He argues however that the UK should not expect preferential treatment and that the country's relationship with the EU remains far from resolved.



The announcement of Jean-Claude Juncker's [proposed Commission](#) was important, for several reasons. Firstly, it suggested how the *Spitzenkandidat* process has fed through into the potential politicisation of the Commission. Secondly, it has offered a new model of organisation that reflects the long-standing reality that some posts are more important than others. And finally, it has been conducted in the shadow of a number of major challenges for the EU.

Here, I will consider this final point in particular, and with a particular eye to the situation of the UK. As a large member state, its opinions and reactions matter to the entire Union, just as the functioning of the Union matters to a country that is currently undergoing a debate about its future path. Some background is in order here, since it has clearly shaped current positions.

The British government – like most others – had been ambivalent about the *Spitzenkandidat* model when the European Parliament first floated it. The working assumption was that it wouldn't come together and that it was best left ignored: that assumption underestimated the will of the main political groups to push it through.

Where the UK diverged from others came at the time of the EP elections, when it became evident that the Parliament was going to swing behind a *Spitzenkandidat*. Other capitals made the calculation that they could not easily avoid accepting the EP's choice: that none of the three likely contenders – Juncker, Martin Schulz and Guy Verhofstadt – was particularly radical in either politics or personality also made it less difficult to swallow. London, on the other hand, was more worried about the principle being established: the EP holding the reins of power more closely, largely to the detriment of member states.

David Cameron's opposition to Juncker's selection was never likely to win, which made the decision to pick the fight in the first place all the more questionable, just as it did the type of language being used. In a final irony, [Juncker looks like a good choice](#) for the UK. Fences were mended to a degree at the time, but this looked to be less than fulsome. The choice of [Donald Tusk](#) as European Council President was let through without fuss by Cameron, even though one might argue he would be less suitable for British interests.

A mark of this conditionality seemed to be the selection of [Jonathan Hill](#) as the British candidate for the Commission team by Cameron. His merits as a political operator and backroom broker (Juncker-ish, one is tempted to say) might have made him suitable for British purposes, but it went against the public agenda of Juncker to bring in more women and credible political figures. That Hill then proceeded to keep a [very low profile](#) didn't help matters: the sense was that the UK was counting on its size in securing a 'good' portfolio.

Juncker has, to a considerable degree, played a blinder so far. The decision to rationalise portfolios and create a tier of vice-presidents not only allows him to give prizes to all, but still to keep a trusted core group around him. Hill's nomination for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union gives him nominal control of policies of key importance to the UK, both in its own right and as the leader of the non-Eurozone member states. However,

his work is controlled by two vice-presidents – Jyrki Katainen at Jobs, Growth, Investment & Competitiveness and Valdis Dombrovskis at The Euro & Social Dialogue – who have powers to ‘steer and coordinate’ Hill’s work. As Open Europe [noted](#), this set-up has the potential to strongly filter work, in a way that could leave Juncker in the driving seat.

At the time, Juncker stated that he wanted to avoid ‘[giving the impression of being annoyed](#)’ with Cameron, which is not the same as not actually being annoyed. However, that none of the large member states have secured the VP posts (Italy being a somewhat different case, after their push for Mogherini as High Representative) will have made that a harder challenge to make.

Domestically, Hill’s portfolio was generally seen as a good result, given all that had come before, and Cameron was at odds to stress this as an example of influence in Brussels, whatever the case might actually have been. In this, neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats wanted to rock the boat, so it was left to Nigel Farage to pronounce that Hill was being used to be the ‘[hangman for the UK’s financial sector](#)’, a stark contrast to earlier remarks where he had doubted that Hill would get a decent portfolio at all. Everyone seemed to ignore the treaty requirement that Commissioners do not represent ‘their’ member state.

Of course, such selective representation of situations is to be expected, especially as the UK runs into a [general election](#) in May 2015 where there is the distinct possibility of a renegotiation of British membership. But it has highlighted the scope for creating different narratives about the place of the UK in the institutional system and in decision-making. How far that does is largely moot, but it is worth reflecting on how little the securing of the High Representative for Catherine Ashton five years ago has benefited those in favour of membership. The EU remains distant and unknown for many – not only in the UK, although the problem is worse than in many other member states – and this remains as a [long-term challenge](#) for all involved.

There is one sting in the tail in all of this. Juncker’s structure also has the feature that allows for individual Commissioners outside his core team to be more easily picked off during the Parliament’s hearings that are now underway. Hill [might not be the first](#) in the line of fire, but his links to [lobbyists](#) will not endear him to many in the hemicycle and it would be wrong to assume that he passes through this undamaged. Certainly, the EP is unlikely to step back from past practice just because it won on the *Spitzenkandidat* issue.

The working assumption has to be that Juncker will want to keep his team intact and will come out in support of them against challenges. But if one or more nominees do fall, then it allows Juncker to play the role of honest broker with member states and plead that it wasn’t his fault. That may well be true, but it does offer an interesting opportunity for all sides to make political hay. While a Brexit might not have been topmost on Juncker’s mind, it has played a role. However that neither means the UK can expect to be treated preferentially nor that the UK’s relationship with the Union is in any way resolved.

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About the author

Simon Usherwood – *University of Surrey*

Simon Usherwood is Senior Lecturer in Politics and Deputy Head of the School of Politics, University of Surrey. After study at the College of Europe and the LSE's European Institute, his work has focused on euroscepticism, both in the UK and more widely across the EU. He is coordinator of the [UACES Collaborative research Network on Euroscepticism](#) and co-author of *The European Union: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP 2007).



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