

The European Commission is stronger and better equipped to meet Europe's challenges than is often thought.

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Hussein Kassim presents findings from a new book that reveals the inner workings of one of the world's most powerful international administrations. Examining the backgrounds and beliefs of officials, and how the organisation has changed over the past decade, he argues that the European Commission is stronger and better equipped to meet the challenges that confront the European Union than is often thought.



In a Eurosceptic age, the European Commission is widely viewed as the arch-bureaucracy — remote, arrogant and imperious. In the public mind, the organization is populated by zealous federalists, with little experience of the world beyond Brussels. Its depiction in the academic literature is often no more sympathetic. The Commission is typically presented as either monolithic and expansionist or hopelessly fragmented and difficult to lead.

These accepted wisdoms were put to the test in a major study conducted by a multinational [team](#) of researchers, who investigated the internal operation of the Commission and the backgrounds, beliefs and careers of its staff, as well as their attitudes and responses to the changes brought by administrative reform and the enlargements of the EU in 2004 and 2007. At the heart of the study was the largest and most representative survey of Commission staff ever conducted by independent researchers, involving almost 2000 people. The team also carried out more than 200 interviews with Commissioners, cabinet members middle and senior managers, and administrators.



European Council President Herman van Rompuy and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso Credit: Maria Brianchon (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

The findings, published in a new book, [The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century](#), challenge many widely held views about the Commission. The book also answers important questions about how the organization functions and about its staff that were previously unaddressed or where the existing literature is now out of date.

Among the myths it dispels are the following:

Commission officials have no experience of life beyond Brussels. In fact, 96 per cent of officials worked somewhere else before deciding to pursue a career in the European Commission. In addition, the workforce is more diverse

than often thought: the Commission employs more economists and scientists than lawyers; and while more than a third worked previously in a national administration, more than a quarter come from business and the private sector.

Commission officials want always and everywhere to increase the power of Brussels. Few officials see the Commission as the future government of Europe. More want to see the Commission continue to play its traditional role in policy initiation and enforcement. Only a minority see the member states as the pillars of the Union. Officials are also selective about where the EU's power should be extended. There is strong support for 'more Europe' in police and judicial cooperation, energy, asylum and immigration, and foreign and security policy, but a desire for 'less Europe' in agriculture, historically regarded as sacrosanct by EU officials.

The Commission is built on the Napoleonic model of administration and dominated by France. In practice, the Commission draws on several national administrative traditions. If France ever dominated the organization, it does not do so now. Like other large member states, France is under-represented in proportion to its share of the EU's total population.

The Commission administration is weak, divided and difficult to lead. Treaty change, enlargement and administrative reform have increased the powers of the Commission Presidency and, combined with internal reorganization, have enabled José Manuel Barroso to lead the Commission effectively. Cabinets are no longer enclaves of national interest in perennial conflict with each other and with the permanent administration, and coordination within the organization has dramatically improved.

The Commission is an antiquated administration that resists change. Officials were split on the merits and impact of the reform implemented under the [Prodi Commission](#) (1999-2004), the predecessor to the Barroso Commission. Senior officials were most positive about the changes introduced. The reforms have brought many of the procedures and processes within the organization more closely in line with modern personnel policy, and financial management and control.

In short, our study shows that the European Commission is stronger and better equipped to meet the challenges that confront the European Union than is often thought. Not only do its officials command an impressively diverse range of expertise and experience, but the organization has demonstrated an ability to adapt to changing demands requirements, and under the Barroso Presidency it has developed a capacity for coherent action across the full range of policy.

At the same time, the book highlights a number of potential problems that the Commission may have to confront in the future. First, the larger member states, notably, Germany, Italy, and the UK, are underrepresented in the Commission administration as measured against each nation's respective share of the EU population. As well as leaving the Commission short of expertise in key areas, this shortfall may contribute to an erosion of confidence in the countries concerned. Second, while the EU's expansion has introduced young, talented and dynamic officials, those from the newer member states have different aspirations and ambitions and may have different policy preferences and expectations as to the EU's role. This could lead to new ideological tensions within the organization and challenges to long-standing policy positions. Third, the gender balance among Commission officials remains a problem. While the percentage of women has increased significantly in recent years, women remain over-represented in the lower levels and under-represented at the top. Finally, it is unclear whether the strengthening of the Commission Presidency will survive the departure of Barroso. The strong leadership exerted from that office since 2004 has been founded to a large degree on the transformation of the Secretariat General into a service of the Commission President and the expansion of the Secretariat General's coordinating role. It is unclear whether either will prove enduring, not least due to the ambivalent attitudes of senior managers.

Further information about the project can be found [here](#). *The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century* is published by Oxford University Press on June 27.

*The team included: Prof Michael Bauer (Speyer University), Dr Sara Connolly, (UEA), Prof Renaud Dehousse (Sciences Po. Paris), Prof Liesbet Hooghe (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and University of Amsterdam), and Prof Andrew Thompson (University of Edinburgh). Ms Vanessa Buth (UEA) and Ms. Louise Maythorne (University of Edinburgh) were research assistants.

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