

How to be a good European Commissioner and still serve the British interest

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In last week's cabinet reshuffle, David Cameron announced that he was nominating Jonathan Hill, a relative unknown, to be Britain's next European Commissioner. In this post addressed to Hill, [Mareike Kleine](#) provides three suggestions for how to be a good Commissioner and still serve the British interest.



Dear Lord Hill,

It has come to my attention that you will soon be nominated British Commissioner in the EU. I freely admit that I am relieved because I feared that your government was going to nominate a 'Eurosceptic' of the conviction that British (or dare I say English) and EU interests are diametrically opposed. Having learnt about Philip Hammond's appointment to foreign secretary, it is my understanding that the foreign office now suffers this fate instead.

To be frank, I have always found your government's lamentation about the supposed conflict between British and EU interests quite bizarre, since it implies more than anything its own failure to make its voice heard in Brussels. Having long examined these matters, I have found that there is in fact a great openness in Brussels to respect national sensitivities. Indeed, EU officials and politicians often seek ways around the formal procedures in order to make EU laws broadly agreeable.

In his treatise *The Prince*, Machiavelli famously stated that in order to understand the nature of the people, one must be a prince, and to understand the nature of the prince, one must be of the people. As somebody socialised in the British political arena and soon to be thrown into the EU's, you have the great opportunity to build bridges between both levels and foster a mutual understanding of each other's sensitivities. Wishing to congratulate you on your appointment, I would therefore like to offer you, based on my insights into the informal governance of the EU, three suggestions for how to be a good Commissioner and still serve the British interest.

Get a cream slice, obviously

The first important question to answer is which of the various available portfolios allows you to exercise the most influence. In the past, when there were fewer Commissioners and a limited number of equally important issues the Commission dealt with, the member states typically tried to get their hands on portfolios that were of special sensitivity to them. In today's Commission of twenty-eight members and numerous responsibilities, however, the President has much more authority prioritising certain issues and, conversely, letting others slide. It is therefore important to claim a portfolio that is likely to receive the President's backing.

In the new Commission, important portfolios will be those in which the Commission has sole or primary responsibility (or 'competences' in EU jargon). This is because in order to be renominated Spitzenkandidat and re-elected by the European citizens, the Commission's new President Jean-Claude Juncker will have to concentrate on issues that allow him to produce a noteworthy record within five years time. Consequently, he is not going to waste his time on policies for which it is difficult to attribute and claim success.

Whether he likes it or not, there are strong incentives for Juncker to concentrate on policies where the Commission's responsibility is unambiguous and neither the Council nor the European Parliament can steal much of his thunder. In short, forget about the internal market and free movement and try to get your hands on the common commercial policy (i.e. external trade), the competition policy, or the common agricultural policy.

Don't be a technocrat

In today's college of twenty-eight commissioners, it is easy to lose sight of what your colleagues are doing. This can potentially lead to situations where Eurosceptics feel they are being strong-armed and presented with a fait accompli. The Commission is consequently conceived and portrayed as a faceless technocracy that is completely detached from the interests and values of its citizens.

There is an unspoken agreement, however, that it is the Commissioner's role to engender a better understanding for their home country's national sensitivities within this bureaucracy. It is unspoken, because this understanding of the Commissioner's role seemingly undermines the Commission's supranational character. It is generally agreed, however, because many conflicts that leave the Commission portrayed as a faceless technocracy are in principle avoidable and easily solved with little effort.

In order to stay in the loop about the Commission's activity and intervene early on, it is imperative to hire a cabinet (EU jargon for a personal office) composed of loyal and politically savvy generalists, not experts. These generalists liaise with other cabinets and the Commission's civil servants; they anticipate the political fallout from the Commission's actions; and they are not afraid of stepping on somebody's toes on your behalf.

Don't be a stranger

Just as important as it is to keep the Commission informed about British national sensitivities, it is important to keep the British national arena informed about the Commission's activity. It used to be customary for Commissioners to travel back to their home country at least once a month in order to meet with representative from various parties (not just the major two). As EU activity and time constraints increased, however, contact to a broad national political sphere have in many cases been replaced with contacts to the permanent representations in Brussels.

It is worth reviving this custom. For EU legislation to be successful, it not only requires agreement of a broad range of actor in the Council and the European Parliament. It is also important that citizens understand its rationale. It is futile to communicate with citizens directly, since most of them do not understand the Commission's role in the EU's political system anyway. With parties being the main opinion leaders, they must be your main point of contact, even if they are not themselves keen on this contact.

I hope this advice will prove helpful during your term in office, for which I would like to offer you all my good wishes.

Sincerely,

Mareike Kleine

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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