

Will He Stay or Will He Go? The Post-Bailout Role of the Irish PM in Europe

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By [Michael Courtney](#)

11/12/2013

With the next European Parliament elections only seven months away, discussion is heating up on the likely contenders for the prominent positions of European Commission President and European Council President. As early as August of this year Ireland's biggest selling daily newspaper, the *Irish Independent*, was [reporting](#) that the Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny was being linked as a candidate to succeed either Mr. Barroso as President of the European Commission or Mr. Van Rompuy as President of the European Council. This came as something of a revelation to the Irish electorate as there had been no previous indication that Kenny was seeking a position in Europe, although Minister for the Environment Phil Hogan TD has been tipped as Ireland's next commissioner. Here, I argue the merits of choosing the Irish PM for either position, assuming he would want to take it if he was offered a nomination.

[Enda-Kenny](#)

Fast forward three months or so from the *Independent* article and there is wider press speculation about Mr. Kenny's future. This increased speculation is fuelled by a campaign of centre-right EU leaders to prevent the socialist President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, from becoming the next Commission President. *The Guardian* is [reporting](#) that David Cameron, or Number 10 at the very least, would support any push to elevate Mr. Kenny to Commission President. Meanwhile, Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU, a major component of the European People's Party in the EU parliament, has not been so vocal about where their support will fall. However, *Der Spiegel* [reports](#) that Luxembourg's Jean Claude Juncker is a likely candidate to oppose Martin Schulz from the EPP side. A clue as to the EPP's intentions may lie in the *Der Spiegel* report. The EPP are planning to hold their convention to select a candidate for Commission President in Dublin in March 2014. Might they be announcing their intention to nominate the Irish Prime Minister on his home ground? Such a strategy might be the case for two good reasons; Ireland's consensual leadership style in European politics and its emergence from the Troika bailout in December 2013.

Picking small countries for big EU jobs is possibly the only workable strategy for the EU. The raw political and economic power of the large countries needs to be balanced at the highest levels by small country 'referees'. Though no country should be discriminated against in a democratic institution, the Union maintains broad support when it demonstrates to small countries that they can achieve influential positions within its political structures. This signalling mechanism is all the more important where several small countries, including Mr. Barroso's native land, Portugal, are all financing their day-to-day activities with money from Europe. Rather than gratitude, the domestic mood in these countries is that, far from Europe bailing out these countries, these countries are bailing out German and French banks, who lent with profligacy to small country banks when interest rates were low and small countries were booming. Choosing a small country leader, whether from a programme or non-programme country prevents the emergence of an impression of the large countries throwing their weight around. This is undesirable, particularly if it is necessary to get major treaty changes past the Irish electorate in the future.

The Irish have a reputation for consensual leadership in European politics. Despite the Irish electorate's record of hesitancy in EU referendums since the turn of the century, the Irish political elite have been contrastingly accommodating. The most notable of these achievements was former Fianna Fáil PM Bertie Ahern's ability to broker agreement on the Lisbon Treaty during Ireland's presidency of the EU Council in 2004. Similarly, Ireland's most recent presidency has been [hailed](#) as a success under Mr. Kenny's stewardship, which saw agreement reached on contentious items such as the EU budget and reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. Moreover, while the

horsemeat scandal threatened to damage Ireland's reputation for food production, the fact that it was Irish regulators who discovered what turned out to be a Europe-wide problem, and effective management of the problem by the line Minister, Simon Coveney TD (MP), showed Irish political leadership at its best since the financial crisis of 2008.

Therefore, the elevation of Enda Kenny to a top European post makes sense on several levels. He is the leader of a small European country, which is about to emerge from a financial assistance programme with relative ease. The recent budget adjustments did not have any major political consequences (so far). He was a vice-president of the EPP and his candidacy is supported by David Cameron, whose domestic party are members of the EPP's rival group the Conservative and Reformists. Thus, Mr. Kenny's candidacy is already a factor in forming a broad coalition of support to oppose the socialists and Mr. Schulz.

The European Union also needs to maintain support among the southern bailout countries. By rewarding the leader of a post-bailout country with such a prominent position as Commission President, the EU may give the electorates of other programme countries greater confidence in the former's responsiveness to the latter's plight, and highlighting the future role of all small countries in the development of the European project. Thus, the choice of Enda Kenny for Commission or Council President might even secure the future of the European Union as we know it.

With further emphasis on the Irish dimension and in an interesting turn of events, Enda Kenny's Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn, a member of Fine Gael's coalition partner, the Labour Party, was the one to personally announce Martin Schulz's candidacy for Commission President on Wednesday November 6th. Ultimately, it is unlikely that Kenny will be the EPP nominee despite the advantages of such a move outlined here and the parallels with Mr. Barroso's political experience prior to becoming Commission President. But it would be unwise to bet against him being nominated for the Commission or President of the European Council. That is, of course, if he wants to go.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.