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Article

Should the EU have a president with two hats? (Pro and contra) : no

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No

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When the presidium presented a “skeleton for a Constitutional Treaty”, this structure on purpose did not contain concrete proposals for changes in the EU institutional architecture. There is a place holder for the “Presidency of the EU”, however. Although institutional questions will not be discussed in the plenary until the beginning of next year, the opinion of the different components in the Convention is being formed now and the players have started to voice their opinions.

The institutional setup is, of course, a question of power. The main battle line is between those who want more power for the Commission and Parliament and those who want to rely more on the nation states and thus on the Council. We are only at the start of this debate now. Transferring the idea of a “double hat” figure also to the Presidency of the EU is interesting and could be helpful in search of a compromise at a later stage of the Convention. However, before settling for less by agreeing on the seemingly “easy” approach of dissolving the antagonisms by merging the functions, we should first seriously try to find solutions that see all institutions on their own merits. Democracy is all about checks and balances, and antagonisms are built-in stabilisers.

The challenge is therefore to find the right balance among the institutions. The relationship is delicate, an increase in power for one institution will also affect the others. An isolated approach focussing on just one element would be counterproductive. In my opinion, the reforms should aim at a

strengthening of all parts of the institutional triangle at the same time.

Several proposals are floating around. There is, on the one hand, the idea of a high profile President of the EU selected by the Council, the so called ABC proposal. Mr Blair has reiterated this proposal in his speech in Cardiff lately. The idea of a “Super President” of the Union has been met with suspicion by the smaller member states. They are concerned about being dominated by a “directorium” of the large countries. Looking back at Nice, their concerns have to be taken seriously. Several days ago, Guy Verhofstadt, the Belgian Prime Minister, at the College of Europe in Bruges, opposed the idea of electing a President of the European Council from outside the membership of this body and for a longer period. Luxembourg shares this view.

The European Parliament, along with the Commission, is also not in favour of an executive Council President. It would weaken the democratic control function, as the President and his budget could not be controlled by the European Parliament. He could not be dismissed either. This model would thus lead to a weakening of the European Parliament and democratic accountability. Establishing a President with executive functions would also lead to a loss of efficiency by creating two administrations spending a lot of their time competing each other.

On the other hand, a strengthened role for the President of the European Commission is suggested, a proposal with which a number of small countries can associate themselves. The overall goal is to enhance the executive role of the European Commission and at the same time its democratic control by the European Parliament.

Ideally, the President of the Commission should be elected by an absolute majority of the European Parliament. The European Council would then



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approve his appointment. The ongoing debate has shown that this may be premature, however.

Therefore a compromise could take into account the interests of member states anxious to lose influence. A candidate for President of the European Commission should be proposed to the European Parliament by the European Council by qualified majority vote. New in this proposal is that the European Council should select the candidate in light of the outcome of the European elections. This would strengthen the democratic control function and increase the political weight of the European Commission. It would result in a presentation by the political parties of presidential candidates in the European elections. This more personalised electoral campaign would be more attractive to the voters, raising their interest in European politics.