



EU Presidency: Who Really Carried The Day?

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We are now seeing the first major effects of the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. National governments have finally decided on the appointments for the new roles of president of the European Council and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Both are going to be filled by politicians, who, to put it charitably, have a limited profile on the world stage. The top job goes to Belgian Prime Minister Herman van Rompuy, who had only been head of government for a year and is otherwise light on executive experience. The number two role, the high representative, goes to Baroness Ashton, a British politician from the ruling Labour Party, whose top level political experience is even lighter than that of van Rompuy. She has never sought elected office, and prior to being appointed to the House of Lords (the upper house of the British parliament), her most senior post had been as the appointed chair of the Hertfordshire Health Authority. Then began a rapid rise including stints as Leader of the House of Lords, the European Commissioner for Trade and now High Representative-designate.

So why these choices? As we highlighted on October 30, the smaller EU countries were wary of appointing a charismatic, high profile politician like former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair. Van Rompuy, by contrast, comes from traditionally euro-friendly Belgium, and has strong pro-EU views. His opposition to Turkish EU membership and desire for higher taxes on the financial sector are likely to have endeared him to a number of EU governments. Crucially, he was not Tony Blair.

The choice of Ashton, however, is much more interesting. Given the lack of prior high-level experience, she is potentially a risky choice. She is unlikely to cut a high profile on the international stage (which is likely to please some states), but her candidacy has a number of benefits for most member states. Her appointment is a consolation prize to the UK government, which had been pushing Blair for the top job. It also makes a measure of sense to have the incumbent come from one of the larger states to give them greater clout. Britain still remains a permanent member of the UN Security Council, while also having globally significant military and diplomatic resources.

However, there is potentially another story lurking beneath the surface. First, with van Rompuy coming from the centre-right, all the signs suggest that there was a deal between European governments that a centre-left politician should have the foreign affairs portfolio. With the political balance of Europe currently being to the right, that left few figures to fill the role, to Ashton's benefit. Second, there are signs that France and Germany have set their sights on the finance and economic portfolios which they believe are more important as Europe comes out of recession and new regulations are proposed. With low profile politicians ensconced in the two top jobs, there is every possibility France and Germany have got the best of the deal. That is, unless van Rompuy and Ashton can project themselves onto the international stage in a way they have never done before.