

Embrace an unromantic Union

They may not intend to, but Brussels policymakers too often confuse the EU for an emerging state-like entity, writes Roderick Parkes

For the EU, the second semester of 2010 will be one of re-definition. Herman Van Rompuy, the president of the European Council, is limbering up to tackle the EU's financial and geopolitical situation, while José Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission, is seeking to regain the initiative in areas such as the single market.

In the current climate, both face a tall order. Almost daily, editorials predict the rise of nationalism and the end of the EU. But is it fanciful to believe that, if handled imaginatively, this climate could actually reveal the Union's strengths?

National capitals are sceptical. They diagnose a smug romance in Brussels-think that is ill-suited to these difficult times. And, among the member states, the mood is worse and the differences greater than either Barroso or Van Rompuy has so far been willing to admit.

The duo could usefully start by dispelling the notion that the EU's 27 members club together thanks to a sense of common mission, to solidarity and trust. Rather, the unique selling-point of the EU is its capacity to accommodate and overcome differences between its members. Its strength, unrivalled by other organisations, is an institutional robustness formidable enough to give otherwise competing states the confidence to do far-sighted things together.

In practice, the robust mode of co-operation offered by the EU has been both too widely and too narrowly applied. Too widely, because it has been activated in ways where it cannot use these strengths. And too narrowly, because the range of innovative



LACKING IMAGINATION? José Manuel Barroso and Herman Van Rompuy. COUNCIL

solutions that the EU might provide is far from exhausted.

EU romantics point to values such as solidarity and a sense of common responsibility to justify co-operation in almost any area. If member states shared such values that deeply, the Union would be able to behave, in effect, like a cohesive state. But this is not the case. What the EU's unusually strong institutions offer is a structure that enables such values to be mimicked.

The EU's new 'asylum-support office' highlights the EU's constraints and its potential in this regard. There is no pool of solidarity that the EU can tap into to persuade member states to share the burden of handling refugees. Instead, to be effective, the office will have to create quid-pro-quo arrangements, by which all members gain from showing a form of solidarity.

But the differences within the Union are usually under-appreciated and, as a

result, EU policies tend towards a homogenisation of the member states. The recent EU 'Blue Card', for example, sought to emulate larger, more integrated labour markets to create bait for immigrants. However, now that the Blue Card is finally being translated into national legislation, it looks set to be a flop: the member states were simply not prepared – or, given the differences, able – to integrate their market practices to the degree necessary.

A more imaginative approach would have offered something different. Each member state can compete with rivals such as the US on at least some of the many criteria that attract immigrants, such as language, regulatory regimes and historical links. The EU could have offered an umbrella for groups of member states with a similar competitive advantage to target specific third countries, with these groups even offering immigrants access

to each other's labour markets.

There is, undoubtedly, more than a whiff of the romance of state-building in Brussels-think: there are still federalists and there are still those who view shared values as a given rather than a goal. But, in general, the romance – and the homogenisation – is evidence of a lack of imagination: when no effort is made to define the EU for what it is, it is easy for policy-planners to fall back on the principles and understandings that guide national policymaking.

Barroso and Van Rompuy need to dispel romanticism. When they have done so, they will be able to set out more coherently and comprehensively the way in which the EU can use – rather than be hampered by – the differences between its member states.

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