

## **Assembling a Cabinet: The Brussels Way**

*Wolfgang Streeck*

Over the summer, the President-elect of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, put together her college of Commissioners. (It will have to be confirmed by the European Parliament, which however can vote only on the Commission as a whole, neither on individual members nor on the assignment and composition of their portfolios.) A lot of heart-lifting PR stuff was published on this by the press, so we can focus here on the essentials. The Commission has 27 members, including its President, one from each member state (28 in fact, but Britain has not claimed a seat in view of its impending withdrawal). A cabinet of 27 is a lot, even for a proper state of the larger sort; Germany, for example, has a cabinet of fifteen, which is already considered big. In fact there was a time when it was discussed to cut the number of Commission members by half, on the innocent assumption that the Commission is to be nationally colorblind anyway and its members are supposed upon taking office to cease being Dutch or Greek or whatever and become „European“. But this would have meant that one half of the member states would for extended periods of time not be „represented“. While officially there is to be no national representation on the Commission, try to imagine France or Germany having to take a leave of absence in favor of, say, Malta or Estonia! So much on supranationalism.

Have you ever seen a picture of the Commission's seating arrangement during full meetings? The circle of tables is so big that members would need binoculars to find out who is sitting opposite them. Good that they don't have to; meetings are scripted by the bureaucracy from beginning to end. „Free discussion“ is neither possible nor needed nor, in fact, wanted. Given the very limited real jurisdiction of the EU compared to its member states, a tricky problem for the Commission president is to invent job descriptions for Commission members

that mean something to the outside world (especially in their home countries) even though they may mean nothing on the inside. There is, for example a Commissioner for „Environment and Oceans“, another for „Equality“, yet others for „Transport“, „Justice“, „Health“ — portfolios that, given their actual legal, political and budgetary significance, would be handled at national level by a civil servant heading a ministerial subdepartment at best. Other portfolios have strange titles like „Values and Transparency“ or „Innovation and Youth“ — all of them cobbled together, and reshuffled every five years, from the no more than 34 so-called Directorates-General headed by long-serving General Directors who are certain to have their own views of the Commissioners that are supposed to lord it over them. Why would anyone want to be Commissioner then, even former members of national governments? At a minimum, Commissioners are very well-paid, at least 264,000 Euros per year, plus extensive allowances of various sorts and very generous “transition payments” and retirement benefits, which is far above the salaries of prime ministers in quite a few member states; also, taxes are paid to the EU, not to home states, with special allowances that keep effective rates low; and the appointment is for five years during which there can be no fresh elections or changes in government coalitions.

Still, some of the portfolios and their nominees are of interest. The Italian Commissioner, a former Prime Minister, like other Italian prime ministers of a very short shelf-life (2016-2018), is to be in charge of a portfolio called „Economy“, which originally was to be called something like, believe it or not, „A good economy for all of us“. This may have sounded threatening to European capitalists, for which a good economy is only one that is good for capital, which implies that sometimes it unfortunately cannot be good for others also. So the flowery title, full of promise, was dropped in favor of the more sober one. Equally puzzling, there is a portfolio, ranked even as Vice Presidential, called „Protecting our European Way of Life“, no kidding; it is to be headed by a future Commissioner from Greece. What is meant becomes clearer if we note that among the Directorates-General assembled under

him is that which deals with refugee policy. (Cries of shock coming from the symbolically obsessed Greens who find the title “racist”; it will be up to von der Leyen to invent a more politically correct name for what will remain the same thing. Incidentally, there is to be also a Commissioner for „Crisis Management“, from Slovenia; if his job title had anything to do with his job, which is as unlikely as with most other job titles, he would be really busy during the next five years).

And then there is at least one deceptively simple job title – that of the French Commissioner, who will be in charge of the „Internal Market“. Important enough, one should think, since enforcing the Internal Market is almost the EU’s only real competence. But does she know enough about it? Sylvie Goulart, a well-connected insider in French politics, was for a few weeks in 2017 French Minister of Defense (her German colleague being Frau von der Leyen) until she had to resign because of “financial irregularities”. This did not upset her close relationship with President Macron, nor did the fact that she had from 2013 to 2016 collected a “consultancy fee” of 10,000 Euros per month (!) from the Berggruen Foundation. But why Internal Market? Hidden in her portfolio is a new Directorate-General for “Defense Industry and Space”. Remember that von der Leyen was effectively enthroned by Emmanuel Macron? Be ready to observe the two Commissioners, good friends one hears, implementing together with Merkel’s successor, AKK, Macron’s European policy of last resort: the arming of Europe, in particular of Germany, at a level of two percent of GDP, and the sale worldwide of Franco-German quality-engineered killing technologies to warlords of all sorts.