

A surfeit of leaders

Apr 8th 2009

From *The Economist* print edition

The European Union still foxes outsiders with its plethora of presidents



Illustration by Peter Schrank

“WHY are there four glasses of water?” asked a reporter from a German daily. It was a good question. A score of journalists had been hustled into a back room at a European Union summit in Prague, for a briefing by Barack Obama. The mystery was soon solved, as a case of EU protocol. When the American president arrived, three Europeans were with him: the Czech prime minister, whose country holds the six-monthly presidency of the EU; the prime minister of Sweden, who will come next; and the president of the European Commission.

Mr Obama, nearing the end of his European tour, neither smiled nor spoke. His expression unreadable, he silently invited the commission’s boss, José Manuel Barroso, to stand at the lone microphone. As Mr Barroso, a voluble sort, talked about strong transatlantic relationships and the like, Mr Obama gazed stony-faced at his shoes. His Mount Rushmore impression did not falter even when Mr Barroso valiantly called the half-day EU-America summit “a very important event”, which it was not.

Next came Sweden’s Fredrik Reinfeldt, who welcomed “new signals” from America on tackling climate change. Then came forgettable remarks by Mirek Topolanek, the summit’s Czech host. Mr Topolanek’s coalition government fell on March 24th, leaving him a caretaker. His clout with Mr Obama was also reduced after he publicly called America’s economic-

recovery plans the “way to hell”. He duly found himself sidelined: his bilateral time with Mr Obama was reduced to a minimum, and he had to share it with the Czech president, Vaclav Klaus, a schemer widely credited with toppling the Topolanek government.

At last Mr Obama spoke briefly. Deftly navigating the morass of euro-presidencies at his side, he praised the “leadership of the three gentlemen here” and talked a bit about North Korea. He called EU-American ties “one of the key foundations for progress in the world”, and then left without taking questions.

To euro-types in Brussels, such embarrassing vignettes point to one blindingly obvious conclusion: as soon as possible, all 27 EU members must ratify the Lisbon treaty, which creates the new job of a full-time EU president, so that small, incompetent countries like the Czech Republic no longer take turns to speak for Europe. Early on, the Czech presidency had its fair share of successes. The sniping began even before the Czechs took their turn in the EU chair, on January 1st, and was loudest in Paris. Such critics often seemed inspired by a doctrine set out by President Nicolas Sarkozy, when he surrendered the EU presidency at the end of 2008, that “it is for big countries to take the initiative” in Europe. In other words: small countries pipe down.

Sadly, the time for defending the Czech presidency is gone. The parochial myopia of Czech politicians has seen to that. As Mr Obama left Prague on April 5th, a deal was reached to form a technocratic government led by the country’s chief statistician, Jan Fischer. If a majority in parliament agrees, Mr Fischer will be in power until a fresh election in the early autumn. Backers of such a non-partisan government say it avoids the risk that Mr Klaus would appoint a different one that shares his fierce Euroscepticism so as to wreck the Czechs’ EU presidency, which still has some weeks left to run. They are deluding themselves. If a technocratic government takes office, it will leave the presidency politically dead, even if Czechs physically keep chairing meetings. In the depths of a world crisis, the other 26 governments will not allow appointed bureaucrats to set the agenda.

Does the Lisbon treaty’s full-time president hold the answer? It would sweep away the “Welcome to Lilliput” aspects of the EU that exhaust visitors like Mr Obama, notably the need to share a platform with three different euro-representatives. But consider the three big requests that Mr Obama made during his European tour: for more help in Afghanistan; for more fiscal stimulus; and for Europe to become more serious about energy security (ie, buy more non-Russian gas). Almost nothing was offered on the first and third, and the G20 conclusions papered over lingering transatlantic differences on stimulus plans and financial regulation. And Mr Obama also earned a public rebuke from Mr Sarkozy

for strongly backing Turkish membership of the EU, which the French president opposes.

A Blair, which project?

Imagine that Europe already had a full-time president (Tony Blair, say), rather than poor, rotating Mr Topolanek. How much would change? A President Blair might be able to push for a bit more EU unity over gas supplies. But he could hardly force governments to embrace Turkey, send troops to Afghanistan or change their views of financial capitalism.

During the NATO summit in Strasbourg, Mr Obama came up with a sharp observation. In its "wheeling and dealing", and constant pursuit of different interests, political interaction in Europe is "not that different from the United States Senate", he remarked. He was too polite to complete the thought: that European leaders, like senators, combine verbosity and limitless self-regard with a readiness to be bought off with money for voters back home, or favours for special interests.

As the Czech presidency enters its death throes, expect more people to argue that only a full-time president can save Europe. Be sceptical. Internal EU disputes will not melt away just because a powerful figure chairs leaders' meetings. Dynamic Mr Sarkozy may be remembered fondly now, but many governments were relieved when his presidency ended. With Mr Sarkozy in charge, the prospect of a two-speed Europe yawned too widely for some people's liking. It is the same externally. European and American leaders disagree because, on some issues, they disagree, not because of the way they organise their summits.