

Reforming the European Commission – A (missed?) Academic Opportunity
Michael W. Bauer
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Abstract
The desire to reform the European Commission is a recurrent theme on the agenda. Has the political failure to reach an appropriate restructuring of this institution a parallel in academic neglect of that institution? To answer this question the article looks into current research efforts on the reform of the European Commission. It calls for (more) systematic investigation into the Commission's managerial strengths and weaknesses and does plead for a reassessment of the Commission's potential in the context of the ongoing governance changes.
Kurzfassung
Die Europäische Kommission ist während der letzten Dekade in die politische Defensive geraten. Die im Zuge der Santer-Nachfolge angekündigten administrativen Reformen scheinen im Sande zu verlaufen. Spielt die Europäische Kommission noch eine zentrale Rolle im Integrationsprozess? Der Artikel gibt einen kurzen Überblick über die wissenschaftliche Debatte zur Rolle der Kommission und ruft auf Basis einer Defizitanalyse der akademischen Erklärungsansätze dazu auf, supranationale Policy-Managementfragen stärker als bisher mit der Governance-Debatte zu verbinden, um auf dieser Grundlage zu einer Neubewertung der Kommission und ihrer künftigen Rolle zu kommen.
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Contents:

- [1 A Recurrent Theme on European Integration ...](#)
- [2 ... Without Much Impact?](#)
- [3 Internal Reform Alone Won't Do it](#)
- [4 Back to Basics?](#)
- [5 The Management Deficit as Research Gap?](#)
- [6 EU Spending Programmes: A Recipe for Trouble](#)
- [7 Does a Strong Europe need a Strong Commission?](#)
- [References](#)

1

1 A Recurrent Theme on European Integration ...

The desire to reform the European Commission is almost as old as the institution itself. DECODE, SEM 2000, MAP 2000, ABB, ABM and IAS(1) are the latest acronyms in the long list of projects to reshuffle the organisation 'at the heart of the Union' (Nugent 1997). One characteristic of the past reform initiatives is that they have been led by professionals rather than academics. Put bluntly, political scientists and students of public administration have not bothered much to bring their knowledge and methods systematically to bear on the subject (Levy 1999). It would be naïve to think that more academic commitment could have altered the fate of the Commission at these earlier stages. However, if more evidence-based analysis were available, we would now probably have a better idea about the realistic possibilities for reorganising this institution and for preparing the Commission for the challenges of the new forms of EU governance and eastern enlargement.

Such analysis is even more needed now, since the Commission's relationship with national governments has apparently been deteriorating. The question here is not whether Prodi is good at making friends among the chiefs of state and government (he is not); the issue is rather what can we say about the changing position and conceptual strategy of the Commission and thus about its future needs and capacities in an enlarged Union? Should the Commission stress its deal-making skills and delve even more into politics, or would it be wiser to try to win back some ground by defining and defending the Union's 'general interest'. Do lost struggles over 'blue letters', fisheries, or temporary fuel subsidies to lorry drivers suggest that the Commission has lost its political muscle and therefore cannot be expected to stand firm when confronted with determined national governments? Has the Commission merely been sidelined in recent distributional conflicts, or is it out of touch with what the people of Europe actually want?

It is up to the students of European politics to establish whether and why the Commission has been temporarily weakened, whether eastern enlargement will finally eradicate the powers of this 'outdated' organisation and what the Commission's current internal reform efforts have to do with all that. As a starting point, in the following paragraphs I attempt to raise some major issues that may concern anybody who want to research the European Commission and the reforms within that body.

2 ... Without Much Impact?

As a matter of fact, past reforms had precariously little impact on the Commission's institutional development (Spence 2000). Do the current reform efforts stand any chance of breaking that trend? The answer to this question is probably yes. Never before has the change of the internal management culture been pursued so comprehensively and seriously (Kinnock 2000b,c). Will it affect the Union's current problems with efficient governance and legitimacy? In all

likelihood, not too much. Although there is no doubt that solving internal managerial problems will make the Commission a more efficient public administration, the real challenge lies elsewhere: (Fortunately) no one institution alone, even one as 'central' and (as we may hope for the future) 'professional' as the European Commission, has or ever will have the clout to 'manage Europe' (Metcalf 1996, 1999). It is about time to stop bemoaning this fact, and to start discussing whether the Commission's role in network-based EU governance should be that of a *catalyst* for or of an *engine of* integration. We need clarity about what the Commission's main task is to be in the future. My hunch is that it will have more to do with *helping* to govern *within* Europe than with *governing* Europe. But what does this mean for a Commission that is continually dragged into the government of Europe as the 'agent' of other supranational institutions (Pollack 1997; Majone 2001; Bauer 2002)?

2

3 Internal Reform Alone Won't Do it [↑]

One could even argue that many salient issues – and perhaps those that are most salient – remain unaffected by the current suggestions for internal administrative reform (Commission 2000a, 2000b). This means that, even if the Commission were to be transformed into the type of 'world class civil service' (Prodi 2001a) that everybody is talking about these days, the real challenge it is facing would remain untouched. This challenge consists in defining the Commission's changing role in the context of the emerging mode of EU multilevel governance (Hooghe and Marks 2001), which, because of the frustration with the current patterns for coordinating common policies and the higher scale of distributional conflicts to be expected after eastern enlargement, will soon become even more complex (Scharpf 2000; H ritier 2001a).

4 Back to Basics? [↑]

European integration has a long tradition of 'Commission bashing'. However, the latest incidents, in which a sulky Commission President skipped some European Council press conferences and in which German Chancellor Schr der accused the Commission of having an 'anti-German bias', certainly mark a peak, if not the turn of another page. Such behaviour is, first of all, evidence that politics is increasingly seeping into supranational relations. However, it casts some serious doubts on whether the Commission strategy of arguing (unsurprisingly) that 'a strong Europe needs a strong Commission', together with the revival of the Monnet method, will actually do the job (Commission 2001a).

Academics and reformers alike should ask themselves whether the Commission should not simply return to the business it knows the best – namely to offering ideas, transmitting information and focusing on the right of initiative. Is not the talk about the Commission being the future 'European executive' based on an outdated form of thinking about the traditional dimensions of 'government', which misses the point as we undergo transition in which new, i.e. network-based and traditional division of functions cross-cutting 'governance' structures for the EU have to be developed (Mayntz 1998; Bauer 2001b). In accord with the latter perspective, the Commission's job is to delegate policy-specific managerial functions to European agencies and to leave implementation duties to the national administrations. It is to focus on providing the European Council and its subordinate councils with strategy and policy proposals as well as proposals for organising the collective supervision of national compliance with EU initiatives – something Jacques Delors had already called for more than a decade ago (Ludlow 1991: 126; cf. Vibert 1994). However, it is also to avoid attempting to micromanage EU public policies. Admittedly, these suggestions are based on claims rather than on established knowledge. And indeed, a major deficiency in the debate is that there has been more rhetoric than evidence-based argumentation. But this should actually increase the academic eagerness to test hypotheses, instead of perpetuating the willingness to neglect the internal reform topic.

5 The Management Deficit as Research Gap? [↑]

Issues of 'supranational' public management have received very little academic attention. Recently, however, there has been a rising interest in the role of the Commission. Nevertheless the newly evolving body of literature has some way to go to make up for the previous decades of neglect – to which Coombes (1968) and Michelmann (1978) were the two exceptions. Furthermore, the focus of the present research interest lies on the Commission's role in the process of EU public policy-making and European regulation (Ross 1993, 1994; Cram 1994; Fuchs 1994; Nugent 1995, 1997, 2001; Hooghe 1996b, 1999; Pollack 1997; Peterson 1995, 1999; Smyrl 1998; Cini 2000; Spence 2000; Vos 2000; Doleys 2000; Wincott 2001b). Management issues, by contrast, have received little attention. There are no more than a couple of standard publications on the 'management deficit' – to use the term coined by Les Metcalfe (Metcalf 1992, 2000; Laffan 1997; Levy 1997, 1999). But what is really astonishing is that even after the 1999 resignation of the Commission – and after all on examples of 'mismanagement' (European Parliament 1999a) – there is no sign of increased research on the

Commission's management capacities.

3

This is regrettable. Even more so since the momentum for reform, which in the first two years of the Prodi Commission has been surprisingly strong, is now in danger of dissipating, without unfolding enough political energy to change locked-in institutional structures – this is perhaps in part due to other, partly competing, EU reform initiatives like the 'governance white paper' and the 'convent'. Not that the internal reform issue, the governance white paper and the convent are not intimately connected. They are. The point is, however, that the Commission does not appear to be sufficiently conscious of this interrelatedness. It still seems to believe – as is clearly evidenced by the governance white paper – that the neofunctional/traditional line of a 'strong' Commission applying the Monnet method is the panacea for the EU's governance problem. It is not (Scharpf 2001; Héri-tier 2001b; Wincott 2001a). But even this widely held academic view has not motivated researchers to highlight the connection between the management and the governance concerns.

Even the three authors who explicitly address the management issue do this from different perspectives. Brigid Laffan (1997) and Roger Levy (1997) focus empirically on financial management and budgetary control. Les Metcalfe (1992, 1996, 2000) is interested in the Commission's (missing) strategic capabilities for managing EU policy networks in 'turbulent organisational environments'. Metcalfe comes closest to the governance debate, but gives little hint of how to design viable institutional solutions. Laffan and Levy cover particular policy sub-fields from which generalisations are difficult to make. Despite the fact that all three provide brilliant analyses and indicate important starting points for future investigations into the management issues, as Levy himself admitted, we still know very little about 'what it is that needs fixing'; consequently a wide range of competing and contradictory diagnoses and potential cures are offered (Levy 1999: 14).

In sum, despite the importance of managerial improvements, the issue ranks low on the political and scientific agendas. The Kinnock reform appears to have been downsized dramatically: it is now more or less an exercise of internal administrative streamlining and of reorganising the motivation/promotion of the staff (which is in itself important, but certainly not important enough to compensate for the more general management shortcomings). Researchers – with the important exceptions mentioned above – have not yet sufficiently come to grips with the transformations in EU governance or with what these changes mean for the reorganisation of the Commission.

6 EU Spending Programmes: A Recipe for Trouble [↑]

The comments here are not meant to make up for years of academic neglect. They actually aim to revive researchers' interest in the subject and to call for new research commitments. On the basis of my own – certainly limited – research in the field (Bauer 2001a, b), I would recommend investigating whether there are particular policies that are more prone than others to elicit EU management problems. For example, it may turn out – and the reports of the three wise men would underline such a view (European Parliament 1999a,b,c) – that EU spending programmes are particularly controversial as regards the management role of the European Commission. If that were to be confirmed by more comparative research, then it may well be that eastern enlargement would prove to provide the crucial opportunity for changing the system (Schmitter and Bauer 2001; Bauer and Schmitter 2001). The point here is a simple one. The Commission has been extremely successful in the areas of structural funds; also through CAP it expanded its institutional powers. Both of these successes came as part of a deal between the net receivers and the net contributors to the Union budget at the crucial moment when these spending programmes were being expanded as a side payment for the southerners' approval of the internal market programme. In short, through this the Commission gained a greater say in how to implement the increased CAP and structural funds budget, but at the same time it had to assume the role of supervising the EU spending. It turns out that increased competences are, at best, often such a mixed blessing for the Commission. The greater the Commission's responsibilities for programme implementation and management in comparison to its supranational peers, the more it is forced to stretch its (scarce) resources: it does not just have to pay to plan and devise policy, but also to implement and manage it. In the attempt to fulfil this double role – as conceiver and supervisor of EU public policy – the current management problems begin, and they tend to overstretch the capacities of the Commission, and, for that matter, perhaps of any institution. Put simply, the Commission should stick to managing ideas and programs, and it should avoid managing implementation.

4

More evidence and systematic, comparative analysis is needed before such a view can be firmly established. However,

until this is done, it would probably be wise to get the Commission out of the business of implementing EU policies, or, at least, not to assign it any more such competences. Arguably, there is little danger of expanding Commission powers at the moment, since a new trend, expressed by the Open Method of Coordination and new developments around co-decision the procedure, appears to be cutting back the Commission's influence anyway (Farrell and Héritier 2001; Mosher 2000; Hodson and Maher 2001). Unfortunately for the Commission, this radical answer to the management deficit even limits its room for manoeuvre where its organisational strength lies: in devising policies. The Commission's response to this situation, however, merely underlines that 'a strong Europe needs a strong Commission'. Many people in Brussels appear to think that all that is needed is to straighten out some internal lines of responsibility and to implement better staff appraisal rules. However, if this alone is done, then the Commission will miss the opportunity to provide a comprehensive overview of the EU's current governance problems and the Commission's own part in that.

7 Does a Strong Europe need a Strong Commission? [↑]

The point is that Europe can probably live with a Commission that only has weak powers to manage implementation and that thus delegates policy application and supervision to specialised agencies instead. However, if the Commission is systematically prohibited from devising and coordinating EU-wide policy initiatives, this will certainly affect the path that integration will take. Even if we, as researchers, should not seek to determine the path of imminent political developments, we have to assess the existing arguments by weighing them against empirical evidence. As regards the management role of the European Commission, our task is still in its infancy. In this particular case, however, it would be too bad if our analyses were to lead us in 2012 to judge that, on the basis of some wrong-headed assumptions, the European Commission of 2004 missed the opportunity for decent and comprehensive and much needed reform. The academic challenge is evident, as are the prospects for the imminent impact of the research results. Hence, it is time to bring transnational public management issues to the centre of the debate on the transformation of EU governance.

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<<http://www.eustudies.org/GovernanceForum.html>>.

Endnotes

(1) The acronyms stand for Designer la Commission de Demain, Sound and Efficient Management 2000, Modernising the Administration and the Personnel Policy 2000, Activity Based Budgeting, Activity Based Management, Internal Audit Service.

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