



Brussels and beyond by Ole Ryborg

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## Barroso's female revolution

President designate, José Manuel Barroso, sent a letter to all heads of state and government earlier this week. In polite diplomatic words Barroso gave the EU leaders a very clear hint of what he expects when they nominate candidates to the next Commission:

“To allow me to propose a properly balanced team to the Council and the European Parliament, I would therefore ask you all to see gender balance as a common goal and as a shared responsibility. I would therefore urge you to pay particular attention to the presence of women in the College...”

In other words: Send more women.

Obviously there is an element of tactics in the Barroso letter. The president designate was criticized for the lack of female commissioners when his Commission was approved five years ago and the letter states the obvious: That Barroso is not free to pick any team he would like. Appointments are done hand in hand with heads of state and government.

But the letter is not necessarily only a strategic move. As a matter of fact Barroso is right now in a key position to do more for gender equality in the EU institutions than any EU-leader before him have ever done.

Barroso can argue – and with huge credibility – that he need to get more women commissioners to get his Commission approved by a majority in The European Parliament.

The president designate can also move things forward quite substantially by offering more interesting jobs to the countries that provide female candidates – and it is understood that he is doing exactly that.

It is easy to foresee the arguments Mr Barroso will meet when discussing commission candidates with EU-leaders. Many EU leaders will argue that they really would like to come up with a female candidate but that they unfortunately do not have a qualified candidate this time round. When that argument comes up Barroso would be well advised to refer to recent business experiences in Norway.

The Norwegian government introduced a law saying that at least 40 percent of board members in larger companies must be women. The law triggered fierce resistance from both business and many politicians. They argued that there were not enough sufficiently qualified candidates, that the educational level on average would decrease in boardrooms, that companies would cease investing in Norway. Some even predicted that companies would leave the country.

Now the Centre for Corporate Diversity has evaluated the law and the results speak for themselves. All 460 companies covered by the law actually succeeded in changing the gender balance in their boardrooms. The average educational levels in these 460 boards were increased.

Not one company left the country. On the contrary, investors seem to be more interested in earning money than in the composition of boards.

If Mr Barroso has the political courage to be tough on member states and insist on more gender equality he stands a good chance of succeeding. He has two very efficient tools at his use. The threat of getting his Commission rejected by Parliament, and his sovereign power for distributing portfolios. Simply reward member countries that provide a qualified female candidate with better portfolios than member states that insist on male candidates.

Such an attitude would not make the president designate popular among heads of state and government. But he has a lot more to win than to lose – both personally and publicly.

Firstly Mr Barroso could show that he is the boss and that the bullying we have all seen in the run up to his re-appointment is now over.

Secondly he would send a clear signal to all members of the new Commission that the president is the boss.

Besides these personal gains a Commission with more gender equality would help overcome part of the image problem EU institutions have for being an elitist male club. More female commissioners might also help changing the Commission internally where male dominance is still high among civil servants in higher positions.

Ideally appointing a more gender balanced Commission should not be the only gender exercise these days. With the appointments of Mr Buzek as president of the European Parliament and Mr Barroso as president of the European Commission, two of four EU top positions have been filled.

Two more posts are to be filled during the next days. Those are the president of the European Council and the High Representative/Foreign Minister.

Both a group of MEP's headed by Danish MEP [Christel Schaldemose](#) and the European Womens Lobby have conducted campaigns to try to gather public support and to put pressure on EU-leaders to appoint at least one woman on one of the four posts.

Mrs Schaldemoses [Females in Front](#) have gathered almost 200.000 signatures while the [European Womens Lobby](#) have gathered around 19.000 signatures for their campaign.

But the battle for a woman at one of the final two top positions seems to be lost. That leaves Mr Barroso the only one left to secure better gender equality in European high politics.

Many will probably argue that there should be no focus on gender equality what so ever and that commissioners should be appointed on merits only.

That is a very valid point.

But in a world where heads of state and government believe that it is their job to regulate what bonuses a private company can pay its chief executives, the same leaders cannot argue that the question of gender equality should be left to some kind of political market forces.

It will do Europe good to have more women in top positions and Barroso is in a position to make that happen.

Source: <http://blogs.euobserver.com/ryborg/2009/10/22/barrosos-female-revolution/>