

New Commission in trouble

The former leader of the May 1968 rebellion in Paris, the German MEP Dany Cohen-Bendit, who now co-chairs the ecologist group, has called on the European Parliament to reject the new Commission en bloc, following the conclusion of the hearings into the nominee commissioners. The vote is to take place on 27th October, when the Parliament must decide whether to accept or reject the whole Commission. Cohn-Bendit says that “six or seven” of the nominees have “doubtful” qualifications. Cohn-Bendit said that he was speaking on behalf of the Green group. “This Commission is weak,” he said, “a rejection by the Parliament now will avoid a disaster in future.” Cohn-Bendit was throwing oil on the flames of the row which has blown up among socialist MEPs about the remarks made by Rocco Buttiglione, the Italian commissar, who said he thought homosexuality was a sin and that women ought to be mothers. Cohn-Bendit said, “The Italian commissar is only one among many incompetent candidates.” Cohn-Bendit said that, for example, the Hungarian energy commissar, László Kovács, had “about as much understanding of the energy sector as a hare does for hunting.” [*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 16th October 2004]

The reaction of the president of the Commission, José Manuel Durrao Barroso, to the hostile reception which members of his team received in the European Parliament has been to tough it out. He has reaffirmed his total confidence in Buttiglione. The leader of the Socialist Group, Martin Schulz – the man who crossed swords with Silvio Berlusconi when he barracked the Italian Prime Minister, prompting Mr. Berlusconi to say that Mr. Schulz would do well in a film in the role of concentration camp guard – called on Mr. Barroso to give Mr. Buttiglione a different job. He is currently the commissar for justice and home affairs, and his enemies fear that his conservative views on homosexuality will prevent them from pushing through Europe-wide laws on the family, including gay marriage. Schulz said that if Barroso ignored the Parliament “repeatedly”, e.g. by not giving Buttiglione another job, then his group would vote against the Commission. In addition to Buttiglione and Kovács, the Dutch competition commissar Nellie Kroes is

being attacked – not just from the left, but also from the British LibDems and from the German FDP liberals. [Jean Quatremer, *Libération*, 16th October 2004] She is in hot water because she failed to declare that she had worked as a lobbyist for Lockheed Martin, the American arms manufacturer, from September 1996 to the end of 1997, during which time she arranged the sale of F-16 fighter planes to the Dutch air force. Lockheed is under examination by the Commission for illegitimately using state aids in the US. [*Le Monde*, 22nd October 2004]

Buttiglione got into further hot water after the hearings, when it was reported in an Italian paper that he had made negative remarks about single parents. The nominee commissar said, however, that he had been misquoted. The quote was: “Children who have no father are children of mothers who are not very good.” Oddly enough, Buttiglione said that his remark had been taken out of context and that in fact he had been calling for reconciliation between Europe and America. He claims that he said, “The best thing would be for Europe and USA stand side by side again, so that their children (i.e. the peoples of Europe and America) once again have a mother and a father.” Buttiglione said that he had full respect for single mothers. Elmar Brok, the Chairman of the Foreign Policy Committee of the European Parliament, warned of an “escalation” of the row. He said that a rejection of the Commission would plunge the EU into a constitutional crisis. [Martin Halusa, *Die Welt*, 18th October 2004]

Turkey's enemies find ammunition

The debate is not over on Turkish admission to the EU. The Austrian Government has expressed doubt that the EU is prepared to admit the country. It has called for a full debate on the issue. A Commission report on the consequences of Turkish membership leaves many questions open, especially on Turkish foreign policy. Indeed, this 60-page document asks a lot of questions and answers few, but most EU observers expect that its publication will not have any consequences. On the other hand, it does give ammunition to opponents of Turkey, for instance when the enlargement commissar, Günter Verheugen, says that geopolitical arguments are the main reasons for wanting Turkey in. “Turkey would

be an important example for a country with a majority Muslim population and which makes the principles of freedom, democracy and respect for human rights its own.” Verheugen also says in the report that Turkish admission would “better protect energy supplies”. The report also says that Turkey generally follows her national interest in matters of foreign policy, for instance in Iraq or in the Caucasus. Her ability to support a common foreign policy will remain “in doubt, for as long as she is not able to show that she follows the EU line over a number of years.”[*Handelsblatt*, 15th October 2004]

Reflecting the considerable concern in France over the prospect of Turkish membership, the French Parliament has held a debate on the matter. The debate was opened by the Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who said that, “Neither Turkey nor Europe is ready for Turkish to join the EU” but added that “the future is not fixed”. Raffarin said that people should not say No to Turkey without discussing the matter first. Raffarin sought to ease people’s concerns – the majority of French people are against Turkey joining – by saying that there would be a referendum on it whatever happened. He said that whatever happened the process of joining would take a very long time. The president of the Socialist Group in the French Parliament expressed the same position as the conservative Prime Minister when he insisted that both outcomes – full membership or some kind of partnership – remained open and that the decision would not be taken until the end of the negotiations. The head of the governing UMP parliamentary party said that his group was in favour of a partnership, not membership, but that any sudden breaking off of negotiations with Ankara could “play into the hands of those who want the clash of civilisations”. Others were openly hostile. The pro-European François Bayrou said that Turkish membership was not part of the unification of Europe but rather a step towards its dissolution. Some UMP deputies said that the more Turkey approached Europe, the more threatened it would be by radical Islam. [Sophie Huet, *Le Figaro*, 15th October 2004]

Gül says partnership is unacceptable

Visiting Berlin to drum up support for Turkish accession to the EU, Abdullah Gül, the Turkish Foreign Minister, has met leading German politicians. In an interview with *Die Welt*, Gül said that he was convinced that the EU heads of state and government would give the green light to the opening of negotiations when they meet on 17 December. Gül said he did not think that Greece and Cyprus would stick to their promise to veto opening negotiations with Turkey if Cyprus is not recognised.

But he did not explain how or why Turkey wants to join an organisation of which it does not even recognise one of the member states. Gül also said that the German Christian Democrat idea of a “privileged partnership” was “unacceptable” to Ankara. He said that such a partnership, in place of full membership, would be “a great injustice to the Turkish people”. [Ayhan Bakirdögen, *Die Welt*, 19th October 2004]

Infamy! Infamy! They’ve all got it in for me!

The leader of the CDU-CSU deputies in the German Bundestag, Michael Glos, has said that his party might organise a petition against Turkish membership of the European Union. Glos called the issue “a question of fate for our country” and called for the matter to be decided by referendum. Glos said that Turkey was an Islamic country which did not belong to “our cultural circle”. He said that financing Turkish accession was beyond the means of Germany and Europe. The leader of the Green deputies, Volker Beck, attacked Glos’s remarks as “infamous” and “irresponsible”. He said that Glos wanted to provoke a clash of civilisations, whereas Turkey could become a bridge between the Islamic world and Europe. But the president of the Green party, Claudia Roth, supported the call for a referendum. [*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9th October 2004]

Another political party voicing strong opposition to Turkish membership is the Northern League in Italy. The Justice Minister, Roberto Castelli, who is one of the Northern League members of the Berlusconi Government, confirmed that his party’s objective is to organise a referendum in Italy on Turkish accession. Castelli said that the issue was “epoch-making” and that it would influence the future of Europe “for centuries”. That was why the matter should not be decided simply by the Government. This announcement is a source of embarrassment for the Italian Prime Minister, who has described himself as “the best advocate for Turkey in Europe”. [Barbara Jerkov, *La Repubblica*, 18th October 2004]

Gollnisch provokes row

The number two in the French National Front, the university professor and MEP Bruno Gollnisch, faces judicial proceedings aimed at preventing him from teaching following the doubt he called on the role of the gas chambers in the Holocaust. The Union of Jewish Students of France have lodged appeals against Gollnisch, and have called on the Minister of Justice to ask the Prosecutor to look into the matter. The Union has called for Gollnisch to be suspended immediately from his university functions, and it has called on the European Parliament to remove his

parliamentary immunity. Other anti-racist organisations have also said they will appeal. On 14 October, Gollnisch repeated his earlier statement that historians should be able to have a free debate “in all areas, without any taboo, no no-go areas, and no persecution” on the issue of the number of people who died in the Nazi concentration camps, and on the existence of the gas chambers. The Minister of Justice, Dominique Perben, has said that he thinks these remarks are “unacceptable” and said that a judicial enquiry was under way. The President of Gollnisch’s university, Lyon III, called on the Minister of Education to suspend him from his post (Gollnisch teaches Japanese) and he has started disciplinary proceedings. Gollnisch’s opponents say that his remarks are worse than those of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who referred to the question of the gas chambers as a “detail of history”. French law makes it a criminal offence to question the findings of international tribunals, which includes the findings of the Nuremberg tribunal on the Holocaust. [*Le Figaro*, 15th October 2004]

Europe and America disagree over Iran

A meeting on 15 October between European and American government officials on what measures to take against Iran’s nuclear programme came to no conclusion. The discussions, held in the US Department of State, centred on a “serious offer” which Germany, Britain and France want to make to Tehran, but which they want to clear first with the Americans. The European states want to stop the transfer of technology to Iran, and to stop the programme of uranium enrichment. The US Government wants the matter to be dealt with by the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Authority. [*Handelsblatt*, 15th October 2004]

Russia increases oil deliveries to China

The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has agreed with China to increase oil deliveries by train to China, but this follows the decision by Russia not to build a pipeline, as the Chinese wanted, and which would have delivered 30 million tonnes of oil a year. The visit to China also resulted in a treaty finally fixing the 4,300 km border between the two countries, after 40 years of negotiations. In the first half of this year, 7% of China’s crude oil imports came from Russia, which totalled 6 million tonnes. Demand in China is enormous. In the first nine months of this year, Chinese oil imports rose by 34% with respect to the same time the previous year. The increase in Chinese demand is one of the main reasons for the rise in the world oil price. [*Handelsblatt*, 15th October 2004]

Andreotti finally cleared

Seven times prime minister, Giulio Andreotti embodies more than any other politician the rise and fall of the post-war Italian political system. He was finally cleared of all charges on 15 October. “I am delighted that I have lived to see the end of the trial,” he said. A year ago, Andreotti was also acquitted on implication in a murder, after two appeals. This latest ruling means that the whole basis of the campaign against Andreotti, and the allegedly bribe-ridden republic of which he was the symbol, seems now to have collapsed. The original accusations were that Andreotti had ensured that Mafia bosses were treated leniently in return for political support in the areas they controlled. Andreotti, who is a daily communicant, was also accused of being in league with the *capo dei capi*. It turns out that all the charges, from the gravest to the most general, were in fact themselves made by Mafia people and that it has been impossible to substantiate them. [*Handelsblatt*, 15th October 2004]

Mr Raffarin goes to Bucharest

While everyone is agonising over Turkey, the admission of Romania and Bulgaria to the European Union seems to be uncontroversially in the bag. Everyone expects Romania to join the EU on 1 September 2007. Three days after the debate in the French national assembly on Turkey, the French Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, travelled to Bucharest where he chaired the first intergovernmental seminar between France and Romania. The Prime minister’s office said, “We have always given diplomatic and technical support to ensure that Romania’s accession occurs in the best possible conditions.” [Guillaume Tabard, *Le Figaro*, 16th October 2004]

Shurely shome mishtake

Election observers from Iraq have observed the parliamentary elections in Lithuania. The Chairman of the Central Electoral Committee, Zenonaz Vaigauskas, said, “Lithuania’s experience will be useful to them. Although a fierce political fight is raging in Lithuania, parties ultimately place the destiny of authority in the hands of the electorate. This means that Lithuania is a democracy worth learning from.” [*Baltic Times*, 7th – 13th October 2004] In fact, it is the other way around. In May, Lithuania’s constitutional court approved the impeachment of the President, Rolandas Paksas, and forbade him from running for elected office ever again in his life. Although Paksas is the most popular politician in the country, the people were not allowed any say in his fate. So it is the political class in Lithuania which decides for the electorate, not the other way around.

European human rights law not binding in Germany

The German constitutional court has ruled that the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg are not binding in German law. The German judicial system must take account of the rulings of Strasbourg, and it must attempt to integrate them into domestic law, but it is not subject to them. The case arose after the Constitutional Court at Karlsruhe overruled a court in Naumburg which had ruled in favour of a Turkish man living in Germany, who wanted to see his illegitimate son, who had been given for adoption by his mother at birth. Strasbourg had ruled in the man's favour. [See Bundesverfassungsgericht 2 BvR 1481/04]

Europeans divided on camps for immigrants

The Ministers of the Interior of Italy, Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Spain have met in Florence to try to reach agreement on ways of combating terrorism and illegal immigration. But there seems to be little chance that they will reach agreement on a German and Italian plan to create "reception centres" for illegal immigrants in North Africa. One of the countries designated for this purpose is Libya. The ministers there had suggested that these camps be set up so that potential immigrants could be filtered before they entered Europe. France and Spain are strongly opposed to this idea but Italy and Germany have not yet given up. [Alexandrine Bouilhet, *Le Figaro*, 18th October 2004]

Europe outlaws bottle deposits

The European Commission has ruled against the German practice of bottle deposits. Generally used for beer and water, this simple system allows people to take their empties back to the shop and get a small deposit back. The bottles are then re-used. The Commission has long argued that this system disadvantages foreign producers who cannot operate the deposit system at long distance. The system is therefore said to disturb the functioning of the internal market. Now the issue has gone to the European Court of Justice, because the Dutch are determined to see the system abolished. [*Handelsblatt*, 19th October 2004]

Germany might allow referendums

The red-green governing coalition in Germany is to present a bill which would allow referendums. They have not been part of the German political process since the end of the war. A bill is to be presented to

Parliament this autumn which would allow the people to vote on simple laws as well as on amendments to the constitution and international treaties. Referendums on individual laws would depend on public petitions which collect at least 400,000 signatures in favour of a bill on which the Parliament would then vote. This is effectively the system in Austria. The system for constitutional amendments and international treaties would be different: both would require a majority which comprised at least 25% of the total number of registered voters. Treaties would be subject to referendum only if the Parliament decides by a two-thirds majority that they should be. This bill itself requires a two-thirds majority because it represents a constitutional change, and therefore the governing parties will have to appeal to deputies from the opposition Christian Democrats and Liberals. Support might be obtained from these parties if the quorums are raised slightly: they have traditionally been opposed to referendums on principle. It is possible, therefore, that the European Constitution might be subject to a referendum in Germany. [Peter Dausend, *Die Welt*, 19th October 2004]

What is the Lithuanian for 'euro'?

The EU insists that all member states use the same name for the common currency, the euro. But the Lithuanians are getting awkward about this. They are prepared to accept the euro only if it can be given its Lithuanian name, euras, and can be declined according to the rules of Lithuanian grammar. The Commission insists that it must be called 'euro' everywhere. Vilnius has now appealed to the Council Presidency, currently held by the Netherlands, arguing that the EU has acted *ultra vires* by trying to tamper with the Lithuanian language.

ECB says new member states not ready for euro

The Commission and the European Central Bank have said that the 10 new member states have inflation rates and deficits which are too high for them to qualify for the euro. Two reports published on 20 October by the Commission and the bank both confirm that there is a lot of work to do before the eurozone can be enlarged. The Polish Finance Minister has expressed his disappointment at the report. Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Cyprus and Malta are already subject to the excessive deficit procedure. [*Le Monde*, 22nd October 2004]