European Commissioners and the Prospects of a European Public Sphere: Information, Representation and Legitimacy

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Information, representation and legitimacy

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Introduction

As part of its formal duties to represent 'the European interest' and propose means of deepening European integration, the Commission produces and disseminates a wealth of information about itself, its activities and those of the European Union as a whole. Contrary to popular perceptions and the omnipresent political discourse about the Union's 'democratic deficit', it is therefore difficult to argue that this organisation lacks transparency. Rather the central challenge facing the Commission concerns how its agents render the information released 'legible' for journalists and a general public still largely unused to the specificities of Europe-wide politics. In more analytical terms, studying the communication activities carried out by Commission staff from the angle of political representation – defined as both 'speaking for' and 'symbolically incarnating' (Abélès 1997: 247) – sheds light upon a number of traits of the EU which constantly sap its legitimacy as a source of political discourse. More precisely, the puzzle for empirical research then becomes how practioners within the Commission strive – sometimes successfully, often unsuccessfully – to legitimate themselves. By legitimation is meant the transformation of public acceptance of their self-organisation from one based upon an unstable consensus of interest-based calculations into one based upon a durable 'belief in the social value of institutions' (Lagroye 1985: 399).

Drawing on former research on European Commissioners in general and eight in particular in the period 1989–99 (Joana and Smith 2002; Smith 2003),[1] the central claim made in this chapter is that the EU possesses both an embryonic single European public sphere and a series of overlapping national and subnational spaces for public deliberation and debate. The legitimacy and social meaning of all these spaces do not, however, simply stem from the length of their respective pasts or the existence of formal bodies. Instead, they are shaped by the manner through

which a range of identifiable and 'studiable' actors interact and render public this activity. Although most of these have built the existence of the EU as a space for political negotiation into their daily political work, the vast majority still do not see it as a space for political representation.

From this angle, three aspects of the representational activities of the Commissioners studied are analysed in order to explain why they are so often presented as 'technocratic' that is, distanced from political competition, deciding upon the basis of expertise rather than upon values and, more generally, behaving in a discreet or 'non-public' manner (Radaelli 1999).

First, it is argued that Commissioners frequently find themselves at a disadvantage when competing for media attention with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and national ministers. Part of this asymmetry is due to their non-elective positions. More deeply, however, the relative weakness of Commissioners is due to deep-rooted expectations regarding their behaviour in public fora. In short, presenting oneself as dutifully respectful to ministers and MEPs is a key component of the institutionalised role of a Commissioner.

Second, the capacity of these actors to communicate publicly is often hamstrung by the Commission's inability to 'speak with one voice'. On one level, this trait is due to competition between individual Commissioners and various administrative services. However, the underlying cause of this fragmentation lies in the multiple roles of the Commission. Torn between acting as an initiator of law and policy, a deliberator, a mediator between national and sectoral interests, a negotiator and a watchdog over implementation in the member states, the organisation's claims to represent 'the European interest' are constantly undermined by the daily behaviour of its own agents. In other words, not only are public expectations about the Commission unclear, but the professional identity of those who work for this body is also frequently confused and confusing.

Finally, details of the relationship built up between Commissioners and the media need to be elucidated. The relatively low level of coverage given to EU politics by national media cannot simply be explained away by general arguments about cultural difference and socialisation. If these issues have great importance, they are mediated in very concrete terms around the precise relationships built up between public actors on the one hand and journalists on the other.

In presenting these arguments and our data, it is recognised that a certain number of Commissioners have occasionally managed to overcome constraints upon their representational activity and thereby reach certain parts of Europe's general public. Nevertheless, the central message of this chapter is that the legitimacy of such political representation is constantly undermined by the specific set of rules and expectations that lie at the heart of the institutionalised role of a European Commissioner. It is this role, rather than the personality of each incumbent, that almost

invariably leads Commissioners to engage in political representation from the perspective of a technocratic or diplomatic broker rather than from that of a fully legitimate political participant in Europe's public spheres.

The publicisation of institutional competition: Commissioners, the Council and the Parliament

The Commission as a whole is stuck between a rock and a hard place: regularly chastised by national actors for 'engaging in propaganda' when it provides information and for 'acting technocratically' when it does not. Most Commissioners, however, are not prepared to admit that they are in a 'no-win' situation. Instead, their daily work leads them to compete with MEPs and national ministers for media attention, and more fundamentally for legitimacy. Although they and the Commission did possess some potent arms of their own, the Commissioners we studied often found themselves battling from a position of structural weakness. In order to elucidate the institutional source of this situation, our research seeks to answer the following questions: (i) to what extent does competition for public attention impact upon the dominant forms of political communication in the EU? and (ii) does competition contribute to the building of a single European public sphere or simply further consolidate a set of overlapping national spheres?

Commissioners versus MEPs

Orthodox commentary on the EU has frequently underlined how the formal legitimacy of MEPs – their democratic election – contrasts with the influence of agents of the Commission, which stems from their organisation's agenda-setting function and its privileged access to decision-shaping arenas. Prior to the mid-1990s, the resulting institutional competition was heavily focused upon attempts by MEPs to use their authority over the EU budget in order to obtain isolated concessions and grudging recognition from staff in the Commission. However, two sets of changes introduced with the Maastricht Treaty have led Commission officials in general to take the Parliament more seriously. Indeed, they have obliged Commissioners to engage in processes that have had an impact upon their own practices of political representation.

   The first of these innovations concerns the introduction of an investiture procedure for the College.[2] Prior to 1995, Commissioners were simply nominated by national governments and began work as if hired by any private company. The Maastricht Treaty did not change the nomination process but it did introduce a requirement for Commissioners to present themselves and their respective portfolios to sessions of parliamentary committees open to journalists and other interested members of the public. Although we did not conduct systematic research

on the impact of this form of investiture upon the College,[3] it considerably shaped the subsequent priorities and behaviour of at least two of the Commissioners studied in detail: Yves-Thibault de Silguy and Edith Cresson. More precisely, both were given a particularly rough ride by MEPs but reacted to this experience in ways that provide insights into how they envisaged the role of a Commissioner and the shape of public space in Europe.

As Commissioner responsible for economic policy in general and monetary union in particular, during the investiture hearings, de Silguy came under attack from a number of left-leaning German MEPs who criticised his faith in the European Monetary Union (EMU), his political inexperience and, implicitly, his right-of-centre party affiliation. Having opened the proceedings with what he and his cabinet considered to be an effective and technically impressive presentation of his policy priorities, de Silguy was clearly unprepared for the politicised nature of the MEPs' comments. This 'breaking of the frame' (Goffman 1974: 347) is highly revealing in two ways. First, it exemplifies the extent of change in the relationship between the Parliament and the Commission because de Silguy, once a senior member of Commission president Gaston Thorn's cabinet, clearly expected the MEPs to stick to a more policy-centred line of questioning. Second, the incident led this Commissioner to decide actively to seek the support of the parliamentary committee for the relaunch of the EMU. This was done in particular by choosing to make the initial presentation of many decisions and policy initiatives before the committee rather than in the press room of the Commission. In summing up the relationship developed with this committee, a member of de Silguy's cabinet considered that 'Yves behaved as a minister would within a national Parliament'.[4] More generally, this stroking of MEPs' vanity through recognising the legitimacy of their institution contributed to de Silguy rapidly developing a 'European credit', which benefited him throughout his mandate as Commissioner.[5]

Like her French colleague, Edith Cresson also began her life as a Commissioner with a difficult parliamentary hearing. Criticised for not appearing to master the technical detail of training policy, unlike de Silguy, she reacted by considering the European Parliament (EP) an arena to be avoided. Instead, Cresson consistently presented new policy initiatives directly to conferences of economic and social actors concerned with her portfolio. History informs us that this neglect of, or even disdain for, MEPs was to prove costly when charges of financial mismanagement were brought against her at the end of 1998 and early 1999. By then, and despite a concerted but desperate last-minute attempt to recapture lost ground,[6] it had become too late to recognise the legitimacy of MEPs and, hence through a process of reciprocation, to bolster that of Cresson, the office of Commissioner in general and that of the Commission.

The second change in EP–Commission relations brought about by the

Maastricht Treaty concerns the knock-on effects of the introduction of 'co-decision'. By increasing the EP's capacity to amend draft legislation, this treaty change upgraded the importance of parliamentary committees and obliged many Commissioners to include them in their respective negotiating strategies (Fouilleux *et al.* forthcoming). Indeed, from the point of view of policy-making, all the Commissioners we studied considered it necessary to bear in mind constantly the political equilibria of these committees and endeavoured to seek allies or neutralise probable opponents. However, and notwithstanding the example of de Silguy, it is not clear that Commissioners in general have come to see the EP as an effective means of support for communicating about their activities and aspirations. On the contrary, as Olivier Baisnée (2003b, 2004) has shown so effectively in his sociology of the Brussels press corps, Commissioners are very much aware that most journalists specialised in coverage of the EU are far more interested in the discourse of the Commission than that of MEPs.[7] In short, European parliamentarians are certainly now taken more seriously by Commissioners as policy experts and negotiators, but not as political representatives of the EU.

The implications of this are far-reaching. Although many Commissioners clearly see MEPs as fellow politicians with whom they have much in common, the inter-institutional competition at the heart of the EU's decision-making process strongly discourages overtly political discourse and opposition between members of each institution. If avoiding such conflict is seen as facilitating the production of EU law and policies, it also contributes to technicised practices of political representation, depoliticised media coverage and, ultimately, limited legitimacy of both the EP and the Commission. In other words, it contributes neither to the construction of a single European public sphere nor to the widespread recognition of an overlap between such a sphere and its national counterparts.

Commissioners versus national ministers

Paradoxically, if Commissioners compete even more intensely with national ministers than they do with MEPs, their battles are much less open to observation by journalists and other EU watchers. This characteristic can be explained on one level by noting that much of this interaction goes on within meetings of the Council of Ministers from which external observers are specifically excluded. But the institutionalised processes at the heart of Council proceedings also frequently lead Commission representatives to downplay their own contribution to Council debates in order to position themselves as potential brokers of compromise agreements between the member states. More specifically, in encouraging Commissioners to technicise their arguments during negotiations and in discouraging them from presenting themselves as the equals of ministers, a number of the Council's rituals and implicit rules contribute strongly to

weakening Commissioners' political legitimacy. More fundamentally, by doing so they also reduce the likely emergence of a single European public sphere.

The tendency of Commission representatives to depoliticise or technicise their discourse and action has been recently highlighted by some astute EU policy analysis (Radaelli 1999; Robert 2004). In our case studies of European Commissioners, we also came across a number of negotiations where these actors deliberately chose to accentuate arguments based upon economic or legal expertise in order to further their respective policy objectives. In the case of research policy, for example, Edith Cresson based much of her attempt to reform the Framework Programme for Research upon 'the requirements of scientists and industrialists' rather than upon an ideological commitment to research as part of industrial policy. Similarly, once the EMU was firmly back on the EU's agenda, de Silguy and his team concentrated upon the detail of producing a single currency and preparing different economic sectors for this innovation. However, many of our other policy studies showed quite the opposite: Commissioners striving to set the EU agenda by politicising issues ranging from Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform (Ray MacSharry) to the harmonisation of VAT levels (Christiane Scrivener). A range of standard political tools, notably public speeches and press releases, were used to stress that the issue at hand was not just about policy efficiency, but also entailed questions of equity and even morality. In short, far from being avoided, the question of the values underlying the policy was deliberately made public. It is important, therefore, to underline that Commissioners are by no means condemned to act technocratically. However, they appear most free to act politically during the phase of European problem definition and agenda formation. Once negotiations in the Council begin in earnest, most Commissioners consider that their legitimacy is under threat and therefore rely much more heavily upon the legal and economic expertise they are able to muster in order to back up their arguments. In a word, the phase in the policy cycle symbolised by Council meetings sharpens the definition of the hierarchy between Commissioners and ministers, which until that stage, most often remains fuzzy and ambiguous.

The question of hierarchy is particularly evident at the end of Council meetings when press conferences are held and the proceedings are relayed to the media. On such occasions, the official spokesperson for the meeting is the minister from the member state that currently holds the presidency of the EU. Commissioners usually attend such conferences but are generally confined, and confine themselves, to the role of providing additional, and often detailed, information. One such example concerns Yves-Thibault de Silguy and the posture he adopted after monthly meetings of the ECOFIN council. Despite the work he did to prepare, structure and run such meetings, at each press conference he had to take on a demeanour that clearly showed he was not even a member of the 'club'[8]

of Finance ministers, let alone one of their equals. Faced with the symbolic authority of national ministers, other Commissioners adopted strategies that were either openly combative (e.g. Sir Leon Brittan and his use of the media, see below) or based upon 'the logic of the by-pass' (e.g. Ray MacSharry and his use of a captive specialised agricultural press). Most Commissioners, however, appear fatalistic and frustrated by living in the shadow of national ministers for whom, for a number of ideological and career-driven reasons, they often have little respect.[9]

In summary, the Council 'brings out the technocrat' in European Commissioners for reasons beyond pure negotiating strategy. Instead, over the course of the EU's history, perceptions of the legitimate role of a Commissioner have hardened into a set of institutionalised expectations and rules. These largely determine both how holders of this office see themselves and are by their political allies and adversaries. Once again, these expectations and rules militate against publicisation within a genuine European public sphere, or even against greater overlap between and amongst European and national spaces of deliberation and debate.

The limited publicness of competition between Commissioners: discretion or denial?

Of course, a Commissioner's political friends and enemies exist not only outside the Commission. Indeed, in quantitative terms, the interlocutors they most frequently come into contact with work inside the College itself or in one of the Commission's Directorates General (DG). Fragmentation at this level has been documented by books about this organisation as a whole and, in passing, by a wealth of EU policy analysis which uses the theory of 'bureaucratic politics' to explain the Commission's incoherent or lowest common denominator outputs. Such an explanation is often fruitful but tends to neglect the role of Commissioners and the College. In the case of the Commission's communication activities, this omission is particularly glaring and leaves one unable to explain why the organisation has never been able to construct public information on the EU as a legitimate 'European problem'. In order to grasp the effects of competition between Commissioners over the Commission's communication practices and on public spheres in Europe, a shift of focus is needed. Instead of conceptualising competition between Commissioners as mere power struggles, one needs to see that battles within the College are played out within an institutionalised order which consistently favours 'technocratic' forms of representation over 'political' ones.

The mirage of unified information

From at least 1958 to 1999, responsibility for information within the College was a task that no Commissioner wanted.[10] Almost invariably, this

portfolio was attributed either to a Commissioner from a small member state or to the 'second' Commissioner from a larger country. One of the reasons for this was that the corresponding administrative unit, DG X, was always weak in terms of personnel and legitimacy as compared to other DGs. In charge of 'general' publications, the officials from DG X could do little to counter the proliferation of information units in other DGs and the resulting cacophony of publications emanating from the Commission. But merely describing this characteristic begs the question of why the College as a whole, and the Commissioner in charge of information in particular, almost never even broached the issue of how the Commission should be communicating. Through our analysis of the activities of two holders of this portfolio (Jean Dondelinger and Marcelino Oreja) and indirect information on a third (João de Deus Pinheiro), light can be shed both on the fragmentation of Commission information policy and some important unwritten rules governing the College.

During the nine years which span Dondelinger's (1989–92) and Oreja's (1995–9) terms of office, Commission archives reveal only one public speech on the subject of how the organisation should be communicating.[11] Just as tellingly, neither engaged in launching any initiative within the Commission in order to provoke internal debate and decision-making about how information policy should be framed and implemented. In interviews, the personal staff of both these Commissioners excused this low level of investment in information policy by underlining how busy their respective 'masters' had been in more legislation-based policy areas (in particular the audiovisual sector and, for Oreja, preparing the Amsterdam Treaty). However, since use of an actor's time depends a great deal on what they consider important, this explanation merely serves to highlight how, for these Commissioners, information policy was not only a low priority, but one which they had great difficulty in tackling.

Pinheiro's two-year term (1993–4) provides both an interesting contrast with those of Dondelinger and Oreja as well as more insights into the intrinsic 'slipperiness' of the information portfolio. In the aftermath of referendums on the Maastricht Treaty, lack of public support for European integration suddenly became an issue that was pushed up (or even onto) the agenda of the College. Pinheiro and his cabinet reacted by creating a strategy unit on information,[12] which was given the task of producing papers for the College as a whole. They also established a 'users council' and commissioned a report from a 'Committee of wise men' chaired by a Belgian MEP, Willy de Clerq (1993). This report was supposed to 'propose a mid-term communication and information strategy which would enable the European Institutions and the Member States to take into account the needs, the concerns and the hopes of citizens at a decisive moment for the process of European integration' (De Clerq 1993: preface, author's translation). However, Pinheiro considered some of the

report's recommendations too audacious, an opinion confirmed as soon as the *Financial Times* labelled them 'the fantasy of advertisers' (Tumber 1995: 517; Shore 2000: 54–6). More generally, the College as a whole distanced itself from these issues and instead participated in producing a general discourse upon 'transparency' and 'openness'.[13]

The vacuity of this discourse merits study in its own right. What our own research shows is that for agents of the Commission, 'elevating' the problem of information to such a level of abstraction had the advantage of side-stepping the thorny issue of who should be responsible for making information policy and what powers they should have over other actors engaged in communicating about the EU. This lament by an official from DG X reveals some of the causes and effects of a fundamental characteristic of the College:

> The Commissioners have never worked upon their own image. Such work would involve building a communication strategy, revisiting what they do in their respective countries, spending more time outside Brussels (as Bonino and de Silguy do), using media other than the *Financial Times*. But all that is taboo. DG X has no mandate to give advice to Commissioners about how they communicate. Some cabinets sometimes think about information strategies. However, at the end of the day, each Commissioner is an autodidact who improvises his or her own practices […]. In short, there is no longer any debate at the level of the College about how we communicate. Worse, we don't even give ourselves the means to analyse this question. Consequently, any discussion there is on this subject is like a chat in a pub.[14]

In other words, behind the myth of the unity and the collective responsibility of the College lies the mirage of a unified Commission information policy reaching out to 'the European citizen'. In reality, the College is an arena for political competition within which practices of information and communication are jealously guarded resources for advancing ideological preferences, national or sectoral interests and personal careers. Consequently, these practices are not for pooling as part of a Commission-wide strategy for building either a single European public sphere or encouraging overlap between nationally or sectorally segmented spheres.

The myth of a single press office

The impact of the myth of collegial unity upon the Commission's relationship to 'the public sphere' also needs examination from the angle of its press office. Since the beginning of the 1960s, a Service des porte-parole (SPP, spokesperson's service) has constituted the official interface between Commissioners and journalists. Formally, each spokesperson

does not work for a Commissioner but for the SPP as a whole in order to ensure that the Commission 'speaks with one voice'. In reality, two further characteristics of the role of Commissioner largely explain both why each occupant of this post has a great deal of control over his or her spokesperson and why the latter are used in such different ways.

The first concerns the selection of spokespersons. Although the Secretariat General goes to great lengths to establish short-lists of candidates for these positions, ultimately each Commissioner decides whom they want as their media representative. This is usually determined through a process of interviews where personal commitment to the Commissioner is clearly an important criterion. A Commission official who was interviewed unsuccessfully for the job of Leon Brittan's spokesperson provides a telling insight: 'I made the mistake of saying, "Of course, I would be working for the Service des porte-parole". To which Brittan replied, "Of course, if you wish to work for another Commissioner, you are quite free to do so".'[15]

Those that are nominated generally have their allegiance to 'their' Commissioner reinforced by being treated as an additional cabinet member.[16] Once incorporated into the Commissioner's 'political enterprise',[17] most spokespersons consider themselves part of a team in competition with those of other members of the College.

At least until the reform of the press office in 1999, a second trait of the College also had considerable impact upon the unity of the SPP. This concerns the liberty given to Commissioners to hire spokesmen or women from inside or outside the Commission. Many Commissioners (e.g. Oreja, Brittan) used this leeway to hire journalists from their own country in order to deal with the press. Others (MacSharry, de Silguy) preferred to take on an 'ordinary'[18] official from the DG to be responsible for their portfolio. This practice clearly sapped the internal cohesion of the SPP by injecting it with a mixture of professional identities. More fundamentally still, it provides yet another indicator of how little each Commissioner feels bound to act according to an institutionalised set of rules, rituals and expectations. Consequently, it is no coincidence that Commissioners who considered their portfolio as the centre of their activity selected Commission officials, whereas their counterparts who saw themselves as generalist politicians were more likely to hire journalists.

The fragmentation of the College and the SPP constituted an important ingredient in the fall of the Santer Commission, which cannot be analysed here.[19] What does need stressing is that this episode precipitated a reform of the Commission's press services, the disappearance of DG X and a rather desperate attempt by Romano Prodi to centralise communication around the Commission Presidency (Baisnée 2004). At the same time, however, Prodi put an end to the physical grouping together of Commissioners in one building and sent them and their cabinets out to work alongside their respective DGs. In-depth research has yet to be conducted upon the effects of this decision. At least in terms of the Commis-

sion's communicative practices, however, it appears to have accentuated rather than attenuated the individualistic behaviour of Commissioners. Contrary to what even many social scientists appear to believe, this individualism is not the effect of personality or 'cultural difference'. Instead, as has been argued here, it stems directly from the nature of the College as a political arena within which a Commissioner's commitment to his or her colleagues is constantly cross-cut by their engagement in a form of ideological, inter-sectoral, international and personal competition which discourages public debate both 'in Brussels' and in the member states.

Commissioners and the media: getting heard or being forgotten

If the position of Commissioner per se is not an obstacle to an active approach to communication, clearly there are constraints that affect how successful an occupant of this post can be in reaching the eyes and ears of Europe's citizens. Over and above the resistance of national actors, the most powerful of these is the sociology and structure of the European media. Contrary to a large number of policy sectors, these media have not undergone a significant process of 'Europeanisation'. For this reason, Commissioners are condemned to working with two quite different sets of journalists: the Brussels press corps and reporters located in the member states. In both cases, but for different reasons, they cannot simply expect journalists to write or broadcast about their respective actions or public pronouncements. Instead, if a Commissioner seeks to remain or become a public figure, the media have to be worked on in ways that frequently differ from national political practice. In more analytical terms, the institutionalised role of Commissioner vaguely incites its incumbents to foster a single European public sphere and to encourage national public spheres to recognise their degree of mutual interdependence. However, it does not provide them with a ready-made road map for moving in both or either of these directions.

Commissioners and the Brussels press corps

The Commission's 800 accredited journalists based in Brussels make up what Olivier Baisnée (2000) has identified as the EU's 'first public'. Not only are these reporters paid to specialise in news about the EU, since the 1960s their standard method of collecting and processing information has led them into a relationship of deep dependence upon the staff of the Commission. This relationship is nurtured by the importance accorded to the Commission's midday press briefing both by journalists and civil servants. During this briefing, a sharing of values occurs and a set of implicit rules about what constitutes European news emerges. Although some investigative journalists have recently broken with this mould, the general

expectation is that members of the press corps produce articles on the detailed outcome of College meetings, negotiations with the Parliament and the Council and third countries. However, they avoid in-depth analysis of the battles that precede the setting of a Commission decision, or those that continue to take place 'behind closed doors' once this decision becomes part of a formalised debate with national governments. Stigmatised as 'trivial' by civil servants and most journalists, this conflict is therefore almost systematically kept out of the public eye. However, one only needs to make a cursory examination of national press, radio or television to see that the 'trivia' of political jousting are the spice that interests a variety of publics. Moreover, analysis of the type of conflict papered over by the Brussels press corps shows that ideology and power are precisely what they leave out, thus paving the way for depiction of the Commission as a haven of value-less 'technocrats'.

It would be erroneous to suggest that all Commissioners and their staff are aware of this context when they take up office. Indeed, many still seem unaware when they leave. However, as the following examples illustrate, they all soon learn either how to fit into the institutionalised relationship between the Commission and the media, or the risks and costs involved in trying to break with it.

A first, and probably most common, way of adapting to this relationship is to stick rigidly to one's portfolio and concentrate upon providing the press corps with detailed information about policy developments. This was the approach adopted by Franz Fischler, Commissioner responsible for agriculture between 1995 and 2004. A captive audience of specialised agricultural journalists based in Brussels was used as a platform for a highly sectoral form of communication. For the first three years of her mandate, Edith Cresson also dealt with the press using a similar logic. In contrast to Fischler, however, she did not court the Brussels press corps, apparently believing that she could reach the national media more directly using the sectoral route or her own personal reputation.

A second type of Commissioner attempts to make more strategic use of journalists based in Brussels in order to further his or her respective policy aims. As Commissioner for agriculture from 1989 to 1992, Ray MacSharry used the agricultural press in order to set the agenda for reforming the CAP. Unlike his successor Fischler, however, MacSharry politicised his criticisms of this policy and did not attempt to downplay the fact that under his leadership the Commission was seeking to change the very foundations of farm subsidies. In this way, this Commissioner also attracted the attention of the more general media. Yves-Thibault de Silguy adopted a similar approach to his portfolio of economic and monetary affairs. Conscious of the importance of the *Financial Times* amongst political and economic elites, but also as a relay to other parts of the media, at the beginning of his mandate, de Silguy and his (British) spokesman made considerable efforts to win the respect of the *Financial Times*'s jour-

nalists in Brussels. Similar efforts were made with leading newspapers in all the large member states. Part of a wider strategy to make the euro 'credible', this approach to the Brussels press corps aimed to go beyond a highly specialised type of journalism and attract the attention of media generalists.

The interest of the general media is the objective of a third and final type of Commissioner for whom the Brussels press corps is essentially a stepping-stone with which to reach the national media in general, and that of their own country in particular. In our panel, only Sir Leon Brittan fitted this category. Considering that it was his role and right as a Commissioner to look after his own portfolio but also 'to cover the whole waterfront',[20] Brittan constantly sought media coverage of his actions and of himself. Like de Silguy, he and his cabinet were in daily touch with the *Financial Times* and other 'heavyweight' papers. Again, like his French colleague, he made public speeches throughout the EU. However, the specificity of Brittan was that he always explicitly voiced an ideologically driven set of opinions about what the EU was and what he thought it should be doing.

In summary, analysis of the different communication practices of Commissioners provides important insights into differing ways of working in and trying to deepen Europe's public sphere. For some holders of this office, the most effective way of doing so is to act technocratically in the hope that carefully controlled publicity about EU affairs will steadily increase the legitimacy of the EU. For others, however, it is precisely through engaging in overtly political conflicts that the Commission is best able to push EU matters onto the forefront of public debate within Europe.

Commissioners and their national public spheres

Brittan's ideological commitment may have made him interesting for the media to cover. But it is also important to highlight how this Commissioner, like many others, strove to remain part of his country's public sphere and not simply become a 'European without a homeland'. Over and above the particularities of the Brittan case, comparison with that of the Frenchwoman Christiane Scrivener provides a means of addressing a second aspect of the communication practised by Commissioners: their dealings with their own national media. In turn, this subject allows one to address empirically the question of the degree to which overlapping European and national public spheres have emerged and, more precisely, whether it is possible for Commissioners to operate effectively at both levels. The analytical pay-off of this approach lies in conceptualising 'overlap' in terms that are sufficiently precise to encourage better understanding of how political representation actually operates in contemporary Europe.

Brittan in Britain: Europe as ideology

In January 1989, Leon Brittan arrived rather reluctantly in Brussels for two reasons. First, his nomination was interpreted as a form of sidelining that would slow down or even end his political career.[21] Second, like many British Conservatives, at that time he was sceptical about the ideological content of many European policies. Over the next ten years, however, he not only became convinced that the EU could and should be a vector for extending neo-liberalism beyond the English Channel, but also undertook a personal campaign to attempt to convince his political party to transform this argument into a central plank of its political agenda. If, as Conservative policy on Europe in the 1990s illustrates, this sustained effort clearly failed, it is nevertheless highly instructive to examine both how and why Brittan committed so much energy and resources to what turned out to be a series of lost battles.

Brittan's British campaign was essentially waged in two ways. First, although only 21 per cent of his written speeches were delivered in the UK, he made numerous other public interventions and gave talks to a plethora of Conservative constituency parties. This activity was orchestrated partly by a member of Brittan's cabinet in Brussels, and also by a Conservative backbencher, Spencer Batiste, 'Brittan's de facto parliamentary private secretary'.[22] This speechmaking was supplemented by a series of books written during and just after Brittan's mandate as Commissioner (Brittan 1992, 1994, 2000).

The second strand of Brittan's strategy consisted in giving a vast number of interviews to British radio and press reporters. Although rarely seen on television, BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme – the premier political morning talk slot in the UK – regularly used him as an all-purpose 'rent a quote' on European affairs. The press was used even more systematically in order to defend the EU, for example when calling on Conservatives to ratify the Amsterdam Treaty[23] or castigating Tory leaders for their Euro-scepticism.[24] Indeed, given the energy that was also expended by Brittan and his cabinet on policy-making and international negotiations, it is particularly important to note that dealings with the press were key parts of their daily routine. As one cabinet member laconically recalled: 'In cabinet meetings the first point was the press. The second was "How do I get things (and me) into the press?" And only then would we move on to matters of substance.'[25]

Why this commitment and why this strategy? Our research reveals two answers to these questions. To pursue an idea introduced above, the first of Brittan's motivations was one of rapidly acquired political conviction:

> In general terms, Leon genuinely believed that European integration had been a boost to prosperity and to deregulation and economic reform in Britain, and therefore that it was compatible with Toryism

[Conservatism]. He could never understand why the Tories [Conservatives] were turning their backs on this achievement, and incidentally turning their backs on the role played by British Conservatives such as him in Europe. He believed Europe was going in the Conservatives' direction. He was therefore very upset that his own party was turning its back on this and on him. He was never reluctant to speak about this.[26]

A second explanation is that throughout his years in Brussels, Brittan continued to see himself not only as a political actor, but also as a leading politician who had a career to make and manage. Once again, members of his cabinet provide telling testimony of this self-image and its effects:

> The classic worry for all Commissioners is that they will go to Brussels and be forgotten because they don't get enough publicity. Brittan was probably worried that this was the end of his political career; that he was going to be sucked into the role of a technocrat.[27]

History tells us that despite all his efforts, Leon Brittan largely failed to convince his fellow Conservatives to support greater European integration or even to get his views disseminated beyond the British elite.[28] Constantly in the news in Brussels, and followed avidly by the Brussels press corps, our case study of Brittan in Britain highlights how difficult it is for even the most committed of Commissioners to penetrate national public spheres and begin to modify the representations of the EU which predominate there.

Scrivener in France: Europe as blind faith

In contrast to Brittan, Christiane Scrivener was already a committed pro-European activist well before becoming a Commissioner in 1989. A centre-right minister in the late 1970s, Scrivener became a MEP in 1984. Both from this position and as a Commissioner, she returned frequently to her native France in order to 'preach the gospel' of the need for deeper European integration. However, she received relatively little media coverage via the Brussels press corps and virtually none in France itself. In examining how and for what reasons, she continued to engage with journalists, the puzzle is why so much effort went so unrewarded.

Scrivener's media strategy towards France contained three components. The first was her own newsletter – *Lettre d'Europe-Avenir* – where, from 1984 to 1994, she signed editorials and 'wrote' other articles. The second was through speechmaking. Thirty-three per cent of her written speeches were made in France and 19 out of 29 general policy speeches made in six years were delivered there. Finally, she also gave interviews to the press but essentially on issues related to her tax and consumer affairs

portfolio. Indeed, it is important to note that her spokesperson for much of her mandate was a legally trained European civil servant and that her head of cabinet, an *Enarque* (a graduate of the elite National Administration School) from the French Ministry of Finance, was clearly little disposed to dealing with the press.

In examining the content of Scrivener's communication activities, the most striking feature is the way she consistently argued for closer European union from postulates of faith in European ideals and the inevitability of deeper integration ('progressive Europeanism'). Indeed, throughout Scrivener's speeches two meta-narratives constantly appear: how the EU saved Europe from a third world war and the economic dangers of 'non-Europe'. In neither case are these arguments carefully illustrated or linked to an explicit political ideology. Instead, between the lines one can detect a centre-right sub-text about the benefits of bigger, more open markets and less bureaucratic red tape. Indeed, Scrivener regularly used vague references to her past as a private sector 'entrepreneur' in order to convince audiences of her credibility.

Not surprisingly, Scrivener was clearly shaken by the results of the French referendum on the Maastricht Treaty in September 1992. To her usual arguments in favour of European integration, she then began to add the theory of 'communication failure' for which the Commission was partly responsible: 'We have not sufficiently explained something which is difficult to explain.'[29] However, the perspectives set out for the future remained largely unchanged, clearly believing that in order to be heard in the member states the Commission simply needed to shout louder.

If Scrivener's approach to the media clearly contrasts with that of Brittan, this is partly because her own national debate in France on European integration was, at least until Maastricht, essentially consensual. Moreover, less personally ambitious, actively involved in a political party and committed to a combative ideology, she quite simply appeared less interesting to journalists outside a small circle of economic and financial specialists. Nevertheless, her case is of wider interest to social science because in many ways her approach to both public communication and relations with the media appears highly representative of that of many other Commissioners. For these actors, arguing for 'more Europe' from a postulate of faith in vague European ideals and the intrinsic worth of a unified economy provides a safe means of avoiding politicised conflict with the member states and the EP. This stance is also a means of convincing oneself that those who oppose deeper integration are incurable heretics who, having turned their backs upon the course of history, are not even worth debating with. In short, for such actors the EU already is a public sphere and the more one keeps politics and ideology out of it the better.

Conclusion

From several different angles, this chapter has sought to show how and why most European Commissioners find it so difficult to operate both in 'Brussels-centred' and national public spheres. Indeed, this trait goes to the heart of their weakness as political representatives. To paraphrase one of Marc Abélès's (1996: 61) conclusions on MEPs, Commissioners '*make* Europe through engaging in a continuous process of negotiation […], but they *are* not Europe'. As François Foret (2003) also rightly concludes, a limited European public sphere can be said to exist wherein the participants share a number of codes and rituals which ensure a minimal level of homogeneity and mutual understanding. However, there is little sign that this sphere is extending because:

> it comes up against the fact that less specialized actors and the general public possess no particular motivation to engage in the required cognitive investment. More profoundly still, their reluctance to change is compounded by the fact that so few efficient symbolic mechanisms exist which might encourage a rearticulation of their habitual framework of references and the upheavals introduced by the emergence of a European level of government.
>
> (Foret 2003: 82, author's translation)

Indeed, although most public actors in Europe now tackle most of their political work as if one single government of Europe existed (Smith 2004a), the representative dimension of their activity singularly fails to reflect this transformation.

Shorn of many of the resources and rituals usually associated with political representation, Commissioners lack political legitimacy and these traits seem unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Asked to do the impossible work of straddling the gulf between an embryonic European public sphere and its highly institutionalised national counterparts, little wonder that most holders of the office simply give up and take refuge in the role of technocrat or ambassador. Over and above what this tells us about Commissioners and the Commission, it provides important reasons for reflecting upon the specificity of politics as an activity within the EU as a whole (Smith 2004b). Such politics takes place within a single European public space that is far from complete, largely because most practitioners such as Commissioners consider it fruitless to invest heavily in their representational resources at this level. Less the result of careful calculation than an effect of institutionalised roles, this relative neglect of the EU as a sphere for public deliberation and debate leads such actors to attempt to remain present in national public spheres without necessarily giving them the resources to do so with much chance of success.

Notes

1 Part of our research entailed sociographical analysis of all the Commissioners who have held office since 1958. The bulk of our study, however, was centred upon eight Commissioners from two Colleges: Sir Leon Brittan, Ray Mac-Sharry, Christiane Scrivener and Jean Dondelinger of the second Delors Commission (1989–93); and Leon Brittan, Edith Cresson, Yves-Thibault de Silguy, Marcelino Oreja and Franz Fischler of the Santer Commission (1995–9). Although three of these persons were interviewed, most of our 70 interviews targeted the cabinet members of each Commissioner and their opposite numbers in the DG. In addition, the Commissioners' public speeches were systematically analysed. Of course, the College of Commissioners has evolved since 1999 and our study dealt only superficially with these changes. Nevertheless, unsystematic observation of recent events does not appear to invalidate analysis based upon previous periods.

2 For analysis of the investiture procedure per se, see Magnette 2001.

3 Given the controversies sparked by the investiture of the Prodi and Barrosso Commissions, the time is certainly ripe for an in-depth and comparative study of this question.

4 Interview, November 1999.

5 In particular, it facilitated the obtaining of an enhanced communication budget for the campaign for the euro.

6 Cresson spent much of January 1999 trying to persuade MEPs to lift the charges against her. Recalling this episode, a member of her cabinet stressed that 'there were journalists all over the place – the dramatisation of a large-scale trial. She had to respond to questions and in the cabinet we prepared her for this by doing simulations and writing "defensive points". But we were up against MEPs who mixed everything up and others who distributed tracts during our meetings.' Interview, November 2000.

7 On this point, Baisnée (2004: 231) recounts how during a press conference he attended in the EP in November 1999, most journalists only arrived in time to listen to Romano Prodi and Commissioner Barnier. As soon as these actors left, the press gallery emptied.

8 This term was used by one of de Silguy's cabinet members. Interview, October 1999.

9 Many of our interviewees criticised media coverage of the EU and sometimes even accused journalists of a form of 'European treason'. Interview, October 1999.

10 See the novel by Stanley Johnson, an ex-European civil servant (1987: 52–5).

11 This finding is based upon the Secretariat General's archives of written speeches and those placed on the Commission's website. The speech in question was by Oreja in Lisbon on 27 March 1995 during the opening of a European Information Centre.

12 This unit was made up of Pinheiro's head of cabinet, members of President Delors' cabinet, and officials from DG X and the Secretariat General.

13 This discourse was subsequently formalised in a communication from the European Commission (1996).

14 Interview, December 1998.

15 Interview, November 1998.

16 There are some exceptions to this rule. Revealingly, Edith Cresson kept two of her three spokespersons outside her cabinet.

17 First used by Max Weber (1971: 114), the concept of 'political enterprise' has been used by political scientists to denote 'all conscious attempts to conquer and exercise political power' (Gaxie 1993: 27). It encourages us to examine the

goals and strategies of Commissioners and their closest collaborators, not just what structures their activity (Joana and Smith 2002: 19).

18 That is, an official recruited by competition and who, therefore, would have been trained in law or economics but certainly not in journalism.

19 This is done in Joana and Smith (2002: 224–31). For a full analysis of this episode and its consequences, see Baisnée 2003b (Part 3).

20 The expression was used by one of his former cabinet members. Interview, November 1999.

21 Brittan himself recounts that, during a farewell meeting with activists from his constituency party in late 1988, 'Most people did not know what a Commissioner was and I found it hard to explain. The only people who understood were the farmers because of the CAP – they were the only ones to actually congratulate me!' Interview, January 2001.

22 Interview with cabinet member, January 2001 and confirmed by Brittan himself (2000: 185).

23 See 'Don't Oppose Blair Tonight', a personal opinion published in the *Daily Telegraph*, 12 November 1997.

24 See, e.g. 'Brittan lays into Hague's "dated" policy on Europe'; *Guardian*, 29 May 1998.

25 Interview, November 2000.

26 Interview with cabinet member, November 2000.

27 Interview, December 2000.

28 This also reflects a lack of attention given to the popular press. 'It worked for a while with the *Sun* because Leon is good with the soundbite and got on well with Trevor Kavanagh, the political editor. But as it became too Europhile, we dropped this angle. Ultimately, he had an instinctive desire to talk to "his" press – the *Telegraph* and *The Times* – because it was what his cronies read. He hardly ever cared about the *Independent* or the *Guardian*.' Interview with one of Brittan's spokesmen, May 2001.

29 Interview on a Belgian television channel, 29 September 1992. Also see her speech to the Kangaroo group of MEPs, London, 12 November 1992.