THE SANTER COMMISSION:
Pillarised, Nationalised or Just 'Normalised'?

John Peterson
Department of Politics
University of Glasgow
Adam Smith Building
Glasgow G12 8RT
tel: UK + (141) 330 5076
fax: UK + (141) 330 5071
e-mail: johnpeterson1@compuserve.com

ABSTRACT

In retrospect (and following recent publications by Ross, Grant and Cockfield) it is now clear that the early Delors years were an unusual period in the lifespan of the Commission. It was united behind a single purpose, subject to strong central leadership and granted a rare window of opportunity by key Member States (argued by Moravcsik) to take the initiative in designing market liberalisation as well as 'flanking policies'. Commission activism ended before the end of the Delors Presidency, but this paper focuses on the changes under the Santer Presidency and asks what are the implications for theorizing about European integration. Is the Santer Commission unusually weak or just a more 'normal' Commission? The central argument is that the extent to which 'multi-level governance' explains decision-making in policy sectors depends on how deeply the Commission must reach into the fabric of national civil services and interest group structures in order to accrue valued resources, and thus act as 'ring-leader' of policy networks which are effective in asserting their interests.

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One of the great mysteries facing scholars who first began researching and teaching on the European Union (EU) in the late 1980s was the dearth of literature on the European Commission.[1] For what seemed like a long time, the choice when compiling reading lists for the inevitable week on the Commission was between assigning work which was historically interesting but out-of-date (Haas 1964; Henig 1980; Rosenthal 1975; Spinelli 1966), highly state-centred (Willis 1982) or pretty tough going for undergraduates (Cassese 1987; Taylor 1983). To sustain student interest and maintain the belief -- often a very fragile one -- that the EU was both interesting and understandable, the only solution seemed to be tracking down a second-hand copy of Coombes' (1970) long out-of-print masterpiece, Politics and Bureaucracy in the European Community, and putting it on 'short loan', for as short a loan period as possible.[2]

The problem now for EU scholars is trying to stay on top of a enormously expanded literature (Cockfield 1994; Edwards and Spence 1994b; Grant 1994; Ross 1995; Cini 1996; Page 1997). The literature is now starting to move beyond a preoccupation with the Commission's role in the acceleration of European integration in the 1980s (see for example Moravcsik 1990; Sandholtz and Zysman 1989). Its new focus is on how the Commission's role might change now that the long and fascinating Presidency of Jacques Delors (1985-94) is over.

In retrospect, it is clear that the early Delors years were an extraordinarily unusual period in the lifespan of the Commission. It was united behind an essentially single purpose: the 1992 project. It was subject to strong central leadership: by Delors and a network of his trusted operatives in the Commission. Perhaps above all, it exploited a short-lived window of opportunity to get agreement on ambitious market liberalisation initiatives and 'flanking policies' (the structural funds, social and environmental measures, research programmes), all of which acted to accentuate the EU's powers. However, the window appeared to shut well before the end of Delors' Presidency.

This paper's purpose is to place the Commission of 1997 in a wider historical, political and theoretical context. It is concerned with four essential questions:

- First, how is the Commission different under the Presidency of Jacques Santer?
- Second, in historical terms, is the Santer Commission unusually weak or just a more 'normal' Commission?
- Third, what are the implications of the Commission's changing role for theorising about European integration?
- Fourth, what will the 'Commission of the future' look like?

By way of response, we develop four arguments. First, we argue in section 1 that the Commission is certainly better-managed under Santer, but that his authority

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[1] This mystery was first noted and commented upon with considerable insight by Edwards and Spence (1994a).

[2] That Coombes (1970) remains a classic is evidenced by the prominence given to a reconsideration of 'the Coombes thesis' in Page's (1997: 141-5) conclusion.

and personal control are much weaker than Delors'. Moreover, Santer lacks a 'big idea' which, like the 1992 project, could be deployed to rally the Commission, EU Member States and other EU institutions behind a single purpose. Despite innovative new attempts to achieve enhanced policy coordination, the Commission has become more 'pillarised',[3] with sectoral policy networks acting more autonomously. Meanwhile, competition between national interests rages within an EU institution where, in principle anyway, they should be muted if not absent.

In section 2, we see that the Delors Commission was far more an exception in its strength than is Santer's in its weakness. The problems which have plagued the Santer Commission are familiar ones which have haunted the Commission since its origins. Many of them were evident in the final half of the Delors era, when the Commission's position clearly weakened.

Section 3 argues that any viable theory of EU politics must acknowledge three points which are now well-supported in the literature on the Commission. First, we need theory which takes account of how resource-poor the Commission is, which does not draw a false dichotomy between 'national governments' and 'EU institutions', and which does acknowledge that power is delegated from national governments to complex networks of actors, rather than to the Commission per se. Second, we must stop viewing the Commission as a 'single actor' (see Hooghe 1997) and instead deploy an 'actor-based' perspective which allows that its officials have multiple identities which may motivate them in different ways at different times. Third, we must -- perhaps reluctantly -- concede that the political environment within which the Commission operates is, above all, what determines how 'strong' any Commission is.

Section 4 briefly examines recent proposals for reforming the Commission. While radical reform is unlikely anytime soon, we suggest that the present pattern of loading the Commission with responsibilities, but denying it sufficient resources to perform its functions, is unsustainable in the long run. Arguably, the Commission will continue to see its autonomy erode away unless it truly 'does less, but does it better' and becomes more focused on a narrower range of tasks.

[3] The creation by the Maastricht Treaty of two new 'pillars', for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and justice and home affairs policies, is incidental but not central to our argument. We use the term 'pillarised' to refer to the rigid segmentation of EU institutions by policy sector, each of which has its own 'sector-dedicated' Council, Commissioner, Directorate-General (DG, or Commission 'service'), and EP committee. 'Horizontal' links between pillars are notably weak in EU governance.

1. Delors to Santer: What's Different Now?

Managing the Commission

In principle, management of the Commission -- the performance of its assigned tasks according to an agreed set of rules and procedures -- is the responsibility of its Secretariat-General, headed by David Williamson, former head of the British Cabinet office. A crafty behind-the-scenes operator, Williamson became a trusted member of Delors' personal network after his appointment in 1987. However, any ambitions he may have harboured for reforming the Commission's management structures had to be shelved until Delors retired and was replaced by a successor who took more interest in institutional reform.[4] In the words of a senior official in the Secretariat-General:

> Delors' actual influence on the 'house' and how it works has been limited, and the same with [Pascal] Lamy. They've both really neglected the organisation of the house. They have contacts with a very limited number of people and tend to rely on the same people again and again.[5]

The reference to Pascal Lamy, Delors' chef du cabinet, in the same breath as Delors himself reflects both the de facto influence of any President's 'number two' on the day-to-day management of the Commission. Another member of Delors' cabinet was frank:

> For your background information, I can tell you that Delors couldn't organise his way out of a paper bag. Lamy is the guy who makes Delors efficient...There's a theory that runs around that says Pascal came to the Commission in 1985, had a look 'round, realised he was never going to be able reform the place, gave up trying to do it, chose the strategy of finding people he trusted and planted people he trusted in certain key areas...I wouldn't say that he's given up on reform. I would say that he certainly believes that one element of reform -- and I think he's absolutely right -- is choosing the right people. He spends a lot of time trying to make sure, in his view, that people in key positions are not just the guys proposed by X Member country who happen to be of the right political colour but are useless.[6]

Certainly, weakening the informal but entrenched system of 'national flags' in the Commission (see Page 1997, pp.51-5) could be considered an important type of 'reform'.

Yet, Lamy's reliance on Delors' informal network and his 'Frenchman in a hurry' ethos left little time for thinking about how about how the 'house' would function after the Delors era was over.

One management issue became a particularly burning one during the Delors years: the power of cabinets. Consisting of the personal advisers of individual

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[4] Middlemas' (1995: 222-3) contends that an important element in the construction of Delors' personal network was the President's control over internal Commission promotions, which had been the prerogative primarily of Williamson's predecessor as Secretary-General, Emile Noël, in the pre-Delors era.

[5] Interview, Brussels, 15 March 1994.

[6] Interview, Brussels, 2 March 1994.

Commissioners, cabinets 'lie outside the formal, hierarchical structure of the Commission' (Cini 1996: 115). Initially, Commissioners in the old EEC were allowed only two personal advisers. By the end of the Delors years, most had at least nine advisers at the highest administrative level, with only six financed from the Commission's budget (and the rest usually funded by national sources). On average, members of cabinets tended to be younger[7] and less experienced in EU matters than officials in the Commission's services. Most shared the same nationality as their Commissioner. It was probably too simple to claim that 'intergovernmentalism starts when proposals hit the cabinets. They're mini-Councils within the Commission' (quoted in Peterson 1995: 74). On the other hand, the Delors style of 'management' and the dominance of his own cabinet meant that cabinets became 'increasingly instrumental in building policy majorities and package deals across Community institutions and with the Member States' (Donnelly and Ritchie 1994: 47). A senior official in the Secretariat-General with 20 years experience confirmed that:

> Certainly, cabinets are far more powerful now, and that is certainly a consequence of Delors. His own cabinet is very active, and other cabinets are responding. There's a large amount of power in the hands of a group of people whose expertise and experience is quite variable. The problem will have to be dealt with by the next President.

The problem immediately preoccupied Santer's highly-respected and experienced chef du cabinet, Jim Cloos. Previously, Cloos had served as senior official in Luxembourg's Permanent Representation in Brussels and chef du cabinet for Réné Steichen, the Agriculture Commissioner in the final Delors Commission. By most accounts, Cloos (and Santer himself) showed considerable sympathy to the argument that the cabinets had become too powerful, particularly when initial meetings were held with all Commission Directors-General in late 1994. Under the Santer regime, the tenor of cabinet level discussions became far less heated and blatantly nationalistic, and more consensual. Notably fewer charges of 'terrorism', or sabotage of the good work of the services by headstrong members of cabinets, were heard.

At the same time, the Santer cabinet quickly established themselves as hard-liners in their expectations of the quality of work they received from the services. The Commission's formal internal rules of procedure were respected far more than was the case under Delors, but Cloos and his colleagues made it known that they expected initiatives which emerged from the services to be professional, well-researched and politically-astute. A senior member of Santer's cabinet commented:

> Our big mission is to get our people to have respect for the power of the Commission to intervene, because if it is misused then we get criticism from the Member States and we all suffer...There are still problems and some

[7] In early 1994, the average age of all non-secretarial cabinet officials -- leaving aside chefs and deputy chefs -- was 41.75. Nearly 40 per cent (31 of 80) were younger than 40 years old. Contrast these figures with Pages (1997: 73) finding that the average age of senior Commission officials is 54 years old. I am grateful to Nigel Evans, formerly of the cabinet of Karel van Miert, for his kind assistance in assembling data on the ages of cabinet officials.

> cabinets make life very difficult for their Director General. But you have people who have been in the Commission administration for 15 or 20 years, and they have lost touch. They don't know what people think in the member states or what people think in the Council. They make a lot of psychological errors for which we pay dearly as the Commission.[8]

New steps were taken to try to stamp on inter-Commission rivalries. For example, the staggering proliferation of studies commissioned by the services or individual Commissioners -- which numbered over 1300 in 1994 -- often represented attempts by various elements of the Commission to win arguments with each other under Delors. Cloos, together with Williamson, instituted a crackdown.

Despite the Commission President's lack of formal powers, Santer kept for himself an overall coordinating role on matters related to institutional affairs, external policy and monetary union. In particular, Santer made the elimination of internal Commission rivalries on external policy something of a crusade in the wake of very public and bitter turf battles between Leon Brittan and Hans van den Broek in the last Delors Commission. On a number of high-profile issues after 1994, including the US Helms-Burton law on trade with Cuba, relations with Iran and consolidating the peace in Bosnia, the Santer formula seemed to pay off in the form of relatively clear, unadulterated Commission positions.

PLACE TABLES 1 & 2 ABOUT HERE

Santer and (especially) Cloos clearly gave careful thought to the more general problem of insufficient policy coordination. Two new innovations were the creation of the so-called 'Groupes de Commissaires' (see table 1) and 'reseaux' of Directors-General (see table 2) to coordinate policies across narrowly-drawn institutional divisions within the Commission. By no means was the problem solved: coordination across policy sectors remained one of the Commission's most glaring weaknesses. Yet, Santer still presided over a Commission which was better-managed in important respects.

Presidential authority and control

A second clear difference between the Delors and Santer Commissions concerns Presidential authority and control. Three factors conspired to make Santer's position within the Commission far less imperious than Delors'. First, northern enlargement in 1995 meant that the Commission expanded from 17 members under Delors to 20 under Santer. All three Commissioner from the accession states -- Franz Fischler from Austria, Erkki Liikanen from Finland, and Anita Gradin from Sweden -- quickly distinguished themselves as competent, team players. Still, the inevitable effect of the presence of three extra Commissioners was to make the college (and the cabinets) less clubby and more difficult to lead. Fischler took it upon himself to speak (without authority) for the college as a whole during a critical phase of the beef crisis, and then

[8] Interview, Brussels, 6 November 1995.

engaged in an unholy row with Leon Brittan, whom he accused of acting like a 'white knight' in the interests of the British government.[9] More actual votes had to be taken in the college than was ever the case under Delors.[10] It is worth recalling that perhaps the most comprehensive and clear-headed review of the Commission ever conducted -- the Spierenberg Report of 1979 -- was firm in insisting that the number of Commissioners should never rise above 10 (see Page 1997: 36-7).

Second, Santer was nobody's first choice to replace Delors. The Franco-German candidate, Jean-Luc Dehaene, the Belgian Prime Minister, was vetoed by the United Kingdom (UK) precisely because it was feared that he 'might be able to assume Delors's full mantle' (Middlemas 1995: 215). Santer's Presidency was confirmed by the European Parliament (EP) with a notable lack of enthusiasm by a tiny, 8-vote majority (not counting abstentions).

Meanwhile, no less than 7 members of the first Santer Commission previously had been Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers or Finance Ministers. Even Commissioners who fell outside this group seemed unafraid to make statements which defied the principle of collective responsibility or were heedless of Santer's authority. The most notable example was the publication in 1995 by Ritt Bjerregaard, the Commissioner for environmental policy, of her Commission diaries in a Danish newspaper. Bjerregaard's (generally dull) diaries contained several unflattering portrayals of Santer and blatantly violated the Commission's internal rules of procedure. Neil Kinnock's questioning of the wisdom of EMU at a private British dinner in 1985 and Emma Bonino's condemnation of a 1997 Commission (DG II) report which cast doubt on Italy's early suitability for joining a single currency hardly showed respect for Santer's self-appointed status as primus inter pares on EMU. Increasingly, and without Santer's blessing, Commissioners held selective press briefings restricted to journalists from 'their' Member State.[11]

Third, Santer was unable to appeal to a powerful national capital as a tool of last resort. Close observers of the Delors years (Grant 1994; Ross 1995) seem to concur that Delors exploited his direct line to Paris less often than was widely assumed (see Middlemas 1995: 220) or might have been expected. Moreover, France's position of some distance from the median position on the Council on many

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[9] A scathing letter from Fischler to Brittan in September 1996 complained: 'After what I have done to help find an honourable solution on BSE I cannot accept that the Commission's position be distorted as it was and that I be seen (together with the President) as reluctant to help the UK and ready to cave in to pressure from a white knight coming to the UK government's rescue'. Quoted in Financial Times, 21-22 August 1996. See also European Voice, 26 September-2 October 1996.

[10] This point was confirmed by a number of interviewees with experience of weekly Commission meetings in both the Delors and Santer regimes. It is difficult to reconcile with Middlemas' (1995: 235) claims that '[t]he late 1980s and the 1990s have seen more votes and less courtesy. Yet the college is actually more coherent...than it was in the early 1980s thanks to a generally accepted opinion that without central coordination the Commission itself is stultified. In that sense, Delors's legacy has been institutionalised'.

[11] See results of International Press Association (IPA) poll cited in a letter by Michael Stabenow, representative of the Brussels-based German press to the IPA, in European Voice, 19-25 September 1996.

issues was often a liability for Delors. However, Delors' French-ness gave him political weight, particularly because '[l]ike Charles de Gaulle, Delors had a knack of speaking for France and Europe in one breath' (Barber 1995a). His authority within the college was largely unchallenged (except by Leon Brittain) and his French 'connections' helped make the informal Delors network a formidable force. Delors' special relationship with François Mitterrand was an important asset.[12]

The ability of any Commission President to exert strong leadership and control over the Commission is always challenged by the twin doctrines of collective responsibility and the President's lack of formal powers. These doctrines posed relatively fewer difficulties for Delors, who bypassed formal chains of command and worked through his own network of hand-picked placements within the Commission. Santer's far more inclusive and consensual personal style could be viewed as a strategy of necessity as much as choice. However, the point is not one about differences of personal style, but factors beyond Santer's control. It is that the combination of a bigger Commission, the appointment of a large number of political heavyweights, lack of enthusiasm for Santer's initial appointment and his small state national orgins have made for a far less hierarchical and centrally-led Commission.

The 'Big Idea'

A third distinguishing feature of the Santer era has been its lack of any new and energising idea or 'vision' to give impetus to European integration. For his part, Delors himself was 'project-less' when he was chosen as President in 1984: he championed the freeing of the single market only after canvassing national views on a 'menu' of options for relaunching the EU. Still, the 1992 project very much identified with Delors, along with Lord Arthur Cockfield (1994). Once its political effects had begun to wane, Delors shrewdly embraced rapid German unification as a 'project' in 1990, earning himself and the Commission widespread admiration for the remarkable speed with which the incorporation of the new German Länder was 'processed'.

In contrast, Santer has insisted that he dislikes 'déclarations fracassantes' (sensational declarations), and prefers 'travail en profondeur', or in-depth work.[13] Still, it is difficult not to view his 'Confidence Pact on Employment', a plan for creating jobs by securing agreements between governments, employers and unions, as an attempt to give his Presidency a symbolic centrepiece. It also is difficult not to view the Confidence Pact, about which little was heard after September 1996, as a damp squib. Surely, part of the problem was that fighting unemployment lacked the 'sparkle' of creating a 'Europe without Frontiers' and the world's largest single market.

Of course, to a considerable extent the Santer Commission was preoccupied the most ambitious 'big idea' in the EU's history -- Economic and Monetary Union

[12] The contrast with Santer is sharp if we consider the entirely anecdotal, but unavoidable observation of Bjerregard in her diaries that Mitterrand's successor, Jacques Chirac, treated Santer with considerable disregard and even disrespect.

[13] Quoted from interview with Santer in Financial Times, 2 December 1996.

(EMU). Getting EMU launched became absolutely fundamental to the programme of the post-1995 Commission, with all else paling beside it. Yet, EMU was a long-standing project for which Santer himself could take little or no personal credit. It was fundamentally different from the 1992 project in its political effects, in that it did not promise rewards for all Member States (see Peterson 1997b) and even threatened to consign some to second-class status in the EU. Moreover, during the first few years of the Santer era, EMU had the knock-on effect of making the EU itself unpopular as public opinion in France, Germany, Belgium and elsewhere reacted predictably to harsh national austerity policies which became identified with 'Europe'. Otherwise, the Santer Commission was preoccupied by difficult new challenges -- coping with past and future enlargements, the intergovernmental conference (IGC) which began in 1996, the war in Bosnia, and (particularly) the 1996 'beef crisis' -- none of which offered any real prizes to the Commission.

In short, the first two years of the Santer era brought a long overdue effort to make the Commission less reliant on the personal authority, control and 'henchmen' of its strongest President ever. In some respects, the Commission became a more genuinely collegial body, despite its increased size. Yet, Santer's weaker authority and control also had the effect of encouraging more open rivalries between two kinds of faction which naturally and continually seek control of the Commission's apparatus (see Page 1997: Ch. 5). The first, of course, is national imperatives, which have always been -- and will always be -- a constant challenge to the Commission's independence and autonomy.

The second is sectoral interests. The Commission has always featured highly sectorised policy structures, with responsibilities more narrowly-drawn than those of national ministries (i.e. two separate DGs (VI and XIV) for agriculture and fisheries, two DGs for external 'political' (DGIA) and 'economic' (DG I) matters). Meanwhile DGs themselves feature a very large number of divisions or units per employee (Page 1997, ch.2). In the words of one member of the 'Delors network',

> A basic engine of behaviour in the Commission is the mentality which says: 'let me defend my competence and extend it to new areas'. There is a sort of permanent fight. It masquerades as a battle of ideas, but its really a battle of competence or zones of responsibility. The Secretary-General really lacks the competence to integrate things.[14]

Clearly, the early Delors Commissions featured a range of creative measures for stamping on national and sectoral imperatives when they became too extreme or ambitious.[15]

In contrast, the lack of a 'big idea' during the Santer era to unite the Commission and the EU's Member States in common cause opened the door to more attempts by national governments to manipulate the Commission and accentuated the

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[14] Interview, Cellule de Prospective, 10 February 1994.

[15] A good example is the Delors cabinet's use of the Cellule de Prospective, originally created as a sort of internal Commission think tank, to maintain control over the exercise which produced the 1993 White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment. See Ross 1995.

EU's highly 'pillarised' policy structures. Santer's 'do it less, but do it better' credo even gave policy networks incentives to seek policy 'space', to ensure that competing sectoral networks did not capture sought-after (and now limited) 'slots' on the Commission's legislative agenda. The general effect was to contribute to a decline in the Commission's capacity for acting autonomously. Cini (1996) performs the useful service of reminding us of the basic difference between an institution and an organisation: institutions have the capacity to act autonomously, organisations do not. An important part of the story of the Santer era is that the Commission became more of an organisation, and far less like an institution.

2. The Santer Commission in Historical Perspective

The minimal number of studies of the Commission published in the 20 or so years after 1970 is an important signpost to a historical analysis of the Commission. It reflects a general lack of academic interest in the Commission, particularly after the early neofunctionalist literature ran out of intellectual steam, and was even declared 'obsolete' (see Haas 1975). Few scholars wished to risk their time, energy and career prospects studying an organisation (not an 'institution') which appeared to be weak, unimaginative and extremely marginal to the real process governing of Western Europe.

Yet, an historical review of the Commission's evolution pays dividends in three respects. First, it highlights the clear disparity in terms of stature and influence between two (perhaps three) Commission Presidents and all of the others. Even today, few EU scholars would be able to name all of the nine individuals who have held the post of Commission President (see table 3). As such, an EU analogue of the recently-revived 'Schlesinger poll',[16] which asks a jury of leading scholars to rate US Presidents on a scale from 'great' to 'failure', would be a rather pointless exercise. Along with Delors, Walter Hallstein -- one of the EU's true 'Founding Fathers' -- has been the only indisputably 'great President' in the Commission's history. Hallstein's successor, Jean Rey, presided over what became known as the 'memorandum Commission' (Cini 1997: 53). Rey was replaced by Franco Maria Malfatti, who showed little contrition about walking away from the Commission Presidency after 15 months to contest a domestic Italian election. Cini's (1997: 56-7) characterisation of François Xavier-Ortoli as a 'technocrat rather than [a] politician' and 'rather unexciting' seems charitable. Similarly, Gasthon Thorn -- like Santer, a Luxembourger -- was remarkable mainly for his incapacity for strategic thinking.

It might be argued that Roy Jenkins achieved 'greatness', given his prominent role in the creation of the European Monetary System (see Ludlow 1982), particularly as the EMS eventually became a springboard to EMU. But figuratively speaking, a

[16] The poll originated with 1948 when Arthur M. Schlesinger invited 55 leading historians to pronounce judgements on all Presidents since Washington, with the exceptions of two who died soon after taking office. The poll was conducted most recently by Schlesinger's son, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and published in The New York Times on 15 December 1996.

group portrait of all who have held the post of Commission President would reveal a few giants amidst a flock of unremarkable, faceless, and even nameless Eurocrats.

Table 3 - Presidents of the Commission	Period of tenure
Walter Hallstein	1958-67
Jean Rey	1967-70
Franco Maria Malfatti	1970-72
Sicco Mansholt	1973
François Xavier-Ortoli	1973-77
Roy Jenkins	1977-81
Gasthon Thorn	1981-85
Jacques Delors	1985-95
Jacques Santer	1955-present

source: Cini 1997: 37.

Second, a historical perspective reveals that Santer is not the first Commission President to find himself trying to lead a group of high-powered, self-confident former ministers. Considerably more than half of all Commissioners appointed since the Community's origins previously held full ministerial posts in their Member State (Page 1997: 119). No doubt Santer would have much preferred the nine-member Commission over which Hallstein presided to his own unwieldy college of 20.[17] Yet, an important parallel between the two could be drawn from the fact that five of Hallstein's nine previously had held senior ministerial rank (Ludlow 1991). In the late 1950s, as in the mid-1990s, national governments clearly wished to ensure that their voice was heard within the college.

What was different was that many of Hallstein's statements about the Commission's role and purpose, which were considered mildly provocative at the time, would have caused uproar if they had been made by Santer. Two samples: 'We are not in business, we are in politics'. The President of the Commission 'could be considered as a sort of European prime minister' (quoted in Cini 1997: 39,47). Certainly, Santer's Commission lacked the singlemindedness of Hallstein's, which Coombes (1970: 311) described as more like 'a political party or highly organized pressure group rather than...an administrative organization'.

Third, a historian's view reveals that Santer is by no means the first President to find it difficult to enforce collegiality and collective responsibility for the 'company line'. Ross (1995: 27) is unequivocal in insisting that 'Commissions sink or swim on their abilities to act together'. The Rey Commission was marked by several incidents

[17] In fact, Santer made empowering the Commission President, and giving him/her more authority to hire, fire and distribute portfolios, one of the main demands of the Commission within the 1996-7 IGC. See interview with Santer in European Voice, 17-23 October 1996.

when heavyweight Commissioners -- particularly Raymond Barre, Sicco Mansholt and Ralf Dahrendorf -- made public statements that appeared at odds with the Commission's agreed line or programme. Ortoli may be credited with making the Commission more cohesive: prior to his tenure, attendance at weekly meetings of the college was more or less voluntary (Cini 1997: 55-7). However, his Commission featured nasty turf battles over the external affairs portfolio, which foreshadowed the Brittan-van den Broek disputes. Both the Jenkins and Thorn Commissions featured abundant inter-collegiate sniping.

Even Delors struggled to keep (at various times) Brittan, Martin Bangemann, Frans Andriessen, Ray MacSharry and Carlo Ripa di Meana from engaging in independent acts of policy or political entrepreneurship. In particular, Ripa di Meana enraged Delors with his flamboyant attacks on Member States -- especially France and the UK -- for their failure to accept his own 'green' agenda on energy taxes, the creation of the new European Environmental Agency and roads-building. Even at the peak of his power, Delors was reminded repeatedly that he was, at most, primus inter pares.

While Ross (1995) may overstate Delors' power within and beyond the Commission, he is on firm ground in arguing that the success of the Delors strategy was contingent on 'a favourable array of three contextual variables': receptivity in national capitals to EU-level solutions, international changes (particularly German unification) and Delors' ability to 'surf' the business cycle (Ross 1995: 234-7; citation on p.234). Already by 1991, the tide was turning against Delors. Surely, one of the most telling signs of Delors' weakened position by this time was the Maastricht Treaty's commitment to subsidiarity, or the notion that all decisions should be taken at lowest possible level of government compatible with efficient policy delivery (see Peterson 1994; Scott et al 1994). The principle was used by Member States, particularly during the difficult period of Maastricht's ratification, to justify a host of measures designed to ignore rules agreed in Brussels or injunctions issued by the Commission. Incredibly, given that the Commission's legal service was a powerful outpost in the Delors network, 'the subsidiarity principle, with all its potential legal ramifications, was embodied in the Maastricht Treaty without prior agreement by the Legal Service or even examination of what it might signify in a legal context' (Middlemas 1995: 258).

For the sake of comparison, the precise role that the Commission has played in the current IGC is difficult to gauge, if for no other reason than because it remains unclear what will actually be agreed. However, there is little to suggest that the Commission has had much of an impact on the negotiations. While Santer formally has retained the 'IGC portfolio' for himself, in practice responsibility has been delegated to Marcelino Oreja, the Commissioner for institutional affairs. A former Spanish Foreign Minister, Oreja has an impressive political pedigree. However, he is

widely viewed in Brussels as a relatively ineffective Commissioner who, in effect, 'doesn't count'.[18]

Furthermore, Santer's decision to table a proposal for a revision of Article 129 (on regulating animal and plant safety) in the IGC could be viewed as a political blunder. Although sold by the Commission as a step towards 'the establishment of a proper food policy which gives pride of place to consumer protection and health', the proposal provoked a laager mentality amongst many Member States, particularly within the Agriculture Council. The proposal was dismissed in many national capitals as a weak President's desperate bid to appease the EP, after it threatened to vote on a motion of censure in response to the Commission's (mis)handling of the beef crisis. It was difficult to believe that the proposal had not cost the Commission political capital in the IGC.

Another interpretation would be that the Commission has been constructive, and not outrageously radical, in this IGC. The results may well become apparent on pillar III or reining in the Franco-German compulsion for 'flexibility', etc. There seems little chance of a violent backlash as occurred in the 1991 IGC, when -- according to Santer's own rather ironic description -- Delors 'came up too soon in the Maastricht negotiations with proposals which were too visionary'.[19] Still, it is sobering to consider that much of the Single European Act was actually written by a member of Delors' cabinet, François Lamoreaux, or even that the idea of a social protocol in the Maastricht Treaty (signed by 11 of 12 Member States) originated with Pascal Lamy.

But the wider point is that Delors' legacy very much rests on his achievements during the first half of his time in office. The period after 1990 found him and the Commission in a position far more similar to that of the Santer Commission. Furthermore, it would be churlish to deny that considerable policy innovation has occurred under Santer's watch. The more-or-less joint approach of DGs X, XV and II towards new public information campaigns ('Citizens First' and those related to the Euro) reveal a genuine breakthrough in terms of mass information, with Member States designing joint strategies with the Commission. Santer, with the able support of Liikanen and Gradin, has shown considerable sureness of touch in establishing a 'value for money' ethos in the spending of Community funds through programmes such as SEM 2000 and by showing far more respect than Delors for the views of the Court of Auditors on financial reform (see Peterson 1997a).

Ultimately, it could be argued that the act of comparing Santer with Delors itself is unfair. As Middlemas (1995: 225) argues, Delors' power stemmed in large measure from his long tenure: 'Unlike any previous President, Delors had time to create an informal organisation (not a machine) which enabled him to know, survey and influence a far wider range of business than any of his predecessors'. Clearly, even before the Delors era ended, the 'margins for manoeuvre [were] slim, and getting

[18] Here I quote (non-attributably) the Brussels correspondent for a widely-respected media source on the EU.

[19] Quoted from interview with Santer in Financial Times, 2 December 1996.

slimmer' (Cini 1996: 25). Perhaps they have just continued getting 'slimmer' under Santer.

3. The Commission in Theory & Practice

The evolving practical fortunes of the Commission have important implications for theorising about European integration and EU governance. Three are singled out here.

The first arises from the reality that nearly all actors in EU decision-making -- not least members of the Commission -- have multiple identities. Commissioners themselves, as well as officials in the services, all carry 'national baggage'. Their origins are in one Member State or another, and not in a polyglot polity called 'Europe'. At various times, they may be motivated to act as agents of national, sectoral or Commission interests, or some combination thereof.

Thus, the rationale for applying an 'actor-based' perspective -- which holds open the question of what motivates key EU actors -- is clear. In particular, an actor-based perspective helps us to understand the outcomes of iterated bargaining processes which socialise actors to one another and the goals of their particular policy sector. This perspective is not only germane to the Commission: for example, the powerful Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER), which groups together national ambassadors to the EU, appears to be characterised by as much complicity as any nominally 'intergovernmental' forum possibly could be (Barber 1995b; Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 1997: 72-84).

However, the Commission is where blithe assumptions about principle-agent relationships are most dangerous. It is easy to assume that since the Commission retains a formal monopoly over the right to initiate legislation that it controls the policy agenda and uses this power to seek further powers and accelerate European integration. As a very broad brush statement, the assumption is not wrong, just misleading. To illustrate the point, we still lack reliable data about the origins of legislative proposals,[20] but information collected by the Commission in 1993 suggests that only 6 per cent of all proposals originate as 'pure, "spontaneous" Commission initiatives' -- while considerably more originate from requests by Member States, the Council or industry (see table 4). Proposals may appear to emerge from 'nowhere'(Mazey and Richardson 1993),and the Commission certainly does retain at least the formal power to set the EU's agenda. But most proposals are 'sponsored' by various types of policy entrepreneur, which usually represent or have close links to national governments.

[20] Middlemas (1995: 241) makes a cryptic reference to 'a reasoned analysis' in the EU's Official Journal 'showing that only 25% of directives arise solely from within the Commission', then reports that '[s]ome officials reckon that the correct figure is as long as 15%', with a citation to a single interview. Similarly, in a footnote Héritier (1996: 165) cites one interview from DG XI (environment) to support the claim that 'the largest proportion of regulatory proposals may be traced back to the initiatives of member states'.

Table 4 - Origins of Commission proposals	Percentage
Internal consequences of intl. obligations	18%
Amendment to or codification of existing law	15%
Response to Member State requests	13%
Programmes agreed with Council	12%
Required by Treaty	8%
Follow-up to Council requests	8%
Response to Member State requests	8%
Pure, 'spontaneous' Commission initiatives	6%
Follow-up to ECJ judgement	2%

source: Westlake 1995: 64.

The point here, which emerges in bold relief from an actor-based perspective, is that the Commission clearly is permeated by 'national interests', and acts as an important forum for competition between them. EU governance is by no means a purely intergovernmental exercise and the Commission is not simply the 'lackey' of national capitals. Its Commissioners and officials act as 'ring-leaders' of policy networks, which themselves are the true guardians of the EU's policy agenda.

A second and related observation is that the dynamism of the early Delors years gave us a distorted picture of the way in which EU policy is actually made. From 1984-90, it may have made sense to speak of the Commission as a single-minded 'institution' to which powers were delegated by national governments. However, if that period was more the exception than the rule, then the dichotomy often drawn (see Moravcsik 1993; Pierson 1995) between 'national governments' and 'EU institutions' (with the Commission most prominent) becomes difficult to sustain.

If we are to make sense of the role of a Commission which is 'divided into all sorts of interest groups, clans, and cliques' (Ross 1995: 3), then we need a more 'practical' theory of power delegation. A plausible theory is that: powers are delegated to policy networks, not EU institutions, although the Commission often acts as their ring-leaders. Member States tend to be more willing to delegate powers to networks in which their interests are well-represented. An important determinant of their preferences on the Council or, on in more dramatic cases, in IGCs will be whether or not they have well-placed and reliable nationals in the Commission's services, in the Council General Secretariat, or at the level of the college of Commissioners or cabinets. These networks are sectoral in nature, with relevant DGs often existing at their centre, but are populated in large numbers by national officials and private actors (see figure 1).

PLACE FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

An important focus for this theory is comitology: the system of committees of national officials which ostensibly monitor the implementation of EU policies, but which in practice often are consulted throughout the policy process. There are different levels of stringency available to Member States when they delegate power: a management committee offers more control of the Commission's activities than an advisory committee. Yet, what matters far more than what type of committee is chosen is what type of interests are able to influence or even 'capture' policy networks, of which committees of national experts form an important part.

In important respects, both the Delors and Santer eras seem amenable to analysis using the theory of power delegation sketched here.[21] If we view the EU as a system in which governance takes place largely within policy networks, we must specify what sort of interests seek to 'capture' them. Several conceptual tools are available. Competition for control of the sectoral policy agenda -- and thus policy networks themselves -- may be viewed as a battle between various types of technocratically-motivated epistemic community (Haas 1992; Richardson 1996), or more partisan 'advocacy coalitions' (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Delors' hand-picked operatives operated as an unusually effective advocacy coalition: 'Delors's informal networks facilitated a degree of controlled planning previously inconceivable in a loose, fissile and often discordant Commission' (Middlemas 1995: 224).

Meanwhile, Santer's administrative innovations of groupes de Commissaires and
reseaux of Directors-General represent a very different strategy for imposing control from the centre. Its goal is to coordinate actions across sectors by encouraging exchanges between leading figures in the policy networks which correspond to them. The reduced legislative output of the Santer Commission (19 formal proposals in 1996, down from 61 in 1990), its widely-inclusive 'consultation exercises' and the broader policy initiatives which it has embraced make this strategy appropriate and even essential. The alternative is fierce, pitched battles between competing policy networks for limited 'policy space'.

Modelling EU policy networks is usually quite difficult given their complexity and the amount of bargaining which takes place behind closed doors within them. But an actor-based perspective on EU bargaining together with the theory of power delegation sketched here helps us come to grips with the true role of the Commission. We see that -- except in rare periods such as parts of the Hallstein and Delors eras -- the Commission is more a political system in itself than a single-minded, purposeful institution. Again, it is arguable whether we can consider the Commission an 'institution' at all most of the time.

A third and final implication for theorising about EU politics may be stated simply and briefly. Perhaps the most important (certainly the most revealing!) book

[21] This theory is developed further is Peterson and Bomberg 1997, which also contains a more fleshed-out treatment of the implications of an 'actor-based' perspective on EU governance.

written on the Commission in the 'post-Coombes' era concludes by painting a sobering picture of the myriad of shackles on the Commission and the process of European integration more generally (Ross 1995: 227-47). All of the most serious post-Maastricht constraints -- pre-EMU tensions, the general failures of pillars II and III, the new assertiveness of the EP, an oversized college of Commissioners -- have been foisted upon the Commission as a consequence of 'history-making decisions' (Peterson 1995) taken at the highest political level with precious little input from or concern for the Commission. It may be a blow to parsimony to insist that outcomes in EU governance are determined in large measure by developments in the 'wider political and economic environment' within which the Union operates. It certainly is depressing to advocates of closer European unity to find the Commission reduced, in theoretical terms, to a largely functional role of facilitating bargaining within policy networks, and relegated to 'policy-shaping' decisions, while 'history-making' decisions which determine the broad thrust and direction of European integration are beyond its control or often even its influence. But the Commission's fate is mostly determined by events over which it has little or no control.

4. Imagining the Commission of the Future

After considering where the Commission has 'been', it is appropriate to offer a few, brief thoughts on where it is going. The Commission is unlikely to be transformed in any fundamental way anytime soon. Despite the ongoing IGC and EU's impending enlargement, the right of each Member State to appoint a Commissioner has become, in diplomatic parlance, one of the things that smaller Member States are preparing 'to bleed for'. In he words of a senior Danish official:

> The idea of a smaller number of Commissioners is simply not on, unless the big states become willing to appoint only one as part of some wider bargain. You can't ask any country to give up their Commissioner as long as the Commission retains, one, the right of initiative; and , two, the power to act as guardians of the Treaty.[22]

If the number of Commissioners cannot be cut easily or drastically, then a sensible step -- given experience under the Delors and Santer Commissions -- would be to reduce the number of officials who serve in the cabinet of each. Portfolios could be divided more finely, perhaps with senior Commissioners (or those from larger Member States) formally charged with coordinating broader EU policies which cuts across many portfolios. Reducing the size of cabinets to just three or four officials

[22] Interview, Copenhagen, 6 January 1996. At this writing (early May 1997), it appears likely that some type of 're-weighting' of voting strength under QMV -- to the benefit of larger states -- would be traded for an agreement by large Member States to give up their right to appoint 2 Commissioners. As such, the Commission would be able to take on 5 new Member States without expanding the size of the Commission beyond its present number of 20.

would play well in the services and reduce the currently disproportionate power of relatively young, inexperienced, nationally-oriented officials.[23]

Of course, reducing the size of the cabinets is unlikely to satisfy critics of the Commission who advocate far more fundamental reforms. Member States show no inclination to allow the Commission to grow in size or become more powerful, even as they continue to load it with more responsibilities.[24] The Commission's 'zero growth' personnel policy (see Watson 1996), its utter dependence on private consultants, a pending court case concerning the black market in 'undeclared' labour hired by the Commission as subcontractors, and Helen Wallace's estimate (several years ago now) that 'some 20 per cent of Commission staff were "irregulars"' (i.e. seconded from national ministries or the private sector) are all indicative (see Wallace 1993).

One set of proposals for reform is premised on the idea that the Commission should be set free to be an overtly political body by 'hiving off' its 'technical' functions to independent agencies (Majone 1996; 1997). Another set of proposals has the opposite aim: repatriating its political functions to the Council and 'restructuring...the Commission to focus on managerial priorities in the Union' (Vibert 1994: 4). The views of the French President, Jacques Chirac, are long-standing and unequivocal: the Commission should be 'brought back to what it should be...an executive body and not one with parity with other institutions' (quoted in Edwards and Spence 1994). Obviously, the Santer ethos of 'doing less, but doing it better' can be operationalised in a radically different ways.

In any event, recent Commission initiatives have had to show respect for the hard, cold reality that a proposal which is predicated on increasing the Commission's power or resources is as good as dead before it is tabled. Take, for example, proposals in 1997 for new 'plough to plate' controls to try to ensure that future food safety crises, in the wake of the 'mad cow disease' disaster, were avoided. The cornerstone of the Commission's blueprint, developed primarily by Bonino, was the creation of a Food and Veterinary Office in Ireland. Its primary purpose would be promoting the creation of national 'networks of expertise' on food safety. The proposal also called for an increase in the size of the Commission's Directorate-General for food safety, but its expansion was foreseen mostly through redeployment of existing Commission personnel. Significantly, given fierce opposition from policy networks corresponding to particular agricultural products (i.e. wheat, beef, etc.), Bonino tabled her proposal quickly and did not consult widely on it within the Commission.

Another good example is the recent proposal to establish an outside agency -- answerable to the Commission, EP and Member States -- to handle EU aid policy. Development aid now is a portfolio split between 5 different DGs. Proposals developed by Santer together with the development Commissioner, Joao de Deus

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[23] I benefited considerably from a conversation on this point with Emile Nöel in Brussels in July 1996, just before his very sad death.

[24] For example, take the recent (April 1997) decision to give the Commission greater powers to vet cross-border mergers by taking charge of cases which previously were too small to fall under its jurisdiction. See Financial Times, 25 April 1997; The Economist, 25 April-1 May 1997.

Pinheiro, foresee handing over the management of day-to-day development aid to outside experts, thus leaving Commission free to 'concentrate on policy formulation'. There is little doubt, in the words of one official, that at present the Commission 'simply do[es] not have the human resources to manage the amount of aid and different types of aid'.[25] What is far less certain is whether most Member States really want the Commission to 'concentrate on policy'.

Regardless of which direction reform of the Commission takes, two points are clear. First, the hyper-activity of the Delors Commissions is politically unthinkable anytime soon. Second, something has to give in if the Commission -- and EU more generally -- are to survive the trauma of enlargement. Gamely, at least, Santer has argued that:

> I would fight with all my strength to convince my partners in the Intergovernmental Conference that if they want to keep this political project of a European Union and do not want to paralyse it or dilute it into a free trade area, we need a strong Commission holding on to the totality of its powers.[26]

Yet, given how overloaded and under-resourced it has become, it is plausible to believe a Commission which is more focused on fewer policy responsibilities is likely to be a more effective one. The Commission has always been better at proposing new policies than managing existing ones (see Ludlow 1991). Its critics are not wrong to argue that '[i]n the past, the reaction to unproductive expenditure programmes has been to create new programmes rather than to eradicate old ones' (Vibert 1994: 7). But in the Commission's defence, there is no doubt that it has become severely overloaded as Member States have 'dumped' new responsibilities on it without a commensurate increase in resources. A Commission which truly did less, but did it better would be more capable of acting autonomously, and becoming a true 'institution' again.

Conclusion

The European Commission is one of the most fascinating administrations ever created.

It was born as a body which would perform both mundane administrative and overtly political tasks. It has always found it difficult to perform them simultaneously and well.

We have seen that the present Commission is different in very fundamental respects from the early Delors Commissions, although far less dissimilar from Delors' post-1990 teams. There is little doubt that the Commission is better managed, but also far less 'Presidential' and visionary. A historical overview reveals that now is a far more 'normal' period in the Commission's evolution than were the late 1980s. In theoretical terms, the apparent single-mindedness of the early Delors Commissions has encouraged assumptions that no longer stand up about the analytical distinction between 'national governments' and 'EU institutions'. An 'actor-based' approach to

[25] Quoted in European Voice, 16-22 January 1997.
[26] Quoted in European Voice, 17-23 October 1996.

EU bargaining, a more nuanced theory of power delegation, and close attention to the wider political and economic environment within which the Commission operates are important raw materials for theory-building. Finally, it is enormously difficult to get a clear fix on what the 'Commission of the future' will look like, but there are powerful pressures building for quite significant reform.

For now, at least, the basic role of the Commission has been preserved under Santer. Despite its narrower policy focus, the Santer Commission can take credit for policy successes on a number of fronts: competition policy, fisheries reform, the Maastricht criteria, working hours, the beef crisis, Alitalia, etc. Above all, given the post-Maastricht political climate and the Commission's pillarisation, it is impossible not to be amazed that the Commission achieves all it does without being crippled completely.

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