

MISSION? GESTION?

CABINETS IN THE BARROSO COMMISSION

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Abstract

This paper develops three basic arguments about the evolving role of cabinets – the personal offices of European Commissioners – in the work of the Commission. First, however much their roles may have changed, any cabinet is only as strong as the Commissioner it serves. Second, cabinets have become a bridge between long-time member states and new, inexperienced, post-2004 entrants. Third, the cabinet system helps ‘rescue’ the Commission from several barely imaginable fates. One is the one it would face if there existed no channel by which national EU capitals could truly influence and shape the work of the Commission.

The European Commission has always been a hybrid administration. From its origins, it has always been deeply involved in both policy advocacy and management. But controversy about its basic purpose has never abated over its 50 year lifespan. Should the Commission be an *administration de mission*, which charts new directions and projects in European integration? Or simply an *administration de gestion*, which simply manages the policy agenda collectively chosen for the EU by its member states? The Commission under the Presidency of José Manuel Barroso has, as ever, sought to be both. But its approaches to these tasks have, arguably, been distinctive. Its *mission* is a ‘Europe of results’, especially in policy areas visible to ordinary Europeans. Equally, it is committed to ‘better regulation’, not least through more effective management (*gestion*) of the policy-making process.

Against this backdrop, the role of the private offices – or *cabinets* – of the ‘enlarged’ College of European Commissioners under Barroso is investigated in this paper. It develops three basic arguments. First, however much their roles may have changed, the idea that any cabinet is only as strong as the Commissioner it serves is a timeless principle of life in the Commission. Second, the *cabinets* have taken on the role of a bridge between long-time member states and new, inexperienced, post-2004 entrants. Third, and most generally, whatever the pathologies of the cabinet system, it

helps ‘rescue’ the Commission from several barely imaginable fates, above all that which it would face if there existed no channel by which national EU capitals could truly influence and shape the work of the Commission.

Here, we connect to the recent and counterintuitive argument that the Commission and other supranational EU institutions enhance the legitimacy of its member states. They do so not least by helping them to devise and enforce solutions to transboundary policy problems. Just as (generally) ‘supranationalism enhances national legitimacy in functional, political, and administrative terms’ (Menon and Weatherill 2008: 398), the power of *cabinets* (more specifically) in the Commission helps ensure that nationalism enhances supranational legitimacy in all of the same terms.

1. **Cabinets: the Animals Nobody Loves**

It is difficult to find anyone in the academy of EU scholars who has much that is positive to say about *cabinets*, which consist of 6-7 personal advisors to individual Commissioners.¹ One of the most memorable denunciations is that of McDonald (1997: 51) who, not satisfied with labelling them a ‘structural contradiction’, goes on to claim:

They readily recruit people directly from national contexts, bypassing the services, and they have regular contacts with national administrations, national lobbyists and the permanent representations. They also notoriously ‘parachute’ their chosen national recruits directly into key service jobs, over the heads of well-qualified and experienced officials in the services.²

Stevens and Stevens (2001) note that the Commission’s first President, Walter Hallstein, was wary of the very idea of *cabinets*. In their view, it was ‘with good reason as it turned out’, since *cabinets* have been associated with a variety of ills including ‘favouritism and nepotism’ and ‘fragmentation and conflict’ (Stevens and Stevens 2001: 201-7).

Cabinets are probably even more vilified in the Commission’s permanent services, or Directorates-General (DG). They are widely viewed as being disrespectful both of the work of the services and the Commission’s independence. *Cabinets* are a barrier to the Commission’s *mission* to identify and pursue the overarching ‘European interest’ (as opposed to those of its member states). One of the present author’s most memorable interview sound-bites ever came from a Dutch official in the Commission’s Secretariat-General (which manages the Commission’s services) who complained that ‘intergovernmentalism starts when proposals hit the *cabinets*. They are mini-Councils within the Commission’ (Peterson and Bomberg 1999: 39). Ross’ (1995: 161) kiss and tell memoir of his time inside the cabinet of President Jacques Delors accused some *cabinets* of becoming ‘shadow cabinets’ for the national administrations of individual Commissioners, and some cabinet members – especially younger ones – of completely revamping the work sent to them by the services ‘just for the fun of it’.

¹ Under the Presidency of Romano Prodi (1999-2004), cabinets were reduced in size from (as many as) 9 to 6 officials, with Prodi himself retaining 9 in his own cabinet. Barroso also appears to have 9 ‘members’ in his cabinet, but also 4 officials listed as ‘advisers’ (including a ‘senior’ and ‘principal’ advisor). See http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/president/team/index_en.htm (accessed 24 April 2009).

² On the role of cabinets in *parachutage*, see (Stevens and Stevens 2001): 84-9.

The *cabinets* were singled out for attack by the 1999 Committee of Independent Experts, whose report triggered the mass resignation of the Commission under the Jacques Santer Presidency. *Cabinets* were saddled with much of the blame for the Commission's 'distant, needlessly hierarchical and bureaucratic approach' (quoted in Stevens and Stevens 2001: 237). Even the popular (but mostly unknown and pretty ghastly) 1997 film, *The Commissioner*, starring John Hurt and based on a book by Stanley Johnson (father of Boris and former Director-General of DG Environment), gets in on the cabinet-bashing. The head (or 'chef') of Hurt's cabinet as Industry Commissioner turns out to be part of a web of intrigue involving a chemical firm with possible Nazi links that is found to be manufacturing and marketing chemical and biological weapons. In short, *cabinets* recall the title of a 1980s children's television programme: they are, along with wildebeests and warthogs, the animals that nobody loves.

But there is no doubt they are often highly political animals. In the past, many were hand-picked by governments in national capitals. While their backgrounds have always varied, more have been drawn from posts in national political parties, civil services, trades unions, or the private sector – as opposed to the Commission's services – than would be viewed as appropriate by many in Brussels circles. For every past Commissioner that has made a point of recruiting mostly from the DGs, such as Neil Kinnock, it is possible to find another – such as Edith Cresson – who brought nearly all of their team to Brussels from their national capital.

There is evidence of considerable change at the cabinet level in the years since the Santer Commission resigned. Under the Commission Presidency of Romano Prodi (1999-2004), all Commissioners were required to appoint a chef or deputy chef of a nationality other than the Commissioner's own. *Cabinets* were also reduced in size (to 6 from as many as 9 previously). They also were placed, along with their Commissioners, physically in the same buildings as the services for which their Commissioner was responsible. The latter move was described by Spence (2006: 72) as a 'more than symbolic gesture at reform, and overall it led to the cabinet system becoming even more central to the process of Commission policy formation'.

The actual effects of these changes were debatable but certainly mixed. All *cabinets* in Prodi's Commission had officials of at least three nationalities, a major change from the past when Commissioners were only required to appoint one non-national (who was often a marginal figure within a cabinet). Lots of new faces appeared: around two-thirds of cabinet officials had no previous cabinet experience and around 40 per cent were women, which both marked major increases on past totals. *Cabinets* became more like ministers' private offices since Commissioners became more like ministers, based physically at 'their' ministries (DGs). There was some evidence, although limited and anecdotal, of somewhat less disharmony and even what might be termed single-mindedness between some *cabinets* and services.

But few in the Commission were prepared to argue that *cabinets* – smaller, more 'European', and closer to the services - had become any less of a line of direct input from national capitals. In particular, there was no indication that *cabinets* (including, pointedly, that of Prodi) intervened any less aggressively in personnel decisions (see Peterson 2004). Any trend towards greater ministerialism that may have arisen from the basing of Commissioners in the services was reversed when their offices were reconsolidated in the central Berlaymont building after it reopened at the beginning of the Barroso Presidency in 2004.

Less than a year later, the new (British) Trade Commissioner, Peter Mandelson, made what has become something of an iconic statement about the shifting balance of power between the two halves of the hybrid:

...since the glory days of Delors, the Commission has not been led from the top down...my guess is that power within the Commission has inexorably shifted to the services. Indeed I believe that through the shocks of the Santer resignation and the subsequent upheavals, it was the Directors General who kept the Commission show on the road...The consequence has been a loss of cutting edge in policy and a reluctance to make hard choices instead of endless compromises.³

Mandelson could be accused of rushing to judgment, and incidentally airing a highly inflammatory view, after being in post for less than a year. However, there seems little doubt that his view was much influenced by his vastly-experienced chef, Simon Fraser, who had served in Sir Leon Brittan's cabinet during the Delors years, when the rivalry between Brittan and Delors' cabinet was the stuff of legend (Spence 2006b: 64-5). In any event, one thoughtful observer of the Commission, with the advantage of an insider's perspective, observed (around the same time) 'an indubitable trend for civil servants not to accept or at best to openly doubt the authority of *cabinets* to supervise or monitor them' (Spence 2006: 70).

Regardless of Barroso's own view, he made it clear that he was determined to take Prodi's reforms of the *cabinets* several steps further. He decreed that all *cabinets* under his Presidency would include officials of three nationalities, a chef or deputy chef with a nationality different from that of the Commissioner, and should reflect a 'reasonable' gender balance. Perhaps most importantly, Barroso required that all Commissioners select at least 3 members of their *cabinets* from the Commission's services, meaning that only slightly more than half of all cabinet officials were some kind of 'import'. One effect was to change radically the constellation of nationalities at the top of *cabinets*. For example, 4 (of an initial 25) chefs and 2 deputy chefs were German, almost all of whom were young officials with previous services in the DGs. Meanwhile, only one chef and two deputy chefs were French (Spence 2006: 72).

Writing from the perspective of over a decade ago, Donelley and Ritchie (1997: 50), the former another former member of Brittan's cabinet, predicted 'it is likely that *cabinets* will continue to grow in size and importance'. If the first prediction proved false, due to Presidential engineering, the latter remains debatable. However, whether *cabinets* have 'grown in importance' becomes a particularly acute question for a College that has now ballooned to 27 members and which includes Commissioners from new member states with relatively little experience of Brussels. Perhaps naturally, EU-12 Commissioners (that is, those from states that joined in 2004-7) have disproportionately recruited officials who are not of their nationality, are old Commission hands, and hail from one of the EU-15 member states that were already in the Union prior to 2004 (see section 3 below). A question inside the acute question is: can a strong cabinet compensate for a weak Commissioner (or vice versa)?

³ Peter Mandelson, 'The Idea of Europe: can we make it live again?', speech to the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES, Crown Plaza Hotel, Brussels, 20 July 2005, available from: http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/mandelson/speeches_articles/sppm045_en.htm.

2. **The (Wo)Man Makes the Cabinet? Or the Cabinet Makes the (Wo)Man?** Spence's (2006a) edited tome on the Commission, now in its 3rd edition and nearly 600 pages long, probably tells all but the most committed Commission watcher more than they really need or wish to know about the institution. Spence's own contributions to the book are invariably lively, opinionated and spiced with inside dope. Yet, the question of whether any cabinet is only as strong as their Commissioner is one on which he is unusually hesitant and, apparently, of two minds. His long chapter on 'the President, College and the *cabinets*' returns to the question repeatedly, but never resolves it:

A good cabinet can boost the standing of an otherwise poor Commissioner, and a poor cabinet can compromise an otherwise good Commissioner. So, it is no coincidence that the most effective Commissioners have traditionally been those with the best-staffed and best-organised *cabinets*... While the *cabinets* can to some extent counterbalance a Commissioner's shortcomings and are used by Commissioners to strengthen their own performances in areas where they might otherwise be weak, in practice it is very difficult for advisers to manage the successes and failures of policy-makers in the services (Spence 2006b: 60-8).

Most other scholarship on the Commission tends to skirt the question. An exception, however, is Donelley and Ritchie's (1997: 46) clear declaration that 'the effectiveness of the cabinet ultimately depends on the effectiveness of their Commissioner'. There is considerably more evidence to sustain this claim than there is to suggest the a well-run and organised cabinet can 'boost the standing of an otherwise poor Commissioner'.

To be precise, it is probably safe to conclude that an effective cabinet is a necessary, but itself insufficient condition for a Commissioner to be effective. The classic case of a strong Commissioner with a strong cabinet entirely dominating the College is that of Delors himself (see Grant 1994; Ross 1995). Delors' cabinet was headed by a formidably able chef, Pascal Lamy, who later became a powerful Trade Commissioner under Prodi. Delors' office ran an almost parallel 'government' within the Commission by creating and working via a network of trusted operatives in the services (see Stevens with Stevens 2001: 237-9).

But the Delors case illustrates the wider point with even more alacrity when we consider how powerful, forceful, and (by some accounts) ideological Brittan's cabinet was over much of the same period: that is more than a decade of Sir Leon's tenure as Commission Vice-President. Besides those already mentioned, Brittan's cabinet included leading lights such as Jim Curry (later Director-General for Environment and Head of the Commission's Delegation in Washington DC), Robert Madelin (later Director-General for Health and Consumer Protection), David Wright (later of Santer's cabinet and Director in DG Market), and – perhaps above all – Catherine Day (later Director-General for Environment and presently Secretary-General of the Commission). Insiders in cabinet discussions, and indeed College debates, reported that many internal negotiations within the College resembled 'tennis matches' between the Delors and Brittan camps, with all others around the table often sidelined and watching silently.⁴

⁴ In the first Delors Commission (1985-9), much the same was said about the dominance – and polar opposite ideologies – of Delors and Irish Commissioner for Competition, Peter Sutherland and their respective cabinets.

By the same token, multiple examples can be cited of talented Commissioners who were let down by their shambolic *cabinets*. One example is Frans Andriessen, a former Dutch Finance Minister who served for three consecutive terms as (mainly) Commissioner for External Affairs and two as Vice-President from 1981-93. Officials in the Commission's external services during this period often bemoaned the conflicting or entirely non-existent signals they received from Andriessen's office, which was viewed as exacerbating the Commission's marginalisation (after 1992) from the nascent Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In contrast, the main factor behind Chris Patten's generally favourable record as External Relations Commissioner under Prodi (besides his cooperative relationship with Javier Solana), in his own mind, was that his cabinet consisted (mainly) of 'the best that Britain's Foreign Office and Treasury could have provided' (quoted in Spence 2006: 63).

Moreover, there is a flip side to the 'strong Commissioners have strong *cabinets*' corollary. A Commissioner who is out of their depth or has trouble establishing a productive relationship with 'their' service makes their problems far worse when they fail to observe the accepted rules of propriety for assembling a cabinet. Arguably, the current case of Gunter Verheugen illustrates the point. By most accounts, Verheugen – a foreign policy specialist - had both grip and credibility as Commissioner for enlargement under Prodi, and did much to pilot the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004 to a successful conclusion. However, Verheugen frequently seemed out of his depth as Commissioner for Enterprise under Barroso. The ferocious attack he launched on the Commission's services (see Wille 2007) seemed, in part, designed to distract attention from the *cause célèbre* that emerged when he was photographed on an apparently romantic holiday with a long-time associate who he had recently promoted to chef of his cabinet.⁵

In short, and inevitably, the question of whether Commissioners determine their cabinet's credibility more than *cabinets* determine their Commissioner's remains debatable. But it is certainly a burning question, as the next section makes clear, for a radically enlarged Commission. On balance, the evidence points to the Commissioner making the cabinet, more than the cabinet making the Commissioner.

3. The Cabinets After Enlargement

Gauging whether *cabinets* have 'grown in importance' under the Barroso Commission is complicated by significant shift of the ground on which the Commission stands. One major shift, of course, has been in the direction of administrative reform of the Commission (Kassim 2004; Bauer 2007). It is difficult to assess with any precision how much the post-2000 reforms have affected the position and role of the *cabinets* and how. By one view, the effect of more European and less 'nationalised' *cabinets* under Barroso (as well as Prodi), with more officials drawn from the DGs, working with services that are better-run and managed as a consequence of the reforms, should be less disharmony and a Commission that produces more professional proposals and analysis. The *cabinets*, by this view, would finally be emerging as an effective hinge between the political and administrative halves of the hybrid. By a more cynical view, the services might be viewed as so busy with reporting and the goobledygook of Unit Management Plans, the Integrated Resource Management System, Activity-Based Budgeting, Activity-Based Management, and the like that they were easily dominated by the *cabinets* (Peterson 2004: 26).

⁵ For a fulsome exposition of this rather sad story, see Der Spiegel International On-line, 'Political scandal hits the EU', 23 October 2006 (available from: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,444308,00.html>).

Of course, enlargement produced an even more dramatic shift. For the Commission, as for the other EU institutions, it was a major earthquake that shook the terrain on which the administration is constituted. The Commission is now a considerably different institution to what it was before 2004. The swelling of the EU's membership by no less than 80 per cent has left a mark on the Commission in three basic respects (Peterson 2008a; Peterson and Birdsall 2008). First, and perhaps most importantly, for the first time the Commission is constituted like any offshoot of the Council of Ministers, with one Commissioner per member state. Naturally, questions arise about whether the Commission had become just another intergovernmental institution, a sort of COREPER III (Piris 1994), whose independence and capacity for honest brokerage has been compromised.

Second, and relatedly, the College is more dominated by its President. In some respects, Prodi's had been a more Presidential Commission than had been Santer's, even though Prodi himself was widely viewed as a weak and inept leader presiding over a College of (20 for most of his tenure) exceptionally able, forceful, and heavyweight Commissioners (see Peterson 2006). But there is no question that Barroso has imposed his own authority on the Commission to a far greater extent than Prodi. Most insiders concede that more Presidentialism is a simple necessity in a College of 27, even though collective responsibility of the entire College for all of its decisions becomes difficult to maintain. Barroso himself hinted at his tendency to work bilaterally with individual Commissioners in claiming that, paradoxically, decision-making in a College of 27 was actually easier than before: 'if a member of the Commission comes with a proposal that is supported by the President of the Commission, to find a strong majority that objects to it is very difficult' (Peterson 2008b: 68).

Third, again relatedly, the Barroso Commission was an unusually technocratic and faceless Commission, especially compared to that of Prodi. Paradoxically, multiple EU-12 states sent top members of their political classes to serve in Brussels: that is, former foreign, finance or even prime ministers (see Peterson 2006: 90-1). But one top official, with cabinet experience in several Commissions, explained that Barroso's was 'not a political Commission in part because an intermediate generation of technocrats dominated the first post-Communist political classes in the new member states. One consequence is that there is not a lot of ideological debate in this Commission'.⁶

Did that mean that *cabinets* were more or less powerful than in the past? One factor that complicated the equation was how finely-divided portfolios were in a College of 27. Some *cabinets* were perhaps more powerful, or at least more constructively involved in the work of the services (in part) because fewer of their members were 'imports' from national capitals under Barroso. But *cabinets* were certainly not very powerful where the Commission had little competence and the services had little actual policy work to do. The case of multilingualism illustrates the point: it was handled by one official in Commissioner Jan Fígel's cabinet prior to the admission of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU in 2007. After that, in a sense an entire cabinet was constructed to handle the portfolio under the new (Romanian) Commissioner for multilingualism, Victor Orban.⁷

Did the disparity between weak and powerful Commissioners and *cabinets* reflect an EU-15 v. EU-12 divide? Yes and no. Most of the dossiers where the

⁶ Interview, 2 October 2007.

⁷ Of course, Orban's cabinet – like all others – is responsible for monitoring all dossiers and all activities of the Commission so as to maintain the principle of collective responsibility.

Commission packed the most punch – trade, competition, justice and home affairs, and so on – all went to Commissioners from EU-15 member states. But regional policy was allocated to the Polish Commissioner, Danuta Hübner. The former Estonian Prime Minister, Siim Kallas, was named a Vice-President and put in charge of administrative affairs. More generally, the EU-12 Commissioners operated as a sort of ‘bloc’ within the College on only a few issues, such as free movement and recruitment of their nationals to the services. It was notable that at the beginning of the Barroso Commission that chefs of EU-12 Commissioner *cabinets* met as a group, but did so less frequently as time went on.

So, on balance, have the *cabinets* ‘grown in importance’ under Barroso? Or not? By most accounts, *cabinets* do what they always have done: act as recipients of national and sectoral lobbying efforts, link Brussels with national capitals, coordinate policy, mediate between competing interests (not least within the services), and help maintain collegiality. But they now play a new and vital function in an enlarged EU: they act as a bridge between newer and older member states. Perhaps predictably, given rules on the nationalities of those holding senior cabinet posts, officials from EU-15 states accounted for over 90 per cent of all chefs de cabinet in the Barroso Commission. They also held well over 80 per cent of deputy chef posts.

It was more difficult to get a fix on the total composition of the *cabinets* in terms of national origins of members. Again, Barroso’s requirement that all *cabinets* recruit at least 3 members from the services was a factor, since the services offered a much smaller pool of EU-12 officials from which to select. But there was no question that far more than 56 per cent (the share represented by 15 of 27) of all cabinet officials hailed from EU-15 states. The *cabinets* were thus functioning as an important forum for extending the EU’s habits of cooperation far further to the east and south of Brussels than ever could have been imagined when the Commission (and what became the EU) were created 50 years ago.

4. How Cabinets Rescue the Commission

One prominent, recent analysis of the current state of European integration makes a fascinating and, in many respects, entirely counterintuitive argument (see Menon and Weatherill 2008). While rather light on actual evidence, it illustrates the power of a single (sacreligious) idea: in this case, the idea that has been developed by Milward (2000) that the EU ‘rescues’ the nation-state in Europe. Specifically, in the historical case, its creation allowed discredited and weak nation-states to reassert their authority and competence in the post-war period by making possible economic growth that none would have been able to deliver in the absence of European institutions. In the contemporary case, the argument becomes one about legitimacy (primarily), instead of authority or competence. It is that ‘the claims to legitimacy made by the EU and its member states are of [a] distinctive character but independent and mutually reinforcing’ (Menon and Weatherill 2008: 397).

The effect is to turn the argument about the ‘democratic deficit’ on its head. Globalisation means that citizens expect their governments to deliver public goods of which they are incapable of delivering acting on their own: economic growth, but also acceptable health and safety standards in the products they consume, environmental protection, rights to movement across borders, and so on. EU states are more capable of delivering such goods than are other states because of the existence of the Union. Since the EU facilitates such delivery despite the high volume of transboundary exchange in Europe, and crucially does not seek to replace the nation-state in Europe, it adds to the legitimacy of the state in Europe. Put simply:

'[s]tates remain the ultimate sources of legitimacy in Europe. The EU makes their claims more respectable' (Menon and Weatherill 2008: 398). Put another way, 'the EU supplements its member states' (Menon and Weatherill 2008: 403). It is not their adversary, despite the 'credit-assignment problem' whereby the Union is often blamed by national governments for their failings, while governments hypocritically seek to take credit for the EU's successes. It is their friend.

In much the same way, *cabinets* supplement the Commission. The Commission is a uniquely politicised bureaucracy that illustrates the tensions of European governance more than, arguably, any other European institution (Christiansen 1997). The Commission is stuck between its need to be independent and pursue the collective European interest, and its need to be sensitive, and respond, to the narrow national interests of its member states, which have become far more diverse in an EU of 27. *Cabinets* do the trick. They are steadily becoming more European and less captive of national interests. But they still perform the time-honoured function of making national administrations and governments feel ownership of the Commission. *Cabinets* are thus the Commission's friend.

In several specific ways, cabinets 'rescue' the Commission. One is they help obscure and keep from disrupting its work the Commission's glaring and still unmet need for a system of junior Commissioners (Spence 2006), since much of the work done by *cabinets* is effectively that done by junior ministers in national governments (Brittan 2000: 5). But a system of senior and junior Commissioners is unlikely to emerge, particularly given the arrival of a reduced, slimmed down Commission based on equal rotation between member states after 2014, as foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty. There is zero chance of the creation of such a system of junior Commissioners in the absence of a forceful effort to create one by a Commission President, who would in any event face powerful opposition by numerous member governments to such a configuration.

Another way in which *cabinets* rescue the Commission is in terms of voting. When push comes to shove, the Commission decides by simple majority. But it also works on the basis of collective responsibility. If a vote is taken, and the margin is (say) 14-13 in a college of 27, all must publically support the majority view. One of the truly timeless observations about the Commission is Coombes' (1970) insistence that no one has ever shown what is meant to unite the College enough to allow us to expect them to exercise collective responsibility: they share no party political, ideological, national, or any other affiliation or identity (although some Colleges have clearly been united by a commitment to 'building Europe').

In practice, few measures are ever put to a vote in the college. None (if Barroso can be believed; see Peterson 2008b) have been put to a vote under his Presidency. The *cabinets* are a crucial reason why. They are responsible for the vast majority of 'decisions' taken by the college, which (in the case of non-contentious decisions) are taken either by the so-called written procedure or special *chefs* meetings. In the former case, *cabinets* receive copies of a proposal and are asked to raise any objections by a deadline after which the proposal is considered agreed in the absence of any. Meanwhile special *chefs* bring together either policy-specialised or senior (especially *chefs*) members of *cabinets*. In any given week, around 6 or 7 special *chefs* meetings will be held. Each, according to Spence (2006: 67), lasts for between 1 and 12 hours.

We thus might well come to two conclusions about *cabinets*. First, most of their members work extremely hard. Nugent (1999: 108) offers one of the few positive assessments about *cabinets* in the EU literature by observing that 'typically, a

cabinet member is a dynamic, extremely hard-working, 30-40 year old'. Young, thrusting, and with no security of tenure, most cabinet members naturally are driven by a perceived need to serve and make an impression on their Commissioner, which is seldom a recipe for inaction or non-intervention. It is little wonder that they are considered a special form of terrorist by many in the services. But they are also an important cog in the Commission's machinery for decision-making.

Second, there could be no collective responsibility without the *cabinets*. If we returned to the vision of the first Commission President, Walter Hallstein, who was determined to keep *cabinets* small (only a few members, as was the case for members of the High Commission of the original European Coal and Steel Community), then there would logically be far more cases where the College would be forced to vote. The College would thus risk ruptures and resignations (when members felt they could not publically support a College decision) far more often than it does under the current system.

Ultimately, the *cabinets* are the essential deal-makers within the Commission. They 'identify key interests within the member states and construct deals with Commission officials from DGs with divergent views' (Spence 2006: 68). They may be channels for national impulses, even interference, but probably increasingly less so as *cabinets* become less captive of seconded officials from national capitals and more diversely 'European'. In any case, the Commission clearly needs to know which amongst its proposals has a chance of being agreed, and how. The *cabinets* provide the Commission with the political antennae to know what will fly on the Council that (for example) the European Parliament seems to lack. Whatever perceived legitimacy the Commission has, returning to the Menon and Weatherill (2008) argument, it has largely because of the cabinet system.

The *cabinets* rescue the Commission in a separate, albeit related, final, and crucially important way: they allow the Commission to cope in a current period of transition characterised by vast disparities between its member states in terms of the resources and expertise they can deploy at the EU level. It is hardly surprising that the *cabinets* of EU-12 Commissioners contain so many officials who are nationals of EU-15 member states, even leaving aside Barroso's injunction to pull in more officials from the services and fewer from national capitals. Again, there is little to suggest that a weak or lazy Commissioner truly can compensate for their shortcomings by recruiting an able, thrusting, dynamic cabinet. But having experienced advisors puts EU-12 Commissioners at less of a disadvantage in the cut and thrust of Brussels deal-making. They also perform a sort of training function for officials from EU-12 national capitals who have been brought to Brussels to serve in *cabinets*. In short, the *cabinets* are clearly helping the Commission to 'manage' enlargement.

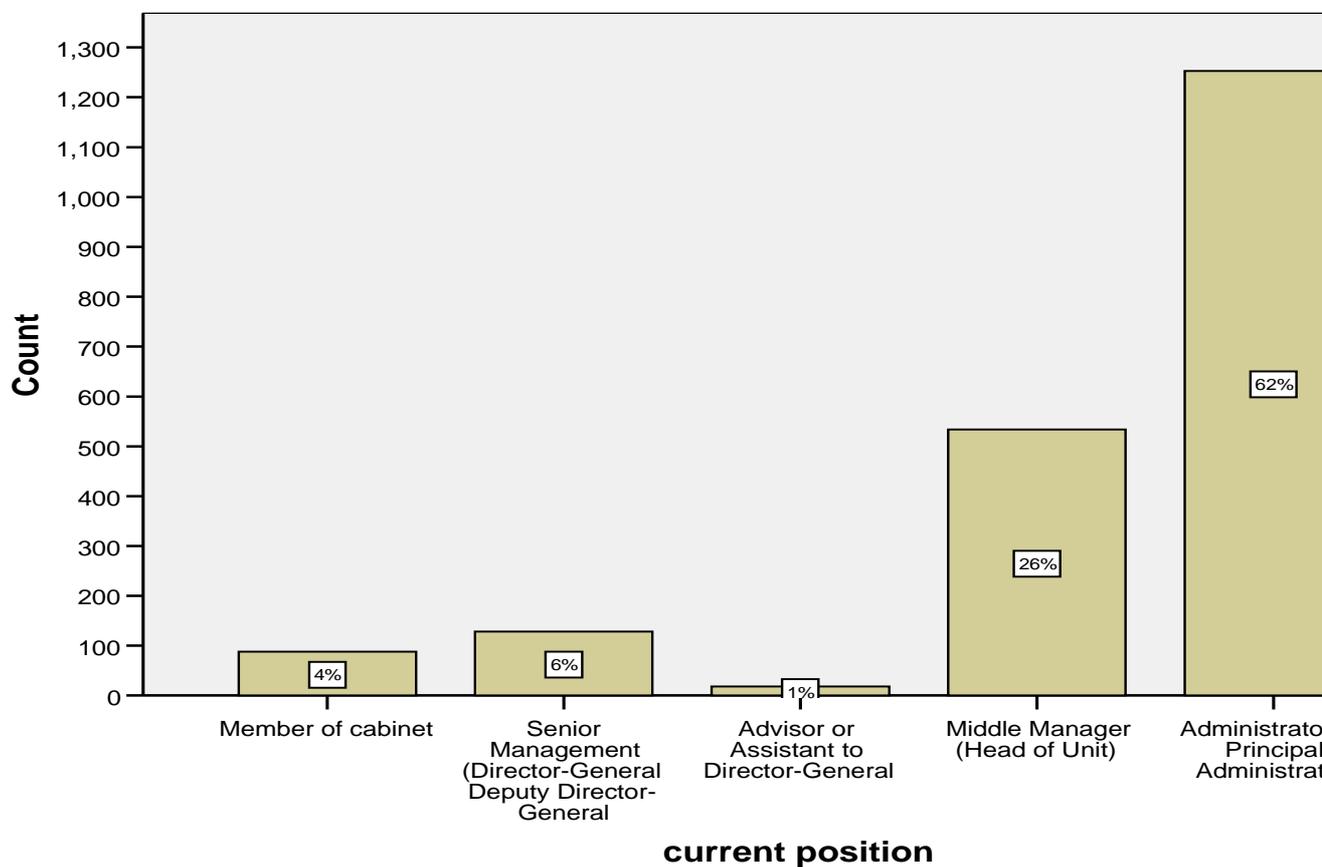
The portrait that we have painted of *cabinets* might well be thought to be over-rosy. If *cabinets* continue to wield independent power, it might be viewed as incongruous with recent reforms of the Commission designed to make it more accountable and performance-oriented. *Cabinets* may be becoming more European, but they need to be made more accountable. We might accept this verdict but also conclude that *cabinets*, for better or worse, are entirely consistent with the trend in national administrations towards the greater use of relatively independent, government-appointed 'policy units' that oversee and even direct the work (often through unwelcome interference) of national ministries (see Barber 2007). As such, *cabinets* make the Commission seem less anomalous, alien, and 'foreign' in the eyes of national governments and administrations. It makes the Commission even seem

‘normal’, in that it ‘embodies many of the organizational and behavioural patterns that are highly typical of executives as we know them from national settings’ (Egeberg 2006: 196).

Conclusion

It might be claimed that we simply do not know very much about *cabinets* in the Commission. We may still be stuck in Delors-era assumptions that are no longer accurate (if they ever were) about *cabinets*, or even the Commission more generally. Fortunately, our knowledge of the Commission may be about to expand by an order of magnitude thanks to the largest-ever independent attitudinal survey of the Commission (see table 1).

TABLE 1 – EUCIQ⁸ SURVEY SAMPLE COMPOSITION



Sampling took place in late 2008 and produced a very large data set on around 2200 officials (see table 1 below). Predictably, *cabinet* members – who apparently

⁸ EUCIQ is an acronym for the ‘European Commission in Question’ project, which is funded by Framework programme VI (through the EU-CONSENT network of excellence) and the UK Economic and Social Research Council. The principal investigator is Hussein Kassim of the University of East Anglia. See http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/eu_consent/commission_survey and <http://www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ>.

continue to have no shortage of things to do – responded far less often than other categories of Commission official. But the sample size on *cabinet* members is larger than it looks because all respondents were asked to indicate their previous positions held. One testable hypothesis is whether there are now more former cabinet officials still with the Commission but now working in its administration.

However large or small the sample's actual count of officials with *cabinet* experience, there is rich potential for generating truly new knowledge about the Commission and *cabinets*. In particular, we should find out the extent to which there are differences of view between *cabinet* officials and officials in the services on some of the most burning questions raised in this paper about how they work together (or not). Examples include how well coordination works between the College (including *cabinets*) and the services, whether *cabinets* respect the technical expertise of the services, and whether they are too preoccupied by developments in their Commissioner's national capital.

We have seen that members of Commission *cabinets* are amongst the least popular Eurocrats both in the EU academic literature and (especially) the Commission's services. We have considered whether they are becoming more or less powerful, while concluding that the Commissioner makes the cabinet far more than the cabinet makes the Commissioner. The crucial role played by the *cabinets* in helping to bridge the gap between newer and older member states was highlighted. Finally, we considered various ways in which the *cabinets* 'rescue' the Commission. Here we should perhaps acknowledge that the Commission is a rather unloved institution in the aggregate and across Europe. The point is that the *cabinets* help it avoid being positively loathed and actively resisted.

After careful analysis of the role of *cabinets* in the Commission, what we may left with above all may be the need to rethink, or even redefine, what we mean by the most frequently-used terms of art in EU studies: 'supranational' and 'intergovernmental' (Peterson 2008a). Enlargement means that the Commission looks more like the Council. It may be less autonomous and independent of its member states than in the past, but possibly also more integrated into the EU system, especially if we understand that term broadly as embedding the national in the supranational and vice versa (see Laffan et al. 2000). The process of embedding EU-12 national politics and administrations into the Brussels system obviously requires time, and the Commission is a vital arena for such embedding. It becomes politically naïve in these circumstances to present as 'fact' the claim that 'there is no intrinsic need for each Member State to have a Commissioner' (Spence 2006b: 55). Very few in EU-12 political classes would accept this view. Most would insist that it is far more important for the Commission to be legitimate than efficient. One important measure of its legitimacy is whether it has a member of the College who is of their nationality, speaks their native language, and can appear in the national media to explain what the EU is doing and why.

Perhaps by 2014, when the Treaty change towards a smaller, more 'European' Commission kicks in, things will be different. But perhaps not. In any event, in these circumstances the fact that EU-12 Commissioners are able, even obliged in some respects, to appoint officials to their *cabinets* who do not share their nationality helps square a circle: the College can retain (for now) one Commissioner per member state and remain an independent, European, 'supranational' institution.

For better or worse⁹, *cabinets* help legitimise the Commission by making governments feel as if they have their own operatives working within it, in positions of power and able to shape and mould its agenda. *Cabinets* thus help rescue the Commission. We might conclude that they give it space to have a *mission*, however compromised by conflicting national agendas, as opposed to just being just an *administration de gestio*'.

Alternatively, we might conclude that we are in a 'post-vision era', or one in which a radically enlarged Union focuses on pragmatic policy results more than new or dramatic acts of political integration. In these circumstances, we might decide that Spence oversimplifies when, first, he accepts as relevant and contemporary the simple dichotomy between *mission* and *gestion* that seems captive of bygone days; and, second, concludes that the Barroso Commission has become an *administration de gestion tout court*. In part because the transition has been so smooth, it may be too easy to forget how recently and radically the EU has changed as a consequence of expanding its membership by 80 per cent in the space of a couple years. Enlargement may be viewed as a true *mission* but that requires careful *gestion*. The *cabinets* help provide it.

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⁹ We might concede both that it is often for worse, but increasingly less so as cabinets are 'Europeanised'.

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