

Bilderberger and closed-door meetings: European Union gets medieval with ultra-secret elections

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The EU is coming under fire for shunning democratic principles as candidates for top jobs assemble behind closed doors with secret societies as “selection day” approaches.

What does the ultra-secretive Bilderberger Club, Henry Kissinger, and closed-door meetings made up of anonymous politicians, bankers and industrialists have in common with transparency, democratic procedure and open societies?

If you answered ‘nothing’ you would find yourself in rather cozy company. In fact, the European Union’s secretive election process more resembles a Vatican conclave to elect a new pope than a modern experiment in democratic procedure. Indeed, the only thing the EU needs to do now is build a smokestack in Brussels so that a puff of smoke will tell us when their arcane ritual is complete (Note: a top-ranking EU official will defend the process behind the election process at the end of this article).

“After an introductory round of consultations with his fellow heads of state and government, Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt [who holds the EU rotating presidency] has decided to convene an extra informal summit on 19 November,” the EU confirmed in a statement.

At the “extra informal” summit [Read: 5-course dinner], the heads of state and government from 27 EU member states will appoint the president of the European Council, high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and secretary-general for the Council Secretariat.

These are three new top EU posts that have been created by the Lisbon Treaty, which will go into force on Dec. 1, 2009 in an effort to bolster the 27-nation bloc’s influence on the international stage. The high level of secrecy surrounding the elections is especially ironic when we consider that the Lisbon Treaty was ostensibly designed to “make the EU more democratic, transparent, and accountable.”

The EU election announcement sparked a frenzy of political activity across the Continent, as politicians dashed off to promote themselves before the cream of the crop of European society.

David Miliband, the UK foreign policy chief, was one of the first out of the starting gates in the hunt for a new employer. British media reported he boarded a last-minute charter flight to join EU leaders in Berlin as they discussed who should become their first president and foreign representative.

Miliband reportedly cancelled appointments [The Times of UK revealed that Mr Miliband

decided only at the last minute to join the gathering, cancelling a meeting that he had been scheduled to attend at Westminster for the Britain-Palestine parliamentary group] and travelled to Germany to rub shoulders with European leaders who gathered for the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Ironical that these delegates got together to celebrate the destruction of the Soviet-era Berlin Wall, at the same time they are building a new wall between themselves and their constituents.

Fredrik Reinfeldt, the Prime Minister of Sweden, which holds the EU's rotating presidency, apparently discussed Miliband's qualifications during lulls in the festivities at the Brandenburg Gate. Other insider favorites include Massimo D'Alema, a 60-year-old former Italian prime minister known for his role in peace talks during the 2006 Israeli-Lebanon war; the UK's Catherine Ashton, now EU trade commissioner; and France's Elisabeth Guigou.

After much frenzied speculation about Mr. Miliband's chances, Prime Minister Gordon Brown had to step in and calm the media storm by announcing that his foreign policy chief was not in line for a comfy EU job.

"David Miliband was never a candidate for the high representative job," Brown said at a Downing Street news conference.

"Britain has only one candidate for the European Council positions that are being discussed at the moment," Brown bellowed. "That candidate is Tony Blair and his candidature is for the presidency of the council."

The BBC reported Monday that Miliband was knocked out of the competition following a conversation Sunday with former Danish Premier Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, now head of the Party of European Socialists, to which Brown's Labour Party belongs.

If the rumor mill is correct, Tony Blair will miss his chance for political reincarnation to Belgium's poetry-writing Prime Minister, Herman van Rompuy, whose low-profile character, as well as his pro-EU stance, seems to sit well with the esteemed gentlemen of the insanely secretive Bilderberger Club (described in some circles as a "steering committee").

But all of this is mere hearsay because, in true democratic fashion, Mr Reinfeldt refused to publicly confirm the names of the top political horses in the race, and refused to discuss reports that Blair's chances for becoming the European Union's first president were slim to none.

"I am halfway through my consultations and... it is important that everyone has their say and that we find the right balance," Reinfeldt told news-starved reporters. "I will not confirm any candidate at this stage."

In fact, the only real clue that Herman van Rompuy has won over the hearts and minds of the movers and shakers is due to his appearance alongside the somewhat sinister Henry Kissinger at a Bilderberger Club session. What a sad state of affairs it has become for democracy when a man's chances for moving up the power vertical does not depend on exit polls, campaign buttons and other foolish tools, but rather on who he sips wine and sucks oysters with far beyond the public gaze.

“Van Rompuy met Kissinger at a closed session of international policymakers and industrialists chaired by Viscount Etienne Davignon,” The Guardian newspaper reported Wednesday.

Who is Viscount Etienne Davignon, 77, you may be asking? He is described as a “discreetly powerful figure in Brussels who was vice-president of the European commission in the 1980s,” the newspaper continued.

“Discreetly powerful?” What exactly does that mean? And weren’t viscounts ceremoniously phased out and relieved of their privileges sometime in the 18th century?

Anyways, if all this doesn’t sound medieval enough, Davignon chairs the Bilderberger Club, the “shadowy global freemasonry of politicians and bankers who meet to discuss world affairs in the strictest privacy, spawning innumerable conspiracy theories,” as The Guardian succinctly put it.

The 500 million souls of the European Union may be delighted to know that their possible future overlord, Van Rompuy, a name that rings like top-shelf Dijon mustard, will in all likelihood call “for a new system of levies to fund the EU and replace the perennial budget battles.”

In layman’s terms, Van Rompuy will be eager to raise taxes across the board.

Van Rompuy’s office was generous enough to release parts of his speech, which were aired in private amid the luxurious grounds of the Castle of the Valley of the Duchess near Brussels. The chateau, by the way, hosted the talks on the Treaty of Rome in 1957 that launched the European Union.

Van Rompuy discussed funding social welfare programs taken from new “green taxes” and devising an international tax on financial transactions. Not a bad idea, especially with the financial crisis still large in the rearview mirror, but it would be nice to see the whole speech before he gets the that phone call in the middle of the night telling him to catch the next bus to Brussels.

Whatever Reinfeldt and the Bilderbergers and the Kissingers ultimately decide, however, it will do little to lower the rising tide of fear in Eastern Europe, and other places, that the EU is turning into an ungovernable “super-state,” where all of the major decisions are made from Berlin, Brussels and Paris, not to mention within the ranks of the world’s most elitist clubs.

From Warsaw, with misgivings

On Monday in Brussels, Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski told foreign policy chiefs that the EU was bungling an opportunity “to operate with transparency and a readiness to bring the citizens of Europe closer to EU affairs.”

Sikorski reminded the assembled diplomats that the proceedings should be “as transparent and democratic as possible.”

Meanwhile, Polish President Lech Kaczynski warned that, given a certain interpretation of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU could turn into a “Moloch” that would replace national states.

Talking to Polish Radio Three last week, Kaczynski said Poland faced two kinds of dangers.

The first is the possibility of the EU evolving from an alliance of 27 states towards a superpower led by only two or three states. The remaining EU members, he said, would play the role of “filling.”

“Such an evolution is not unthinkable; but it can take place under a certain interpretation of the Lisbon Treaty and certain political attitudes. However, this is just a potential threat, not reality,” Kaczynski said.

Poland has never been overly keen on the European Union, which it argues is “ruled” by France and Germany, and prefers to coordinate its foreign policy in line with the United States. But Kaczynski admits he overestimated the value of joining supranational organizations to protect the interests of Poland.

Kaczynski admitted he believed that once Poland joined NATO and the EU such dangers would disappear. But he acknowledged that “we are a member of NATO and of the EU... but the dangers are still here.”

In another interview, the Polish president argued that not everyone in Europe accepted Poland as a strong and important player.

“There are those who think the new, integrating Europe should be an entity dominated by the largest members...,” Kaczynski reiterated. “But we should oppose such an attitude most energetically.”

At this point, it might be worth mentioning a “dark horse” candidate in the running for the EU presidency, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, the 71-year-old former president of Latvia, who likened the EU decision-making process to the “deliberations of Soviet politburos.”

Her nomination could win support from among the EU’s eight Eastern European countries, and calm the regional fears expressed by the Polish president.

Is criticism of the EU electoral process fair?

Michael Webb, EU Deputy Head of European Commission Delegation in Russia, agreed to an interview with RT concerning the EU electoral procedures and whether they could be considered legitimate from a democratic point of view.

Webb defended the fact that candidature lists to the top three offices of the EU are not made public, saying there would be “consensus amongst all EU member states.”

“The candidates are chosen from a group of people who have experience in the national member states,” Webb said. “They are heads of governments or previous heads of government and are chosen by the existing European Council, which of course is made up of democratically elected heads of government itself.”

“There is no list of candidates,” the EU official concluded, “and there is no procedure for an election, but the result will be one of consensus amongst all of the EU member states.”

Asked why the candidates are chosen by secret ballots, Webb argued that is an acceptable practice because the EU is not a federal state, like the United States, for example.

“Well... the EU is not a federal state,” he said. “The EU is made up of 27 sovereign member

states. If you were to have elections across all those 27 states for one person... that would be appropriate for a setup that you have in the United States of America, for example. But we are not a federal state and therefore that sort of an election is not appropriate for the European Union."

Then Webb argued that the democratic legitimacy of the elections will correspond to the experience of the candidates, as opposed to elections across the Continent.

"Democratic legitimacy will come from their experience," Webb said, "rather than from a federal election across the European Union as a whole."

Concerning the ability of the European member states to remain sovereign inside of the new EU structure, Webb was optimistic about their chances.

"Yes, I think they will [maintain their sovereignty]... The European Union member states have themselves agreed to pull their sovereignty in certain areas... and they have agreed that the commission will work on their behalf..."

You will still have France keeping its own traditions and its own existence and its national culture; Germany, the United Kingdom and the same for the smaller countries. I don't think there is any danger in that but we will certainly be acting more coherently and more together in those areas where we have agreed to work together."

Finally, Michael Webb spoke about how relations with Russia might be affected by the person who is chosen as president of the EU.

"Russia will find the European Union a more coherent and an easier partner to deal with because it will be easier for Russia to maintain a continuing relationship with the European Union," he said. "They will not be confronted by a new head of government as the president of the Council every six months."

He or she will represent European Union's policy as a whole and he or she will be bound to respect the consensus view among all the member states. So I don't think the personality of the president should affect the relationship with Russian one way or another."

An announcement concerning the appointments to the three top EU positions - the president of the European Council, high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and secretary-general for the Council Secretariat - is scheduled for Thursday night.

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