

LEADERS

Europe's leadership

After Lisbon

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The European Union is likely to choose weak leaders. It needs strong ones

Reuters



THE ratification of Europe's Lisbon treaty, now completed by the reluctant signature of the Czech president, Vaclav Klaus, has been dispiriting. The treaty does little to make the European Union any simpler or more transparent, two supposed goals when the negotiations began eight long years ago. Nor will it make the EU more democratic or bring it any closer to ordinary citizens: indeed, voters in three countries said no to its provisions, only for their wishes to be steamrollered.

Yet with Lisbon now entering into force, it is time to move on from the EU's introspective decade of institutional navel-gazing and turn to the pressing task of making it work better. Even the British Conservatives, who have wisely dropped their promise of a referendum on Lisbon, are slowly realising this (see [Bagehot](#)). The first task may come next week, when European leaders choose candidates for the two top jobs being created by Lisbon: the president of the European Council and a beefed-up high representative for foreign policy. Unfortunately, the continent's rulers are likely to flunk it.

A consensus has emerged that the first council president should be a low-profile fixer, preferably from a small EU country and the political centre-right. That would rule out Britain's Tony Blair (see [Charlemagne](#)). Mr Blair is also opposed by the Tories, who fear his clout; and by many others because of his role in the Iraq war and his perceived failure as prime minister to push his country closer to the EU. Eurosceptics are against him because the job is unelected, though they ought to favour a strong person chosen by elected leaders to represent national governments, rather than the hated Brussels bureaucracy. None of the declared alternatives to Mr Blair comes near his political heft. Almost comically, a current favourite is the Belgian prime minister of less than a year's standing, the unknown Herman Van Rompuy, who seems not yet to have acquired as many critics as his longer-serving Dutch and Luxembourgish counterparts, Jan Peter Balkenende and Jean-Claude Juncker.

There is nothing inherently wrong about a Benelux prime minister in Brussels. Indeed, a history of running tiresome coalitions might count as job-experience for a person who will have to draw up EU agendas and eke out midnight compromises. But, to most of the world, the president of the European Council, which brings together the EU's heads of government, will stand for the EU as a whole. If Europeans want their club to be taken seriously, such a person must seem able to match the traffic-stopping power of an American or Chinese president. Although they are doubtless excellent men in their way, neither Mr Van Rompuy, nor Mr Balkenende, nor Mr Juncker could do that. Mr Blair would. If he is unacceptable, EU leaders must find somebody else who could, too: Sweden's steely Carl Bildt, say, or perhaps Spain's stern José María Aznar.

A foreign minister who counts as well

The new foreign-policy supremo also needs to be a person of weight, which points to the need for both long experience and a background of taking the diplomatic world seriously. Once again, Mr Bildt would be a good candidate, as would Germany's Joschka Fischer. Yet these two heavyweights are apparently ruled out because EU leaders have struck a political deal that would hand the new job to a candidate from the left, such as one of the two current favourites, Britain's David Miliband and Italy's Massimo D'Alema.

Carving up jobs according to political affiliation or nationality is unlikely to be a way of finding the best candidate. Nor is choosing from among those who are the least well-known or controversial. Sadly, that is just what the EU looks like doing.