

Barroso still seen as 'number one' in Brussels

Print

By Joshua Chaffin in Brussels

Published: November 20 2009 15:43 | Last updated: November 20 2009 15:43

Herman Van Rompuy and **Baroness Ashton** may have won the long-running contest to determine the European Union's first full-time president and foreign affairs chief, but the real winner may have been José Manuel Barroso, the European Commission president.

Mr Barroso, who is about to embark on a second five-year term, enjoys far greater name recognition and authority on the world stage than his new colleagues, who are low-profile and little-known even in their home countries.

As such, just hours after the selection, analysts and observers were already crowning Mr Barroso as the senior partner in the European triumvirate.

"The number one man in Brussels is Barroso," said Simon Hix, a professor of European politics at the London School of Economics.

Andrew Duff, a British Liberal Democrat MEP, called the Commission president "the top dog", saying: "He's the guy with the experience and the assets and the power."

Mr Barroso's own camp did not disagree. "He's delighted with the choice. There's no question that on things like trade, climate, G20, he's going to be the person people talk to," a confidante said.

That dynamic was on display – albeit subtly – during a post-summit press conference to introduce the new team. When asked the question, "Who should President Obama call when he wants to talk to Europe?", a grinning Mr Barroso seized the microphone after the others demurred. (For the record, he suggested calling Lady Ashton.)

Mr Barroso's apparent triumph marks a change in fortune from just a few months ago, when his re-election prospects were in doubt and Tony Blair, the former UK prime minister, was being touted as a favourite for the new role of EU president.

"If it had been Blair, of course, things would be different," the Barroso confidante acknowledged.

While Mr Barroso's supremacy is undisputed, whether it endures and what it means for Europe may be less clear. To Mr Duff, the arrangement will ultimately depend on how the players work together to define two potentially sweeping executive posts that have only existed on paper until now.

Perhaps the greatest uncertainty surrounds Lady Ashton, who has little foreign policy experience but will now chair a monthly meeting of European foreign ministers and command a sizeable European diplomatic corp. "She understands perfectly well that she has to prove herself in the job," Mr Duff said.

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2009. Print a single copy of this article for personal use. [Contact us](#) if you wish to print more to distribute to others.