

The minor European civil servant is the master of the Union

The architecture of power is universal in space and time, from Egypt to Babylon; from the Mughal empires to the Château of Versailles. Look at Paris, its National Assembly, the Senate, the Elysée Palace. Volumes, spaces, columns, sculptures. Everything exudes THE power here. And what about the Capitol in Washington? Has there ever been anything more complete in terms of urban planning and in terms of being a visual depiction of power: a legislator on the hill, visible for everyone, embodying the primacy of the citizen over the executive, which is housed lower down and, more modestly, in the White House. And between the two of them you have the Mall, the huge citizen's area personifying the nation through the omnipresent vision of the Capitol and the Congress.

Size does not have a role to play in the architecture of power. Look at London and 10 Downing Street, which is a very small house in a very small street. But this is a mythical place where, for a multitude of reasons, everything exudes power. Age doesn't come into the equation either. Look at Brasilia. The result, of course, is disappointing: too big, too cold and too distant... but at least the Brazilian authorities have tried to give their new capital the feel of a capital by choosing one of the greatest architects in the world, Oscar Niemeyer, to build it.

In Brussels, the European District is deplorable but what's worse is that nobody has ever really got upset about it or has tried to make it better. The

term 'brusselisation' made its way into the dictionary as spoiling residential buildings by turning them into office spaces. That says it all really!

A century ago, Brussels was, with Vienna, one of the two most beautiful towns in Europe with a Rue de la Loi that symbolised Belgium's success in the worlds of industry and the arts. Starting from the Palais Royal, the Rue de la Loi was lined with stately townhouses and came out at the Cinquantenaire (French architect Charles Girault), followed the Avenue de Tervuren and the Mellaerts pond, crossing the magnificent Soignes Forest to end up in the grandiose Esplanade de Tervuren with the castle of the same name, almost enough to make one nostalgic for the age of Leopold II.

Today, the Rue de la Loi is nothing but a monstrosity that is so polluted by day and at night that the buildings on either side need to be renovated every thirty years. The European District is in keeping with that too: offices, offices and more offices... For forty years, the European District has been turning its back on the three criteria of the architecture of power: it is not based on any urban planning design, it ignores the cultural dimension of urban space and it rejects the citizen who is deemed to be undesirable in this jungle of technocracy.

What strikes you in Brussels' European District is not how ugly the buildings are. Some work pretty well and, in recent years, a desire to rehabilitate and renovate some has grown. Taken individually, the Berlaymont, the Justus Lipsius (what kind of a name is that!) and the Charlemagne are not ugly but they sit there as if at random. What is striking is the lack of an overall plan. None of the buildings has an aesthetic link with its neighbouring building or any functional relationship with its environment. In this respect, Schuman roundabout is symptomatic of what must not be done.

Until very recently, the Belliard/Froissart crossroads located in the heart of the European District, a hundred metres from the Council, two hundred metres from the Commission and three hundred metres from the Parliament, was merely an industrial ruin spread over 10,000m². Out of Christian kindness, we will not go into the painful issue of the Borschette Centre, a sort of sinister bunker where various committees meet, or the Beaulieu District that has been handed over to DG Environment or still less the despair of services that have been moved to the plateau of Kirchberg in Luxembourg. All of that would put you off the European project for good !

Nowhere can you see a piece of art, a sculpture or a tangible record of the founding fathers of the Union. There is no memorial to Jean Monnet. There

is nothing which reminds you of the glorious history of the Union in its productive years. Nor are there any shopping galleries or festive areas or any reason for locals to venture into the European District unless they have to go there. Basically, there is nothing that brings Europe and the citizen closer together. The serious point is not that such a situation exists but that it continues to exist because of disinterest, indolence and helplessness.

On the request of goodness knows who, a plan to redesign the European District was presented by the French architect Portzamparc. But the project is so ambitious that its level of ambition condemns it to being no more than an academic exercise. To make it come to life, it would require no more nor less than to raze the whole sector to the ground and rebuild it from scratch. And in the meantime, new constructions and renovations are coming into being without any overall guiding plan.

One of the only places where there is much life in the European District is the Parliament, close to the Place du Luxembourg. It is beautiful modern architecture, no doubt a bit cold, but open to the outside world. Lobbyists are welcome there and buses and visitors come by every day. It's the exception that proves the rule. Alas, the European Parliament is not a 'real' Parliament because - contrary to all the Parliaments in the world - it does not have the right to propose legislation. This power does not belong to the member states either. It is in the hands of the European Commission, the only institution entitled to propose and draw up laws or regulations.

The European Union in Brussels has given itself the technocratic image which very precisely corresponds to what it has become: a technocracy for which the masters are European civil servants.

The European Commission: a power concentrate

A number of words come to mind to describe the Commission and European civil servants: competent, honest, nationality-neutral, pro-European, defenders of the general interest, multilingual, multicultural, purposeful, pro-active, arrogant, ambitious, frustrated... A good portrait would be a mixture of these adjectives.

But one word is missing: POWER. The European Commission is where power is concentrated. It's worth recalling that 75% of national laws come from the Community. This already considerable percentage rises to 83% for environmental regulations.

Over the years, and especially since 1 January 1993, when the Single Market came into force, power has slid from the national to the European level. With the powers delegated to Brussels and to the World Trade Organisation, what are the member states left with? Not much if we add to that the loss of monetary sovereignty for eurozone countries: respect for convergence criteria, debt and deficit ceilings, interest rate set by the European Central Bank, the loss of the ability to devalue... member states are left with precious few powers.

It's difficult to admit that in Paris, whether you are the Prime Minister or the elected President of the Republic, the bulk of the power lies in Brussels. All the rest is peripheral.

But where is power exercised when it comes to the Commission? Is it located in the highest echelons of the Community's administration (Director Generals) or of the Commission in its guise as political college (the Commissioners)? Or is it located at more operational, more technical - let's dare to say it - junior levels.

There's nothing better than an anecdote to get your message across. Having managed the European sugar lobby and then the European farmers' lobby, I decided, in early 1996, to create my own company. A few months later, I was visited by the Brussels representative of one of the main global soft drinks companies. "Can you draft for me a list of the ten most important people for our Group in Brussels?" he asked.

The top name on my list was a certain Gilbert Mignon. The name generated a considerable amount of confusion right up to the US headquarters of the company. Who was this Gilbert Mignon, what did he do and why choose him rather than his Director, his deputy Director General, his Director General or his Commissioner?

In reality, Gilbert Mignon was the key man in the 'Sugar Division' (but without being the boss), a unit like many others within the Agriculture Directorate General (known as DG VI at the time and as DG AGRI nowadays). The 'Sugar Division' dealt with all the sugar issues in the European Union at the technical (exports, imports, ACP, refunds, stocks, invitations to tender etc.) and political levels (price, Community preference, production quotas etc.).

Within the 'Sugar Division', Gilbert Mignon was a humble 'desk officer' (a civil servant at the bottom of the ladder) and then a Principal Administrator

(a jumped up title for a civil servant who is still low down the ladder). He finished his career as deputy Head of Unit but, through his knowledge of the dossiers, his strategic vision, his credibility vis à vis professionals in the area, his convictions about the policies to pursue, his personal authority and his capacity to go see his Director General to defend his cause and get his way, he was de facto 'Mr Sugar' at the European Commission.

The fact that ordinary civil servants acquire for themselves powers that are well beyond their place in the hierarchy is not something brand new. In spite of the criticisms, the European administration continues to be an example. It is a very small-scale administration (1,000 civil servants to manage European agriculture!), a very structured and very competent one. The Commission has hundreds if not thousands of Gilbert Mignons today. One of the key criteria of influence in Brussels is competence quite simply because civil servants are themselves competent. They do not tolerate approximations, bla bla or generalisations.

Usually nationality-neutral, they strive to defend the general interest. Individually, they do have their own personal convictions but are generally loyal in defending the road map set out by their hierarchy. On the negative side, they have in recent years tended to refer to the Commission when they express themselves. Instead of saying "I think that..." or "Our Directorate General thinks that..." it is much more comfortable and even more satisfying to say "the Commission thinks that...". It's simplistic, no doubt effective and certainly arrogant.

This new found arrogance of a substantial number of Commission civil servants is underscored by their affirmation that they are superior to other institutions. In the past, the Commission delegated a Director to defend each dossier examined by the Economic and Social Committee. Then it became a Head of Unit, then a deputy Head of Unit and then a Principal Administrator.

The same goes for the Parliament, which the Commission somewhat fears but that it basically scoffs at often for its supposed lack of powers, its propensity to get involved in everything and its political opportunism.

This recent drift of the Commission (and by extension European civil servants) towards a form of arrogance, of technical superiority, of a propensity to see itself as the defender of the general interest are at the heart of the way in which comitology is derailing.

This book is the story of an administration that has major virtues but which, by withdrawing into itself, confiscates power delegated by the member states and organises things it as it wishes. It neglects the democratic control of legislators as if the Council and Parliament - who must remain the masters of the Union - have to subject themselves to the decisions of an administration that has become the predominant force.

Reform after reform, the democratic control of the Commission by those who have given it its mandate has ebbed away. This change has been sped up by the lax control of member states who are more interested in the return to national interests than in the developing the Union. Things have come to a point where, in certain circumstances (fortunately very limited ones), the Commission - even a single civil servant when they are not reined in by their hierarchy - can impose a decision unless it is countered by the Council of Ministers acting UNANIMOUSLY as 27 member states!