

Polly Toynbee

# ANOTHER ANGLE

**As the Lisbon Treaty nears ratification, speculation is mounting over who will be the first full-time president of the European Council.**

The bizarre six-monthly rotations that resembled a travelling medieval court are coming to an end – so which country will provide the leader? More important than geography is politics: will the new president come from the right or the left?

Wise heads ask why anyone would want it, since it is only a troublesome chairmanship with no power to lead. Tony Blair, some say – but surely not the man who fell from power because he led his country into a bad war that most Europeans deplored. Blair doesn't do consensus, he does personal conviction and his record on Europe is weak, leaving behind a Britain even more anti-European than it was under the Conservatives. No, not him.

So what of the other runners and riders most often touted for the job? A trawl through names mentioned most frequently throws up these: Jean-Claude Juncker (Luxembourg), Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Denmark), José Manuel Barroso (Portugal), Aleksander Kwasniewski (Poland), Guy Verhofstadt (Belgium), Carl Bildt (Sweden) and Bertie Ahern (Ireland), whose resignation may now have ruled him out. But have you spotted the one overwhelming disqualification they all have? They are all men, every one of them. No doubt when Henry Kissinger famously asked, "Who do I call when I call Europe?" he assumed he'd be calling a man. But of course the new president must be a woman. No doubt about it – and here's why.

Consider the best qualities Europe presents to the world. It offers a moderate and tolerant brand of democracy, an exemplary spirit of cooperation between nations who used to make war. The EU is not by nature warlike. It is the prime engine for concern about climate change and global poverty. Progressive EU values support the welfare state as well as the market economy, demonstrating the alternative to the American way, proving

there is no conflict between social and economic success. An EU president will stand for very different values from the US president. Whatever the rainbow alliance of its member nations, the EU is in all its instincts essentially female, working by consensus towards non-aggressive ends. A woman as its first figurehead would suit its nature – and especially a Scandinavian, since those are the values that show Europe at its social and economic best.

Luckily, just the right person is on hand: Sweden's Margot Wallström, vice-president of the European Commission. She knows the EU institutions inside out, so is already better qualified for the job than most of the men on the list above. She wants the job, she deserves the job and has the nerve to step forward and say so. Unafraid to call herself a feminist, she protests at the way jobs are stitched up for the boys behind the scenes. Above all, she is a passionate European. I have heard her on a platform outperform the men around her with warm and persuasive words about Europe's purpose and mission.

She is also one of the least pompous politicians you could hope to meet, with a down-to-earth, no-nonsense approach that springs from being one of the few non-university educated politicians to make it to Europe's upper echelons. These days increasingly across Europe, cabinets no longer represent ordinary people: Margot, mother of two, cheerful and intimate in conversation, has the gift of instant communication with everyone that the EU has too often lacked.

This is about the vital effort to reconnect the EU with its citizens, who see it as a place where overpaid men in suits talk about institutions. The Union urgently needs a human face. It needs to start talking about what matters – and especially what matters to women:



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childcare, good working hours, decent part-time jobs, equal pay with an equal chance to earn enough to bring up a family on a mother's wages.

Beyond that, European politics everywhere needs to feminise itself. Something is going wrong when 59 percent of EU graduates are women, and more boys than girls leave school with no qualifications – and yet motherhood still confines women to lesser lives, lower earnings and humbler careers. Something is going wrong when more girls grow up anorexic, bullied into unhappiness by obsession with appearance. A dose of feminism is just what Europe needs – and there is no one better to stand up for women than Margot Wallström.

Polly Toynbee is a columnist for *The Guardian*