

THE JUNCKER PRESIDENCY: THE ‘POLITICAL COMMISSION’ IN PRACTICE

Hussein Kassim (corresponding author)

h.kassim@uea.ac.uk

Brigid Laffan

brigid.laffan@eui.eu

Appearing before the European Parliament in July 2014 as candidate for the European Commission Presidency, Jean-Claude Juncker declared that his would be a ‘political Commission’ (2014a). With this formulation, which he would repeat continually over the coming months (2014b, 2015) and throughout his mandate, Juncker served notice that, with his appointment, he had no intention simply of picking up where the outgoing Commission would sign off. His administration would be different: taking political responsibility for its actions, responsive to the interests of citizens, pro-active, and prepared to defend the EU and itself.

Even if the Commission has always been a hybrid of the political and the technocratic (Coombes 1970) and found it necessary to combine competing organisational logics to carry out its mission (Christiansen 1997), few Commission Presidents have chosen to emphasize the political dimension. Most, moreover, rested their claims to legitimacy on the Commission’s technical expertise rather than their mode of election or electoral mandate. Some went as far as to speak of the Commission’s ‘technical charisma’. Juncker, the first Commission President to be selected via the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, provoked anxieties by his emphasis on the political dimension. Some feared that it signalled an end to the institution’s neutrality and independent action based on expertise, and a new importance for political parties and accountability to the European Parliament (EP) that marked the passing of its non-majoritarian status (Majone 2002).

This article critically reflects on the Juncker Commission. It considers the political and organizational strategy that lay behind Juncker’s conception of the Commission, how it informed the changes in organisation and procedures he introduced, and shaped relations with other EU institutions. It situates the Commission with its treaty-accorded roles in the complex

system of EU institutions and its internal organization with political, legal and regulatory responsibilities.

The discussion starts with the origins of the ‘political Commission’ in the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. It considers the implications of this innovation in EU governance for the theory and practice of the Commission’s role in the EU system. It then explores the impact of the experiment on relations with the European Council and the EP before assessing how it affected the performance of the functions entrusted to the Commission under the treaty. The fourth section examines the internal dynamics within the Commission, focusing on how the ‘political Commission’ was organised and the views of Commission staff.

The origins of the ‘political Commission’

The *Spitzenkandidaten* process represents a further stage in the EU’s politicisation following the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, which altered the political context of EU institutions and brought electoral and party politics to the fore. It also marked the origin of the ‘political Commission’. ‘This time it’s different’ was the bold slogan, emblazoned on billboards adopted by the EP for the 2014 European elections and later an awning tethered to the Commission’s Berlaymont headquarters. The slogan was an act of institutional positioning, a claim by the EP to even greater influence in the EU’s political system, and an attempt to link the appointment of the President of the Commission to the European elections.

This innovation in EU governance was made possible by an amendment introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. Article 17.7 of the revised TEU provided that:

Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members [italics added].

The highlighted phrases were seized upon by the EP to expand its power. An EP resolution dated 22 November 2012, which built upon an earlier initiative taken by the European People’s Party (EPP) at the Estoril Congress, urged the parliament’s political groups to appoint lead candidates for the elections by the EP (Westlake 2014).

In the lead-up to the 2014 elections, five of the EP's main party families -- the Party of European Socialists (PES), the European People's Party (EPP), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE), the Party of the European Left, and the European Green Party -- each nominated a candidate, while the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformers (ECR) and the Movement for a Europe of Liberties and Democracies -- both on the Eurosceptic right -- opted not to field candidates. The EU electorate was thereby given a choice on the left-right spectrum, although not on the EU as a project. The candidates, particularly Martin Schulz (PES) and Jean-Claude Juncker (EPP), representing the two largest political families, put considerable effort into a transnational campaign, which included a series of televised debates, conducted between April 9 and May 20, 2014.

Scholarly assessments of the process distinguish between the impact on inter-institutional relations and on input legitimacy (Hobolt, 2015, Christiansen, 2016). As an exercise designed to Europeanize the EP elections, the *Spitzenkandidaten* process reportedly had a minor impact. However, it did disrupt the institutional balance between the European Council, which brings together the political leaders of the member states, elected via national processes and accountable to national parliaments, and the European Parliament, which is directly elected by citizens of EU member states every five years.

Although European political parties were quick to put their weight behind the winning candidate following the May 2014 elections, the European Council was reluctant to accept direct link between the elections and the appointment of the Commission President that would deprive it of a decision-making power heads of government believed rightly should belong to them. Eventually Chancellor Merkel, whose position was pivotal, conceded to domestic pressure and gave her backing to Jean-Claude Juncker as the lead candidate of the party that had headed the poll. A majority of the European Council followed suit. The EP thereby emerged as the dominant player in the 2014 selection of the Commission President.

Juncker's vision of the 'political Commission'

Juncker used the formulation 'political Commission', first as candidate President, then incoming President, to highlight the democratic credentials that issued from the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and to differentiate his administration from previous Commissions. It was also a device to emphasize his own substantial political experience, including eighteen years as prime minister of Luxembourg. The same framing, with a detailed description of the

sources of his mandate, was repeated in the mission letters that were sent to members selected for the College (see, e.g., Commission 2014a) and a document circulated to them at their first formal meeting (Commission 2014b):

‘The new European Commission, its composition, its political orientation and its ambition, are the result of the European Parliament elections on 22-25 May 2014; and of the joint will of the Heads of State and Government of all 28 EU Member States to implement a “Strategic Agenda for the Union in Times of Change”, agreed by the European Council on 27 June 2014. We took up this mission in the Political Guidelines of 15 July 2014, which underline the commitment of the new European Commission to a new start for Europe, and to an Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change with ten priorities. I was elected President on the basis of this Agenda; as a College, after parliamentary hearings, we got the consent of the European Parliament for this new Agenda; and the European Council appointed the new European Commission on this basis.’

In speeches and statements between June and October 2014, Juncker sought to communicate a number of messages concerning what he intended by the term. The first was that the ‘political Commission’ heralded a ‘new start’ for Europe. As the EPP *Spitzenkandidat*, Juncker had campaigned on a platform of five priorities. Before appearing before the EP in June 2014, he fleshed out these ‘political guidelines’. Drawing on exchanges with leaders of political groups in the EP and the European Council’s Strategic Agenda (2014), he described his ten-point policy programme, ‘Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change’, which aimed to turn the page on austerity, focused on a ‘positive agenda’ for Europe, and addressed the challenges that had been neglected while the EU had been absorbed by the crisis.¹

¹ The ten priorities were: A new boost for jobs, growth and investment; A connected digital single market; A resilient energy union with a forward-looking climate change policy; A deeper and fairer internal market with a strengthened industrial base; A deeper and fairer economic and monetary union (EMU); A reasonable and balanced free trade agreement with the United States; An area of justice and fundamental rights based on mutual trust; Towards a new policy on migration; Europe as a stronger global actor; and A union of democratic change.

Second, the ‘political Commission’ would take a programmatic – targeted and selective -- approach to policy. It would prioritise action in fields, where the EU could make a difference. In observance with principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, other policy areas would be left to the member states. As Juncker declared: ‘I want a European Union that is bigger and more ambitious on big things, and smaller and more modest on small things’ (2014a).

Third, Juncker emphasized the ‘special working relationship’ between the Commission and the EP that he expected as a result of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process: ‘For the first time, a direct link has ... been established between the outcome of the European Parliament elections and the proposal of the President of the European Commission... It has the potential to insert a very necessary additional dose of democratic legitimacy into the European decision-making process, in line with the rules and practices of parliamentary democracy’.

At the same time -- Juncker’s fourth message – was that the Commission and the EP would be Community players. The ‘political Commission’ would not be ‘working against the European Council or against the Council of Ministers. We are not building Europe in opposition to countries or nations.’ Juncker stressed consistently that he was not an advocate of a European federation and that the EU needed to be built upon and fully respect European states. He was also careful to underline the influence on his programme of the Strategic Agenda that the European Council had adopted in June 2014.

Juncker’s final message was that, while the Commission would work closely with other institutions, it would not be subservient. Although the European Council ‘proposes the President of the Commission’, he noted, ‘[t]hat does not mean he is its secretariat. The Commission is not a technical committee made up of civil servants who implement the instructions of another institution. The Commission is political.’ Similarly, even though he had been elected by the EP, Juncker warned ‘I’m not going to be the European Parliament's lackey’.

Juncker’s description of the ‘political Commission’ prior to taking office was both fuller and more nuanced than was or has been reported subsequently. Although keen to emphasise the

uniqueness of his mandate due to the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, he also observed that, in virtue of the Treaty's definition of its role, the Commission would inevitably be political. He underlined that not all actions of the Commission could, would or should be political. He was also careful not to emphasize the role of party or partisanship.

There were some obvious tensions between some of these messages. Could a close relationship between the Commission and the European Parliament be reconciled with working with the Council? Also, although the Stability and Growth Pact was an area identified by Juncker as an example of where the rules allowed flexibility, it was exactly in the performance of its implementation and enforcement functions that the idea of the 'political Commission' threw doubt on whether it would continue to play its traditional role of neutral arbiter.

Operationalising the 'political Commission'

The 'political Commission' would require experienced politicians of the first rank if it was to play the leadership role that Juncker envisaged. Drawing on his long years of moving in European circles, Juncker defied convention by making a personal approach to his favoured candidates for particular portfolios and appealing to his mandate when prime ministers were reluctant or challenged his authority. The new team announced on 10 September 2014 included: '5 former Prime Ministers, 4 Deputy Prime Ministers, 19 former Ministers, 7 returning Commissioners and 8 former Members of the European Parliament' (Commission 2014c).²

Juncker and his transition team worked with the Secretariat General on how to operationalise the 'political Commission'. Their guiding ambition was to strengthen leadership capacity in the Commission in order to ensure effective delivery of the President's programme. The restructuring of the College into project teams around a Vice President was the central innovation. Each of the seven Vice Presidents was assigned responsibility for one or more elements of the President's programme. There was also an effort to balance the party ticket in

² In addition, '[o]ne third of the members of the new Commission (9 out of 28 eight), including the President-elect, campaigned in the 2019 European elections reaching out to citizens and seeking their support'.

each project team (see de Marcilly 2014). Most Vice Presidents had prime ministerial experience, which it was thought made them suited to manage coordination at a political level.

The role of the Vice Presidents was described in the mission letters sent to the Commissioners and spelled out in a communication of 11 November, which detail the ‘new ways of working’. As well as steering and coordinating work in their respective areas of responsibility, the Vice Presidents would be gatekeepers in the decision-making process: ‘As a rule, the President will not include a new initiative in the Commission Work Programme or place it on the agenda of the College unless ... recommended by one of the Vice-Presidents, on the basis of sound arguments and a clear narrative that is coherent with the priority projects of the Political Guidelines’. Vice Presidents would take the lead in ‘the follow-up, implementation, and communication of the Commission's priority policies across the Union and internationally’, as well as deciding who should represent the Commission in the European Parliament and the Council. In their work, Vice Presidents without charge over a Directorate General would be supported by the Secretariat General. They would be expected to work closely with the President’s cabinet.

As First Vice President, Frans Timmermans, a former Dutch foreign minister affiliated to the Party of European Socialists, occupied a key position. He was responsible for several portfolios, including inter-institutional relations, the rule of law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the Better Regulation portfolio. In the President’s own words, Timmermans would be his ‘right-hand man’, symbolised by the First Vice President’s power to decide whether initiatives would be discussed by the College or included in the Commission’s annual Work Programme.

A number of changes to the presidential services were included amidst a wider reorganisation of Commission departments. The staff of the Secretariat General was increased by 80 to enable it to manage its expanded workload. The Directorate General for Communications (DG COMM) became a presidential service, and the Spokesperson Service, which formed part of the DG COMM, was centralised, so that Commissioners would no longer have an individual spokesperson. The Bureau of European Political Affairs, the Commission’s in-house think tank, was replaced by the European Political Strategy Centre.

Overall, these changes were intended to ensure that the Commission would have the necessary capacity to steer through the President's programme. The aim was to strengthen political leadership within the institution, give greater coherence to the work of the College and unify political messages within the 'house', and streamline, expedite and improve decision making by bringing the political coordination of policy to the beginning of the process rather than leaving it until the end. The sections below examine how the 'political Commission' played out at three levels.

The 'political Commission' and inter-institutional relations

The impact of the 'political Commission' on relations with other institutions varied between institutions and over time. The relationship between the Juncker Commission and the European Council has been mixed. The start did not look auspicious. The European Council had been divided on the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, with few heads of government persuaded that the EU's democratic credentials had been enhanced. There were concerns that the 'political Commission' would erroneously apply a parliamentary model to the EU, ignoring not only the European Council's status, authority and legitimacy, but its indispensability to crisis management. Suspicions that the Commission was trying to usurp its leadership role lay behind the European Council's decision to draft a Strategic Agenda in June 2014 – prior to formal appointment of the new College and some months before it would take office. In addition, smaller states were worried that a 'political Commission' might abandon the institution's traditional defence of their interests.

Despite these misgivings, the fact that Juncker had been a member of the European Council for close to two decades, as well as chair of the Eurogroup, contributed to a promising beginning. Although Juncker's had pledged to be more assertive than his predecessor in European Council meetings, relations between the Commission President and President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, started on cordial terms. In a reversal of the division of labour that had developed between their predecessors Tusk took the lead in international affairs and Juncker in economic policy. The two Presidents met weekly, and Juncker's involvement in the Five Presidents report illustrates the esteem in which he was held.

Differences over how the EU should respond to the handling of the migration crisis, however, and specifically the Juncker Commission's determined pursuit of a solidarity mechanism that included compulsory quotas for the resettlement of refugees between member states, led to a

souring of relations between the two Presidents within a year. Although it did not ultimately prevent the Commission and the European Council from cooperating closely on related issues, such as the West Balkan route and negotiations with Turkey, as well as broader questions, including the Ukraine, the Greek crisis, and Brexit, migration would remain an enduring source of tension.

The ‘political Commission’ reinforced and to some extent extended the privileged relationship with the EP established under the Barroso Commission, notably in the form of the annual delivery of the State of the Union speech and the 2010 framework agreement. Under the Juncker Presidency, the Commission has been more frequently represented by Commissioners, not officials, in the Parliament and in legislative negotiations with the Parliament and the Council (trilogues). Its relationship with the EP were closer under the first Presidency (2014-17) of the eighth parliament than the second (2017-19). Not only had the EP been the main advocate of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, but the leaders of the EPP, S&D, and ALDE had struck a *quid pro quo* with the candidate Commission President: they pledged their support for Juncker’s nomination provided that his political guidelines responded to their key demands.

Moreover, after his defeat as the *Spitzenkandidat* of the S&D Group, Martin Schulz -- an old friend of Juncker’s -- became EP President, and the EPP and S&D signed up to a power-sharing agreement. They formed a ‘grand coalition’, commanding a working majority of MEPs, that was largely supportive of the Commission’s legislative programme. Regular meetings involving Juncker, Timmermans, Schulz, chairman of the EPP Manfred Weber and S&D Group President, Gianni Pitella -- the so-called ‘G5’ (Palmeri 2015) – helped to maintain close cooperation between the two institutions.

Following Schulz’s departure from the European Parliament, EPP MEP Antonio Tajani became EP President, a return to adversarial politics appeared a possibility. Although the relationship between the Commission and the Parliament became more complex, provisional analysis of parliamentary roll calls suggest that the voting patterns of the ‘grand coalition’ survived in practice (Maurice et al 2019). Indeed, although the EP became more assertive in its relations with the Commission, few proposals were blocked or rejected (see below).

In its relations with the Council of the European Union, the Juncker Commission adopted a more aggressive strategy than its predecessors. Rather than seeking the consensus which member states and the Council preferred, the Commission was satisfied when it was able to muster a qualified majority – an approach that did not endear it to the member states. Nonetheless, at the end of its term, the Commission (2019) was able to report that no less than 90 per cent of the legislative proposals adopted by the Council had been by consensus.

The ‘political Commission’ and the Commission’s responsibilities under the treaties

Although the Commission has achieved some notable successes in its function as EU trade negotiator – notably, in the agreements with Japan and Canada, the joint EU-US statement, and to be nominated as EU negotiator with the UK, which was not a given -- the effects of the ‘political Commission’ have perhaps been felt most extensively in its responsibilities for policy initiation, implementation, and enforcement. Although the Barroso Commission shared the same ambition to control the Commission’s output, the Juncker Commission has gone considerably further. The instruments it has introduced are of a different order. A programmatic approach to policy initiation, enforced by the system of Vice Presidents, together with the introduction of a Regulatory Scrutiny Board and the work of the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and ‘Doing Less More Efficiently’, have been especially effective. Only in exceptional cases – the prohibition of single-use plastics is an example – have new legislative proposals that did not originate within the President’s ten priorities been able to make it to the College.

Symbolising the new approach with a policy of political discontinuity, the Juncker Commission immediately withdrew 80 measures that had been tabled by its predecessor. Its decision was controversial,³ not least because some of the measures that were withdrawn related to environmental policy provoking fears about its green credentials. On entering office, the Commission moved quickly to introduce the Juncker investment plan -- a flagship initiative, intended to signal a turning of the page on austerity -- and to propose to use flexibility within the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact. Its measured approach was

³ In a case brought by the Council, the Court of Justice of the European Union outlined the conditions under which Commission can withdraw proposals (Crisp 2015).

evident at both its beginning and its end: the Juncker Commission's first annual work programme listed a mere 23 new initiatives; and by summer 2018, it had tabled all the proposals it had promised, so issued no further initiatives.

As its term of office drew to a close, the Commission was able to report that of 515 proposals tabled – 471 by the Juncker Commission, 44 carried over from previous Commissions, and 75 per cent fewer each year than its predecessor – 348 had been agreed by the Parliament and the Council (Commission 2019).⁴ The EP (2019) figures are similar: the Commission delivered 512 of the 547 proposals anticipated. Of these, 361 (66 per cent) had been adopted. Of the remaining 151, 115 (21 per cent) were proceeding as normal. Only 36 (7 per cent) had made slow progress or been blocked.

Space does not permit a detailed overview of the fate of the legislative proposals made by the Commission,⁵ but top achievements included the creation of the 'Juncker Fund', measures to strengthen the eurozone, keeping Greece in the euro, the creation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, the general data protection regulation, the end of roaming charges, reforms of the posting of workers directive, the gas directive, and the European Citizen's Initiative, a European Pillar of Social Rights, the creation of the European Labour Authority, and a ban on single-use plastics. By contrast, all seven proposals concerning reform of the common asylum system remained on the table. Its more ambitious initiatives to strengthen EMU and the Banking Union were also unsuccessful, while proposals on e-privacy, e-evidence and prevention of the dissemination of terrorist content online, and social security coordination were among a number left in limbo.

Perhaps, the greatest anxieties about how the 'political Commission' would approach the institution's traditional responsibilities concerned implementation and enforcement. The Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) was a case in point, which Juncker had cited as an area where the Commission could exercise discretion and on which subject it issued an interpretative Communication. A furore greeted the Commission's decision in May 2016 to

⁴ As a senior official in Council observed in an interview with one of the authors, 'If everything it proposed is adopted, the Commission has not been ambitious enough'.

⁵ See Commission (2019), EP (2019), and Blockmans (2019).

allow France more time to redress its fiscal deficit, especially when -- jokingly -- the Commission President appeared to justify the decision on the grounds that ‘France is France’. However, despite the anxieties expressed, there appeared to be vindication in that all the Commission’s decisions were supported by the Council.

Finally, there was little evidence of a tendency on the part of the ‘political Commission’ to favour larger member states or pull punches in enforcement. In competition policy, the Commission fined the Swedish truck manufacturer, Scania, for participating in a price cartel, and Google three times for breaching anti-trust rules. It also required the recovery of illegal tax benefits from Apple and blocked a proposed merger between Siemens and Alstom in the railway sector. The latter saw intense lobbying by the French and German governments and the Commission was criticised strongly for impeding EU industrial policy.

One important change, however, saw the Juncker Commission take a new approach to infringements. Applying a policy based on greater prioritisation, the Commission sought to work to resolve cases with member states without going to Court. By June 2019, it could claim to have closed more than 500 cases each year through negotiations with national authorities. The Commission President also decided that, as a matter of political principle, the College should be responsible for delegated decisions and, in the same spirit, proposed a reform to comitology that would compel member states to own the decisions taken.

Intra-institutional views on the ‘political Commission’

Insights into how staff view the ‘political Commission’ are provided by an online survey (n=6,500) administered to all staff and interviews conducted across the organisation (n=209) as part of an independent research project, ‘The European Commission: Where now? Where next?’.⁶ Asked, ‘Which of the following developments have been positive and should be retained?’, 72 per cent respondents to the survey agreed or strongly agreed with the

⁶ The research team, which included Brigid Laffan, Michael W. Bauer, Pierre Bocquillon, Renaud Dehousse, and Andrew Thompson, was led by Hussein Kassim and Sara Connolly. See [website address to follow at copy edit] for further details.

proposition ‘the identification of political priorities by the President prior to election’. Sixty-nine per cent approved ‘the use of the annual State of the Union to set Commission priorities’ and 68 per cent ‘a desire to be present in political debates in the member states’.

Views were more mixed on the ‘new ways of working’. A plurality of staff agreed or strongly agreed with all four propositions: that the new working methods had improved the ability of the Commission to speak with a single voice (38 per cent vs 21 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed), that Commission policy was now owned by the College as a whole (31 per cent vs 21 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed), that policy proposals were now carefully thought through by the relevant services (30 per cent vs 24 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed); and that cooperation was better between services (30 per cent vs 25 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed). While the level of disagreement ranged between 16 and 25 per cent, between 18 and 24 per cent gave a neutral view and a further 18 to 26 per cent did not know. Analysis of the survey responses revealed considerable variation between and within Directorates General (DGs). Perhaps unsurprisingly members of cabinet, staff in the European Political Strategy Centre, and the Secretariat General were the most positive about the ‘new ways of working’. Logistical support services, by contrast, and the Commission’s legal service, were among the least enthusiastic, while line Directorates General took positions in between (see Bauer et al 2019).

Interviews among Commissioners, cabinet members and senior managers offer a detailed account of the inner workings of the ‘political Commission’. According to these accounts, the ‘new ways of working’ had affirmed the primacy of the President’s cabinet vis-à-vis other cabinets. They had increased the demands on cabinets, due notably to the coordinating role of the vice presidents’ cabinets and the higher levels of interaction necessary at the cabinet level, especially in the early stages of the policy process. There was wide agreement that the new system had strengthened the Secretariat General.

Asked how they evaluated the changes, interviewees thought that the ‘political Commission’ had been a positive development, which had made clear where responsibility lay within the organisation. The adoption of a policy programme established priorities, enabled effective monitoring of planning and programming of policy initiation, and allowed greater predictability in inter-institutional relationships. It enabled the Commission to react to emerging issues, double up on the Commission’s presence, often covering both sides of the

political spectrum, which was particularly useful on key topics when the Commission needed to reach out, and ensure that all Commissioners remained engaged. Interviewees welcomed the ‘new ways of working’, because the new procedures enforced early political coordination between Commissioners and cabinets, strengthened the College, and improved quality control. Few of them thought that the ‘political Commission’ had made political parties or party affiliation more important in the Commission.

Interviewees also reported downsides. There were fears that the ‘political Commission’ could undermine the Commission’s independence in the exercise of its implementation and enforcement responsibilities, its neutrality between member states, and its equidistance between the European Council and the EP. Dangers included over-centralization, an undervaluing of technical expertise, and adverse effects on morale in areas not designated as priority. On the ‘new ways of working’, interviewees expressed concerns about the creation of extra layers of hierarchy, the exclusion of Directors General from political coordination, and a disconnect between interdisciplinarity at political level and the persistence of administrative silos. The encroachment by the Secretariat General in the substance of policy making was an additional problem for some.

A number of suggestions for making the model more effective were raised in the interviews. Many focused on the system of Vice Presidents. Interviewees proposed better delineation of the responsibilities of Vice Presidents and portfolio commissioners, stronger administrative support for Vice Presidents, and a more effective templating of project team meetings. Others wondered about the size, focus and composition of project teams, and whether they should be reviewed and revised during the mandate. A few reflected on the conditions that had made the system work and wondered whether they were reproducible. According to one senior manager: ‘The model works if you assume all the politicians get on and want to work together. Either they compromise or they apportion roles enabling them to work harmoniously. It also depends on the strength at the top. So, Martin [Selmayr – the Head of Cabinet and then Secretary General plays a necessarily role] as an enforcer. Without a strong centre it doesn’t work. This model with Prodi would have been a complete disaster’.

Finally, whatever their reservations about the ‘new ways of working’, respondents to the survey were extremely positive about the performance of the Juncker Commission. Asked to offer their assessment along four dimensions, ‘effectively managing the house’, ‘setting a

policy agenda’, ‘delivering on policy priorities’ and ‘defending the Commission in the EU system’, staff rated the ‘political Commission’ more highly than its immediate predecessor: 44 per cent against 18 per cent, 70 per cent against 19 per cent, 52 per cent against 18 per cent, and 50 per cent against 16 per cent.

Conclusion

The above discussion has presented three arguments. The first is that Jean-Claude Juncker used the phrase ‘political Commission’ as a frame to legitimise a new model of Commission leadership. The formulation was intended both to capture the distinctiveness of the mandate he claimed as a result of his selection through the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and to signal that his Commission would be very different from its predecessors. Second, the ‘political Commission’ was operationalised in a form that distinguished it sharply from previous Commissions, including its immediate predecessor (see Kassim et al 2019). Restructuring the work around a number of Vice Presidents was a key innovation. More fundamental, however, was a reading of the mandate derived from the *Spitzenkandidaten* process to re-shape the Commission in a form that would ensure the delivery of the programme on which the Commission had been elected.

The third argument is that the ‘political Commission’ had important effects at three levels. At the macro-level, it created friction with the European Council, which had opposed the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and saw the ‘political Commission’ as an attempt to contest its leadership role. By contrast, the ‘political Commission’ reinforced the strengthening of relations with the EP that had begun under the Barroso Commission. At the meso-level, the ‘political Commission’ largely delivered the policy initiatives it had promised, even if a number of important proposals remained under negotiation or unadopted, while its record in implementation and enforcement did not justify the fears about its neutrality and independence that were initially raised. Within the institution, views on the ‘political Commission’ were positive. Although the assessment of the ‘new ways of working’ were more varied, overall staff rated the Juncker Commission highly.

A number of questions remain unanswered, however. A first is whether the ‘political Commission’ would be possible without the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. A second question that arises is whether a politician with less experience of the EU than Jean-Claude Juncker would be able to fulfil the presidential role in the same way. A related issue concerns the

conditions, including appointments and availability of personnel, that made the success of the ‘political Commission’ possible. As one Director General commented: ‘The model works if you assume all the politicians get on and want to work together . . . It also depends on the strength at the top. . . Without a strong centre it doesn’t work. This model with Prodi would have been a complete disaster’. For these reasons, in the EU system where institutionalization has not proceeded as far as in national states, it remains unclear whether the ‘political Commission’ is a one-off, a staging post, or an end point.

References

Bassot, E. and Hiller, W (2019) ‘The Juncker Commission's ten priorities. An end-of-term assessment’, European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 637.943

Blockmans, S. (ed) (2019) *What Comes After the Last Chance Commission? Policy Priorities for 2019-2024*, Centre for European Policy Studies,

Christiansen, C. (2016) ‘After the Spitzenkandidaten: fundamental change in the EU’s political system?’ *West European Politics*, 39(5): 992-1010

Christiansen, T. (1997) ‘Tensions of European governance: politicized bureaucracy and multiple accountability in the European Commission’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 4(1): 73-90

Commission (2014a) ‘President Juncker's Mission Letter addressed to First Vice-President Frans Timmermans’,

Commission (2014b) ‘The Working Methods of the European Commission 2014-2019’, Communication from the President, 11 November

Commission (2014c) ‘Questions and Answers: The Juncker Commission’, Memo, 10 September 2014

Commission (2019) ‘Europe in May 2019. Preparing for a more united, stronger and more democratic Union in an increasingly uncertain world’, The European Commission's contribution to the informal EU27 leaders' meeting in Sibiu (Romania) on 9 May 2019

Coombes, D. (1970) *Politics and Bureaucracy in the European Community*, Allen & Unwin

Crisp, J. (2015) 'Judges limit Commission's power to retract EU laws', *Euractiv*, 28 April, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/science-policy/news/judges-limit-commission-s-power-to-retract-eu-laws/>

de Marcilly, C. (2014) 'The Juncker Commission, the return of politics?', Fondation Robert Schuman, European Issue n° 330

European Council (2014) 'Strategic agenda for the Union in times of change' European Council Conclusions 26/27 June 2014

Hobolt, S.B. (2015) 'A vote for the President? The role of *Spitzenkandidaten* in the 2014 European Parliament elections', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(10): 1528-1540

Juncker, J.-C. (2014a) 'A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change Political Guidelines for the next European Commission', Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session' Strasbourg, 15 July 2014

Juncker, J.-C. (2014b) 'Setting Europe in Motion: President-elect Juncker's Main Messages from his speech before the European Parliament,' Statement in the European Parliament plenary session ahead of the vote on the College, Strasbourg, 22 October 2014

Juncker, J.-C. (2015c) 'State of the Union Address 2015: Time for honesty, unity and solidarity', Strasbourg, 9 September 2015

Kassim, H., Connolly, S., Laffan, B. and Bocquillon, P. (2019) 'The Juncker Commission: A new model of presidentialism?', paper prepared for presentation at the 2019 EUSA International Biennial Conference, Denver May 9-11, 2019.

Majone, G. (2002) 'The European Commission: The Limits of Centralization and the Perils of Parliamentarization', *Governance*, 15(3): 375-392

Maurice, E., Hellot, C., Bougassas-Gaullier, D. and Menneteau, M. (2019) 'Review of the 8th Legislature of the European Parliament', Fondation Robert Schuman, *European issues*, n°512, 23 April 2019

Palmeri, T. (2015) 'The most exclusive dining club in Brussels', Politico online, 18 June 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/g5-brussels-most-exclusive-dining-club/>, checked 14 June 2019

Westlake, M. (2014) 'Chronicle of an Election Foretold: The Longer-Term Trends leading to the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure and the Election of Jean-Claude Juncker as European Commission President', LSE 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper Series, Paper No. 102/2016