In a recent blog about the eurozone crisis, Clyde Prestowitz, an influential American think-tanker, commented that Hermann Van Rompuy, the European Council President, “is little known and little regarded” (Prestowitz, 2012). Prestowitz, who considers himself an unconventional thinker, was spouting conventional wisdom. Without doubt, Van Rompuy is little known in the United States and has low name recognition among most Europeans. But in EU political and policy circles, Van Rompuy is well known and highly regarded. As the first elected President of the European Council, which brings together the political heads of the member states as well as the Commission President, Van Rompuy has shaped this new, post-Lisbon Treaty position in an impressive way. His political background and personal qualities have equipped Van Rompuy with the right skill set for a difficult and demanding job. It almost seems as if the new presidency was invented with Van Rompuy in mind.

In fact, the job was initially conceived with Tony Blair in mind, specifically by Blair himself. In 2002-2003, during the Convention on the Future of Europe, Blair, who was then Prime Minister of the UK, pushed the idea of an elected President of the European Council to replace the long-standing system whereby the presidency rotated among the leaders of the member states, every six months. An extension of the rotating presidency of the Council of Ministers, the rotating presidency of the European Council was unquestionably in need of reform. The performance of particular presidents varied greatly; meetings of the European Council were often poorly prepared and followed through; and there was insufficient continuity from one presidency to another. Replacing the national rotation with a standing president seemed like a good idea.

The Constitutional Convention and ensuing inter-governmental conference, held formally to draft the Constitutional Treaty, accentuated the latent divide between big and small member states over the main institutional issues at stake. One of these concerned the modalities of qualified majority voting; another concerned the size and composition of the Commission. In view of successive rounds of enlargement past and pending, which boosted the relative voting weight of the small member states, the big member states.
sought a reweighting of Council votes or the introduction of a new double majority system (of member states and overall population). Having already given up, in the Nice Treaty, the right to nominate a second commissioner, the big member states also pressed for a diminution in the size of the Commission to fewer members than the total number of member states. On the defensive over the voting system and the Commission’s size, most small member states were suspicious of the proposed reform of the European Council presidency, which France, Germany, and Spain supported alongside Britain.

The proposed reform of qualified-majority voting was amended slightly during the intergovernmental conference that followed the Constitutional Convention, and amended again during the intergovernmental conference that followed the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by French and Dutch voters in 2005. The proposed reduction in the Commission’s size to fifteen members survived the Constitutional Convention, the intergovernmental conference to draft the Constitutional Treaty, and the subsequent intergovernmental conference to rescue the Constitutional Treaty in the form of the Lisbon Treaty, but not the rejection by Irish votes of the Lisbon Treaty itself. By contrast, the proposal to replace the rotating presidency of the European Council with a president elected every two-and-a-half years, renewable once, remained in the Lisbon Treaty in its original form. Of the three major institutional innovations in the lengthy treaty reform process, clearly the new European Council presidency was the least contentious.

Blair, who, during the Constitutional Convention, expected to be out of national office by the time that the proposed Constitutional Treaty was likely to come into effect, saw himself as the ideal choice for the new European Council President. He was, after all, an experienced chief executive of a large member state and had a prominent global profile. His ambition inevitably engendered resentment among other national leaders. But it was his strong support for the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which the leaders of France and Germany equally strongly opposed, that ended Blair’s chances of getting the job. Though Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder, Blair’s main protagonists over Iraq, were out of office by the time that the European Council selected its first president, their successors—Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel—were not enamored of Blair. At the same time, steadfast opposition from the small member states to a big member state candidate, and the unwillingness of the big member states to risk having one of their own become a driving force as European Council President, possibly to the detriment of other big member states, ensured that the position would go to someone from a small member state.

Given the makeup of the European Council, in practice its president would have to be a former or current national leader, or a former or current Commission President. Moreover, because the majority of national leaders belonged to center-right political parties, there was a strong preference to select a European Council President from that side of the political spectrum. The universe of potential candidates was small. Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean Claude Juncker would have fit the bill, but lacked strong support from Sarkozy and Merkel, who, at a dinner in Paris on October 28, 2009, opted instead for Van Rompuy, hitherto not a leading contender for the position. As it happened, Van Rompuy was in the right place (Prime Minister of Belgium) at the right time (imminent implementation of the Lisbon Treaty). The European Council formally elected him by acclamation on December 1, 2009 (Barber, 2010).

What are the lessons of Van Rompuy’s selection? It confirmed that the European Council President is most likely to come from within the European Council itself; that a candidate from a small member state is most likely to succeed; and that the candidate is also likely to come from the same political “family” as the majority of European Council members. It also demonstrated the influence of the Franco-German axis, but subsequent developments showed the danger of being seen as the candidate of France and Germany. As resentment of the Sarkozy-Merkel duopoly grew within the European Council, especially over the two leaders’ obsession with austerity in response to the deepening eurozone crisis, Van Rompuy was tainted to some extent by association. Juncker has been the most critical of Merkel’s and Sarkozy’s behavior within the European Council and of what he sees as Van Rompuy’s excessive deference to them as European Council President (see, for instance, Spiegel, 2011). Though harsh, Juncker’s criticism
highlights both the difficulty for the European Council President of standing up to strong Franco-German leadership and the disadvantage of being seen as the France-German shoe-in. Sarkozy’s replacement in May 2012 by François Hollande, and with it the apparent end of the Franco-German duopoly in the European Council, gave Van Rompuy some welcome room to maneuver. The prospect of looser Franco-German relations in 2014, when Van Rompuy’s successor will be chosen, raises the possibility of a more open competition and the selection of a European Council President less beholden to—or at least appearing to be less beholden to—the leaders of France and Germany.

Performance So Far

The escalation of the eurozone crisis raised the political profile and importance of the European Council at precisely the time that the new presidency system came into operation. The European Council has met more often—in regularly-scheduled and special sessions—in Van Rompuy’s first term in office than in the five years before then. Moreover, the leaders of the eurozone countries have also met frequently during the crisis, with Van Rompoy in the chair. The frequency of summits, whether of the 27 (the entire EU membership) or the 17 (members of the eurozone), attested to the seriousness of the crisis and the extent to which “the European Council has emerged as the centre of political gravity” in the EU (Puettter, 2012, p. 161). In effect, the European Council has been in crisis-management mode since Van Rompuy became president, making it almost impossible for him to conduct ordinary European Council business. If one measure of the European Council is how well it deals with unexpected events, then the main measure of Van Rompuy’s performance so far is how well he has presided over a European Council grappling with one of the most serious crises in the history of the EU.

At the outset it needs to be noted that the title “president” is misleading to describe Van Rompuy’s role. Van Rompuy is not a president in the form of the President of France or even the President of the Commission, who lacks strong executive authority but is nonetheless primus inter pares within the College. By virtue of having been a prime minister of Belgium and a member of the European Council in that capacity, Van Rompuy is in the peer group of heads of state and government. Yet as a former rather than a current prime minister, he is not equal to them. Like the Commission President, the other ex-officio member of the European Council, Van Rompuy does not have a vote in that body. He is a president only in the sense that he presides over meetings of the European Council; he is really a non-voting executive chairman.

Although chairmen can be highly influential, the nature of the European Council, consisting as it does of headstrong national political leaders, is a difficult forum for a non-voting chairman to govern. Though nominally equal, some members of the European Council are more equal than others and less likely to defer to the chair. Traditionally, the leaders of France and Germany carry the most weight, though how they throw their weight around depends largely on the personality of the incumbent. Sarkozy was notoriously heavy-handed, making it difficult for Van Rompuy to call him to order. Hollande and Merkel are more restrained. Regardless of the inherently tense nature of the eurozone crisis, meetings of the European Council were often testy when Sarkozy’s was present, and during the presence as well of the mercurial Silvio Berlusconi, Mario Monti’s predecessor as prime minister of Italy. Since then, meetings of the European Council have become less-dramatic and more business-like, which suits Van Rompuy’s approach.

Indeed, Van Rompuy’s leadership style is relaxed, open, and informal. He frequently speaks publicly about his job and about developments in the EU and is accessible to the media. In January 2011, Van Rompuy produced the first of a new series of annual reports, The European Council in 2010, covering the institution’s activities during the previous calendar year. Though glossy and apparently superficial, these annual reports (the second appeared in January 2012) are useful publications. As well as providing a
commentary on the conduct of the European Council, they contain the conclusions or official statements released after each meeting. They also give a flavor of Van Rompuy’s disarming manner (Council, 2011 and 2012).

Being in the European Council presidency full-time for at least two-and-a-half years brings one obvious advantage over holding the position as a sitting national president or prime minister for only six months: an ability to focus exclusively and continuously on European Council business. Van Rompuy has the time to travel throughout the EU in order to consult constantly, between meetings, with the members of the European Council, including the Commission President and the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Those meetings give Van Rompuy an unrivalled awareness of the perspectives and positions of each player, which is extremely advantageous when preparing the European Council’s agenda and chairing the meetings themselves. Having a small cabinet (private office) and being able to draw on the resources of the Council secretariat, Van Rompuy has the necessary staff and administrative support to carry out his responsibilities effectively.

Van Rompuy’s expertise in economic and financial affairs, though not a prerequisite for the job, has been particularly beneficial during his tenure as European Council President. Given the predominance of the eurozone crisis, Van Rompuy has been able to explain developments and frame discussions in an authoritative and reassuring way. Van Rompuy’s expertise may have led eurozone leaders, at their special summit in March 2010 on the eve of the regularly-scheduled European Council meeting, to “ask the President of the European Council to establish, in cooperation with the Commission, a Task Force with representatives of the Member States, the rotating Presidency and the ECB (European Central Bank), to present to the Council, before the end of this year, the measures needed to [remedy the euro crisis], exploring all options to reinforce the legal framework” (European Council, 2010). Commission President José Manuel Barroso was sure that he, not Van Rompuy, would head the task force. Instead, the new body became the ‘Van Rompuy Task Force,’ not the ‘Barroso Task Force,’ which helped to establish in many peoples’ minds Van Rompuy’s institutional ascendancy over the Commission President.

Regardless of Van Rompuy’s role, the European Council has been criticized for its apparently inadequate response to the eurozone crisis. The problem lies partly with the nature of the crisis itself, which by definition is fast-moving, and of the European Council, which by nature is cumbersome. Still, given the extent to which national leaders dithered and disagreed over their response to the escalating euro crisis, it was impressive that they decided in 2010 first to establish the (temporary) European Financial Stability Facility, then to establish the (permanent) European Stability Mechanism. Van Rompuy was right to assert that “the decisions we have taken [in the European Council], notably in May, October and December, constitute the biggest reform of the economic and monetary union since the euro was created” (Council, 2011, p. 6). The political salience of these decisions required action at the top of the EU executive pyramid, in the European Council, which was facilitated by the existence of a standing president.

Judged by its handling of the crisis, however questionable, the European Council was better off with a permanent president rather than the rotating presidency. Van Rompuy could not stand up to the headstrong leaders of France and Germany, any more than the prime ministers of most countries in the rotating presidency would have been able to. As in years past, only more so, France and Germany dominated meetings of the EU-27 and Euro-17. Invariably, the French and German leaders held bilateral summits before meetings of the EU-27 and Euro-17 to thrash out their differences and agree on a proposal or set of proposals for presentation at the forthcoming summits of EU and eurozone leaders. Without prior Franco-German agreement, Sarkozy declared after the December European Council, ‘a deal [on the fiscal pact] would not have been possible’.¹ He may have been right, but Van Rompuy put Franco-German leadership in a slightly different light when he explained, after the October European Council, that agreement

¹ Le Monde, 9 December 2011
between France and Germany was ‘necessary, but not sufficient’ to ensure agreement in the European Council (European Council, 2011). Nor did Van Rompuy slavishly follow the Franco–German lead. In December 2011, he took a position contrary to that of Merkel and Sarkozy, advocating tighter fiscal policy coordination among member states without recourse to a new treaty, which he feared would prove divisive and difficult to ratify.

Van Rompuy’s institutional profile rose when EU leaders decided in October that Euro-17 summits would take place regularly, with Van Rompuy in the presidency. Although Van Rompuy’s presidency of both bodies would be subject to renewal in mid-2012, when his first term as European Council President ends, the presumption at the end of 2011 was not only that Van Rompuy would be renewed in both positions but also that, even after his second, non-renewable term, the presidency of both bodies would be held by the same person. If so, the already small pool of potential European Council and eurozone summit presidents would shrink, being limited in effect to current or former leaders of eurozone countries and current or former Commission presidents.

It is tempting, when trying to evaluate Van Rompuy’s performance, to imagine how the European Council would have fared under the old rotating presidency. The answer so far is mixed. The Spanish leader’s presidency of the European Council in the first half of 2010 would have been handicapped to some extent by his country’s wobbly financial situation, just as the Belgian Prime Minister’s presidency of the European Council, in the second half of 2010, would have been handicapped by his country’s inability to form a new government after the June 2010 parliamentary elections. Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán, widely unpopular among other national leaders because of his authoritarian tendencies, would likely have been a disaster as President of the European Council, though Hungary generally performed well in the rotating Council presidency in the first half of 2011. By contrast, the popular Donald Tusk would have made an excellent European Council President, just as Poland generally did a first-rate job in the rotating Council presidency the second half of 2011. Denmark performed admirably in the Council presidency in the first half of 2012, but the country’s absence from the eurozone would have hobbed the prime minister’s presidency of the European Council and prevented her from chairing meetings of the Euro-17.

Van Rompuy himself is confident that having a standing president benefits the European Council. “Thanks to the new continuity of my function,” he wrote in his 2011 report, “[the European Council] is better equipped to steer change, to give orientations or quite practically to follow-up earlier decisions” (Council 2012, p. 16). Meetings of the European Council seemed well-prepared and well-run under Van Rompuy’s watch. Much of his success depends on having good working relationships with national leaders and foreign ministers (Van Rompuy works closely with the General Affairs Council)—especially with the prime minister and foreign minister of the country in the rotating presidency—and with the president of the European Parliament (EP); political group leaders in the EP; the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy; and the head of the Eurogroup.

Commission President Barroso is a particularly important interlocutor for Van Rompuy. The relationship between the two presidents is inherently prickly, given that the Commission President had more to lose institutionally from the establishment of a standing European Council President than the standing European Council President had from the existence of the Commission President. Barroso and Van Rompuy seem to work harmoniously together, meeting regularly in private and having been tasked jointly by the European Council with drafting reports and taking initiatives to help resolve the eurozone crisis. They frequently take part in joint press conferences and appear together at the EP to report on European summits.

Conclusion
The switch in the Lisbon Treaty from a rotating to standing European Council presidency is undoubtedly a valuable innovation. The European Council is no longer subject to national grandstanding, occasional weak leadership, and uneven presidential performance. There is no guarantee that a standing European Council President will be a good European Council President, but Van Rompuy turned out to have been an excellent choice as the first office holder, just as Javier Solana turned out to have been an excellent choice for the first High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In both cases, the EU was fortunate to have found ideal initial incumbents for important new positions.

According to Richard Corbett, a member of Van Rompuy’s private office, being President of the European Council is analogous to “herding cats” (European Policy Center, 2011). Corbett’s description highlights the individualistic nature of the European Council, a body consisting of extremely ambitious, often egotistical politicians, who are paramount on the national political stage. In contrast to the image of a hard-charging national leader, Van Rompuy appears avuncular and unassuming. Nevertheless he is an ambitious politician, who has held the highest political office in his own member state. Having already, as prime minister of Belgium, been a member of the European Council, Van Rompuy knew what to expect as the institution’s first standing president. Moreover, being Prime Minister of Belgium, a notoriously fractured policy, helped Van Rompuy to hone his skills as a conciliator; skills that have stood him in great stead as European Council President.

Institutions matter, as do the people who run them. The first incumbents of new institutions are especially influential in shaping the institutions themselves. Van Rompuy became European Council President in the midst on the eurozone crisis, which escalated sharply thereafter. The crisis thrust the European Council to the forefront of EU affairs, as a forum not only for occasional decision-making on the most consequential EU issues but also for quasi-permanent crisis management. Van Rompuy’s baptism of fire took place in an exceptionally challenging policy environment, made even more difficult by the powerful Sarkozy-Merkel duopoly during most of Van Rompuy’s first term in office. Van Rompuy weathered the storm, providing continuity and giving the work of the European Council the appearance of seamlessness and flow at an unexpectedly taxing time. Having become the first holder of a potentially important position during an unparalleled economic and political crisis, Van Rompuy is likely to grow in office and bequeath to his successor a strong platform on which to influence policymaking at the highest level.

Yet the vulnerability of the post-Lisbon European Council presidency lies precisely in the story of Van Rompuy’s success. The pool of candidates for elected European Council President is small. Few are likely to have Van Rompuy’s acumen, experience, and skill. Chairing the European Council is a delicate balancing act. Future incumbents may have difficulty walking the fine line between entrenched national interests, represented by powerful politicians, and a common EU interest, represented by an unassuming though authoritative European figure. Whatever the outcome of the eurozone crisis, the European Council will remain preeminent institutionally in the EU. The significance of the European Council presidency will rise accordingly. The choice of Van Rompuy’s successor may well become one of the European Council’s most important decisions in the next few years.

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