New EU top jobs ‘a clean sweep’ for pro-European liberal centrists, says former Europe Minister

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Choice of nominees leaves anti-EU populists ‘rolling in the dust’, suggests Denis MacShane.

MacShane, a former UK Europe Minister, said the nominees represented a “stunning reaffirmation of core European values.”

He said, “The next European leadership team will be led by women and men who are strongly committed to European partnership and opposed to the anti-European ideology of Boris Johnson, Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini and Marine Le Pen.”

German Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen was chosen to replace Jean-Claude Juncker as head
of the commission. The Brussels-born minister is a member of Angela Merkel’s conservative Christian Democrats.

Current International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief, Christine Lagarde has been nominated as the first woman to head the European Central Bank (ECB), Belgian Liberal Prime Minister Charles Michel is nominated to replace European Council President Donald Tusk while Spain's Josep Borrell has been put forward as EU foreign policy chief, or High Representative.

MacShane called the outcome “a clean sweep for pro-European liberal centrists”, adding that Von der Leyen’s appointment together with Lagarde, the former French finance minister, “is a major win for France’s President Macron who emerges as Europe’s new king - or queen-maker.”

He added, “Two other fluent French-speakers, the Liberal Charles Michel and the Catalan socialist and strong anti-separatist Josep Borrell, the new foreign policy supremo, are also French speakers. It is a major win for what Macron calls ‘Les progressistes” and leaves the EU’s nationalist populists in East and Central Europe who were proclaiming along with Steve Bannon they would take over Europe rolling in the dust.”

Further comment came from Giles Merritt, founder of the Friends of Europe think tank, who told The Parliament Magazine, “There hasn't been a German Commission President since Walter Hallstein came to Brussels as the first head of the European project's executive arm in 1958.”

He added, “Hallstein was brilliant, forceful and commanded widespread respect. But the German politicians subsequently nominated as commissioners have on the whole been far less distinguished. The five decades since Hallstein stepped down in 1967 have seen a succession of German technocrats or second-rank politicians sent to Brussels, inevitably suggesting that in German eyes the EU was of secondary importance to domestic politics.

“How Ursula Von der Leyen will make use of Germany's political clout remains to be seen. There's no doubting that coming from Berlin confers more weight than coming from Luxembourg or Lisbon, as have her two predecessors. Much will be made of the fact she was born and raised in Brussels, making her at least the symbol of a new relationship between the European Commission and its most powerful member state at a time when reform and change will be the zeitgeist.”

"It is a major win for what Macron calls ‘Les progressistes” and leaves the EU’s nationalist populists in East and Central Europe who were proclaiming along with Steve Bannon they would take over Europe rolling in the dust" Denis MacShane
The European Parliament's own contest for the commission presidency - the "Spitzenkandidaten" (lead candidate) process - was cast aside by EU leaders during their three-day summit.

Neither the “winner” of that process, German centre right MEP Manfred Weber, nor any of the other Spitzenkandidaten candidates, were selected by EU leaders for the European Commission presidency, the EU’s top job, on Tuesday.

All the Spitzenkandidaten, including Frans Timmermans and Margrethe Vestager, both EU commissioners, were rejected. Weber was the choice of the centre-right EPP, which emerged from the recent European elections as the single biggest grouping in the European Parliament.

Instead, German Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen was chosen to replace Jean-Claude Juncker as head of the commission. The Brussels-born minister is a member of Angela Merkel’s conservative Christian Democrats.

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Commenting soon after the decisions were made on Tuesday, Weber said, “The package put forward by the Council is not my package but I will be loyal to it. For the EPP it was crucial that the EU top jobs reflect the outcome of the elections and the fact that the EPP won the election.”

“If Manfred Weber hadn’t opposed transnational lists this time, he would have become European Commission President” Former UK Liberal MEP Andrew Duff

Weber added, “The EPP has always fought for a more democratic Europe. In this regard it is a sad day for European democracy. However, we are a reliable and responsible force and we will therefore support this deal. In this regard it is good news that the presidency of the Commission will be in the hands of our political family.”

Addressing his own high-profile campaign for the Commission Presidency, during which he travelling widely throughout Europe in a bid to generate support in EU capitals, Weber noted, “My journey started here last September as a top candidate and here it ends. I will continue to fight for a democratic Europe. It was an honour for me to take on this task for the EPP and for Europe.”

When asked where the outcome of the summit had left the much-vaunted Spitzenkandidat process, under which Juncker was elected in 2014, the former UK Liberal MEP Andrew Duff told this website, “It’s clear that the Spitzenkandidat process can only be salvaged if the European Parliament adopts transnational lists for a pan-EU constituency in 2024.”

Duff, a constitutional expert, added, “If Manfred Weber hadn’t opposed transnational lists this time, he would have become European Commission President.”

He said, “For the rest (of the summit nominees), it’s an art in politics to be in the right place at the right time.”

Weber meanwhile tweeted his best wishes to new European Parliament President, Italian Socialist David Sassoli: “Congratulations @DavidSassoli on your election as President of the @Europarl_EN. We look forward to working together and continuing the fight to strengthen the voice of the European
About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine

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