

The Commission must reach out from Brussels to a wider Europe

By Carl Bildt

THE European Commission must leave Brussels and enter Europe if it is to regain its relevance in the political landscape.

That the Commission is seen as aloof and technocratic is part of the conventional wisdom these days.

In a way, that's what the Commission was designed to be.

It was never meant to be populist, slogan-waving and in tune with every one of the moods of the time.

But times have changed and so must – to some degree – the role of the Commission.

If it evolves from being the guiding star to becoming the whipping boy of the European political scene, great damage will undoubtedly be done to the entire European endeavour.

Brussels is a dangerous place to be for those wanting to feel the pulse of Europe. Very soon, there develops the tendency to speak a 'Brusselese' that is not too easily translated into any of the other languages of the Union.

In a way, this is the same danger that is felt in any capital of any political entity. Washington-bashing is as popular across America as Brussels-bashing is across Europe. And, in Swedish politics, you can certainly make some headway with a measure of Stockholm-bashing.

But it is more dangerous in this case, since the legitimacy of the European endeavour is still less than the legitimacy of the different national states.

It has been generally recognized that addressing this problem is one of the key tasks of the Barroso Commission.

My advice to it would be to do its utmost to connect to the different political systems and cultures of the Union.

Commissioner Margot Wallström, in charge of institutional relations and communication strategy, has promised to visit every one of the 25 EU national parliaments during the coming years.

That's excellent. It is primarily by engaging the national political leaders that the gap between Europe and its citizens can be overcome.

But it is not enough.

I would propose that the Commission schedules one meeting per month in one of the member states.

Going there, it could spend one day doing its regular business and the next day spreading out over that country in town-house-type meetings, answering questions and explaining its view of the European agenda.

Over the course of its mandate, this would give the Commission as a whole the possibility of meeting in each member state perhaps twice.

Important for the success of such a scheme is that it does not develop into an expensive circus with massive staff.

Host-country support is better than a Brussels flying circus.

During the years of negotiating our accession treaty – and leading up to our referendum a decade ago – I, as the then Swedish prime minister, set aside each Monday to visit an often remote part of the country for open town-house meetings on the European issue – and encouraged other members of the government to do the same.

There is no doubt that it had an effect in making people more comfortable with what we were doing. But another effect was of perhaps even greater importance.

It is only by being out there in the different political environment that you get the real feel for

the mood – which are the issues and which are the dreams?

Different parts of Europe tick in distinctly different ways – even different parts of Sweden tick in different ways.

It is only when you understand this that you can deliver a leadership that has true credibility.

It is of the highest importance for the future that the institution of the Commission regains some of its centrality on the European political scene.

Only then can it be successful in its crucial task of taking successful initiatives geared to shaping our common future.

But for that to succeed, it will have to be seen as leaving Brussels and entering Europe.

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