



*Canadian Network of EU Centres of Excellence <http://carleton.ca/euce-network-canada/>
and Canada-Europe Transatlantic Dialogue <http://labs.carleton.ca/canadaeurope/>¹
December 2014*

The Juncker Commission Faces Euroscepticism

Frédéric Mérand²

Université de Montréal

For the past six years, I have taught a seminar on European studies in Rome. Normally, my students have every reason to be favourable towards the EU. They come from the four corners of the continent, speak at least three languages, are often involved in federalist movements, and aspire to careers in Brussels.

However, the group I taught this year stunned me. Most of my students did not hide their euroscepticism and even their contempt for Brussels. For some, the EU is a tool that European powers, particularly Germany, use to dominate the other members. For others, the European Commission is an executive power that is simultaneously authoritarian, powerless, and non-democratic. A British student was openly campaigning in favour of his country's withdrawal from

¹ This commentary is supported, in part, by a grant from the European Union and by a strategic knowledge clusters grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union, of CETD, or of SSHRC.

² Frédéric Mérand is the Director of the European Union Center of Excellence (Université de Montréal-McGill University) and of the Université de Montréal Centre for International Studies (CÉRIUM). He is also a lead researcher for the Canada-Europe Transatlantic Dialogue.

This article was translated by Angus Wilson from the original French version that appeared in the Fall 2014 EUCE Network newsletter, which can be found at <http://carleton.ca/euce-network-canada/euce-publications/>.

the EU. A Bulgarian confided in me his admiration for Vladimir Putin. I suspect that the majority of them did not vote in the European elections held May 25-27, 2014.

The results of these elections, the largest in the world after India's, confirmed the disaffection many EU citizens felt towards the unification project. For the first time, pan-European political parties presented candidates for the presidency of the Commission, a move that meant to serve as a further step towards federalism. These candidates were pitted against one another during the numerous televised debates, whose multilingual nature would make Canadians blush.

With the victory of the (conservative) European People's Party, the Luxembourger Jean-Claude Juncker was elected to the head of the Commission. Despite David Cameron's attempted blackmail and the tepid response from German chancellor Angela Merkel, the member states accepted the blow of a Parliament that had succeeded in installing its own candidate.

Since this summer, President-elect Juncker has named a Commission that enjoys considerable political clout, even if women are not strongly represented (9 out of 28 commissioners). Several former prime ministers are present, including the Finn Jyrki Katainen for Jobs, the Latvian Valdis Dombrovskis for the Euro, the Slovene Alenka Bratušek for Energy, and the Estonian Andrus Ansip. Veteran commissioners Cecilia Malmstrom and Gunther Oettinger, as well as the former French Finance minister Pierre Moscovici, round out the list, which even includes a British Eurosceptic, Jonathan Hill, who has taken over the Financial Services portfolio.

Accentuating the political forces in the Parliament, the College of Commissioners has 15 conservatives, 8 socialists, and 5 liberals, a unique case in a supranational democracy that has structured itself little by little around a centre-left axis. However, the Council remains the preserve of the states, with the negotiated nominations of the Pole Donald Tusk to the presidency and the Italian Federica Mogherini to foreign affairs.

Despite this remarkable achievement, remember that it is the anti-European parties that have achieved this unprecedented electoral success, while voter turnout has fallen to historic lows. Some, like the European Left, led by the young Greek Alexis Tsipras, have focused on criticizing austerity, and want, above all, an "Other Europe". However, the symbolic victory goes to the nationalists like the UK Independence Party, which outdid Labour and the Conservatives in the UK, as well as to the xenophobic movements, which took first place in France with the Front

National and in Denmark with the People's Party. Together, the anti-European parties have obtained close to 20% of the seats at the Assembly in Strasbourg, the highest since it was first elected by universal suffrage in 1979.

Divided into multiple groups, these anti-EU parties are unlikely to play an influential role in the European Parliament. However, they are the messengers of an electorate of which a majority in many countries such as France is now unfavourable towards the common currency, the euro. According to a survey published just before the elections by the European Commission itself, 59% of Europeans do not trust the EU (EC 2014). Even those forces that have traditionally been pro-European, such as the Italian Right or French socialists, have argued for decreasing Brussels's power.

This popular rejection comes at a time when the EU has never been more important in the lives of its citizens. My students travel freely throughout the continent, and it is generally due to European scholarships that they can study in a country other than their own.

Since the crisis, the EU has greatly increased its powers: the Commission must now approve the fiscal policies of its member states (that is, their budget – something unthinkable in the Canadian federation) and, with the banking union, the European Central Bank is responsible for supervising the national financial systems.

That EU citizens are able to express their grievances towards the EU from inside the Parliament is not a bad thing. Like any politico-economic institution, the EU creates winners and losers. The austerity programs demanded by the Commission and the northern member states to bail out the banks of Ireland and the southern member states have been difficult for the working classes to endure. We should not be surprised to learn that the EU has become unpopular in Greece or Italy.

However, this distrust serves to crystallize a malaise that has little to do with European institutions. Instead, its source can be found in the perception of an economic and cultural decline in France, the bursting housing bubbles in Ireland and Spain, the Greek government's mismanagement, and the rise of xenophobia in Hungary. It is not in Brussels that solutions to this malaise will be found.