

# Can Jean-Claude Juncker Make Brussels More Political and Less Bureaucratic?

EU Attempt to Ban Refillable Olive-Oil Containers in Restaurants Illustrates How Brussels Is Run by Officials

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Incoming EC President Jean-Claude Juncker arrives for a meeting of the European People's Party in Brussels last week. Reuters

Bureaucrats here turned the European Union into an object of ridicule last year by nearly banning refillable olive-oil containers in restaurants across the 28-nation bloc.

The proposal, an attempt to protect consumers against the evils of fake olive oil, emerged with little public debate and was quickly shelved when the media actually noticed it and politicians across much of Europe howled in outrage.

It is just one illustration of how Brussels is to a large extent run by bureaucrats. At the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, they wield significant power to shape policy and often clash with the politically appointed commissioners who are nominally in charge of the institution. As with "olive oil-gate," regulations are sometimes approved with little political scrutiny.

Now change may be on the horizon. Jean-Claude Juncker, who takes over Saturday as president of the commission, has promised to make it more “political,” creating as he does an institution with the focus and clout to set Europe’s agenda, along with Germany and France, rather than take orders from them.

“The commission is not a technical committee made up of civil servants who implement the instructions of another institution,” Mr. Juncker said in a summer speech to the European Parliament. “The commission is political. And I want it to be more political. Indeed, it will be highly political.”

The glamour and intrigue of U.S.-style politics often escapes the EU capital. A Brussels version of “House of Cards”—the popular Netflix series that dramatizes Washington political machinations—would have to edit out the numerous “working groups” and “standing committees,” like the one that cooked up the olive-oil regulation, where technocrats make policy in sparsely furnished offices over cups of bad coffee.

It would also have to ignore that many of Europe’s most important decisions, particularly during the years of the eurozone crisis, are made by politicians in Berlin and Paris or officials in Frankfurt, home of the European Central Bank.

Mr. Juncker, a heavy-smoking former Luxembourg prime minister, is the man to change that, his aides say. They claim his personal relationships with key politicians will help advance the commission’s agenda. He has democratic legitimacy, they say, since he campaigned for EC president for the party that won most seats in May’s European Parliament elections. The German press has even called him the “Chancellor of Europe.”

But political ambitions face an uphill battle at a time when the European public has rarely been more skeptical of Brussels. Gone are the glory days when Jacques Delors, a former French finance minister, took the helm of the commission in 1985 and made the institution an engine of European integration, **said Michele Chang**, professor of political and administrative studies at the College of Europe, the school near Brussels that produces many of the commission’s bureaucrats. “Now it’s seen as more of a policy manager, and this was really evident in the response to the crisis,” Ms. Chang said.

Mr. Juncker’s aides tout the makeup of his team: nine commissioners who were either prime ministers or deputy prime ministers. Others were prominent ministers. He has also appointed vice presidents who will be in charge of championing his political priorities and ensuring the commission doesn’t get distracted by sideshows such as regulating olive-oil containers.

It is hoped that these changes will help the commission recognize political bombshells hidden in the reams of documents produced by the commission’s technocrats. That ability was arguably lacking last week, when it emerged that the EU, for technical reasons, had sent the U.K. a bill for an additional €2.1 billion (\$2.64 billion) payment to the EU budget.

Faced with a chorus of criticism on his right flank, British Prime Minister David Cameron said the government wouldn’t make the payment by the Dec. 1 date demanded by Brussels.

“A lot of things just make their way onto the commission agenda because they seem very technical and because no one assumes political responsibility for them,” an aide to Mr. Juncker says.

Now, the question is whether Mr. Juncker's commission can behave like a political entity. Doing so goes against the DNA of the institution, particularly in one of its most important functions: enforcing the EU's budget rules. The commission's technocrats and economists are supposed to act as apolitical enforcers of the rules; yet it is here that they also face the most political pressure to cut deals with national capitals.

The EC's role as neutral enforcer extends to other areas, such as approving mergers, fighting cartels and investigating unfair trade practices. Changing that role could be a problem, critics say.

"My objection is if the commission becomes more partisan," said Heather Grabbe, director of EU affairs at the Open Society Foundations, George Soros's think tank. "The commission has an important regulatory function for which it needs to be independent."

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