

## Americans out in force for election celebrations

BY PETE SWEENEY

MANY hours before John Kerry conceded defeat to George W. Bush, election parties were in full swing in Brussels. Alumni of various American universities met for an evening cocktail on Tuesday (2 November) at the Hotel Metropole to listen to American lawyer Anthalia Lingos discussing the American electoral process.

Morning events included an early breakfast at the Conrad Hotel and a later one hosted by the US embassy to Belgium in the Dollar Room at the Marriott Hotel.

The loudest event was a reception at the Renaissance Hotel on Tuesday night, where guests included the US Ambassador to Belgium, Tom C. Korologos, and Europeans draped in various incarnations of the American flag. While a bipartisan camaraderie prevailed in the thousand-strong crowd, Bush supporters were in a minority.

"There's been no partisan issue," said Kevin Leland Prager, chairman of the Brussels chapter of Democrats Abroad. "There hasn't been any opposition that we could find – and we did look for them. But that's OK. There's been enough opposition elsewhere."

Event staff attempted to track the "ever-changing demographic" of the guests using ballot boxes, but the demographic was unchangingly sympathetic to Kerry's candidacy. They danced to a waltz version of the Star Spangled Banner.

But the success of Democrats Abroad was not matched in the US, where record-setting attempts to mobilize voters could not bring victory. It appears that Republicans mobilized their newly registered or dormant voters in excess of Democrats by three million. "There are some little variations here and there," admitted Rob Richie, executive director of the Center for Voting and Democracy in Washington DC, "but the overwhelming trend seems to be that the country is moving in unison along partisan lines".

Professor Michael McDonald, of the Washington DC-based think-tank The Brookings Institution, gave partial credit for the sweeping Republican victory to last-minute mobilization efforts. "The '72-Hour Program' is something the Republicans have been experimenting with for a while," he said, "and they've really got it down."

Richie noted that exit polls in contested states like Florida and Ohio did not align with the published results, which might provide grist for the conspiracy mills, particularly in states where computerized voting has eliminated any paper trail.

"We still have this hodgepodge system of counting ballots," Richie said. "We know that the rolls aren't complete or clean." Richie welcomed the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's monitoring of the election process. The OSCE will release its report on the 2004 election on 4 November.

## Cagey Berlusconi holds key to ending Commission crisis

BY MARTIN BANKS AND DAVID CRONIN

LEADERS of the biggest political groups in the European Parliament have predicted that the institutional crisis over the incoming European Commission could be resolved within a fortnight.

But this depends on Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister, nominating a replacement to Rocco Buttiglione as his country's representative to the EU executive. Berlusconi, who was on a visit to Moscow yesterday (3 November), has played his cards close to his chest after his nominee withdrew from the future Commission last weekend.

There is speculation that Berlusconi may name a nominee when he arrives in Brussels today for the EU summit. Foreign Minister Franco Frattini is widely tipped to secure the nomination. But his removal from government would further complicate an already difficult cabinet reshuffle and therefore Letizia Moratti, minister for education, or Giulio Tremonti, former finance minister, are also in the race.

Apart from Buttiglione, who outraged MEPs with remarks on gays and single mothers, the only other casualty so far of José Manuel Barroso's original selection is Latvia's Ingrida Udre. Indulis Emsis, the outgoing premier in Riga, has agreed to replace her with former minister and ambassador Andris Piebalgs. Piebalgs was lined up to be Udre's chef de cabinet. Rather than stepping in to the taxation dossier earmarked for Udre, he is being touted for the energy post.

Hungarian Socialist László Kovács was initially awarded that portfolio. But after showing a poor grasp of the subject at his Parliamentary hearing, he may be dumped or moved to another post in the new team.

Many members of the European People's Party (EPP-ED), Parliament's largest group, are now calling for Kovács' head.

Martin Schulz, leader of the Socialists, has conceded that Kovács may be better-suited to a post other than energy but is resisting attempts to have him removed from the Commission.



Guarding his moves: Silvio Berlusconi may announce his commissioner-designate today

"The EPP may be demanding that he is withdrawn but we will not accept that because there is a difference between his candidacy and that of Buttiglione," said Schulz.

The Socialists also want Neelie Kroes, a Dutch Liberal whose business past has given rise to several conflict of interests concerns, to lose her competition portfolio. But Liberal deputies want her retained in the Barroso team. "We are not saying Kroes should be ditched, just moved to another post," said Schulz.

Both Schulz and Graham Watson, leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), said that the current impasse could be swiftly broken.

If Barroso is able to present the new team at this week's summit, the Parliament could organise confirmation hearings for the new or reshuffled nominees in the next two weeks. The revised Commission

could then be put to a vote of the assembly on 17 November.

"The whole thing, though, could hinge on whether Silvio Berlusconi and the Italian parliament is able and willing to quickly choose a replacement for Buttiglione," said Watson. Otherwise, he added, any solution would have to wait until December.

A spokesman for the EPP-ED said that, despite the removal of Buttiglione and Udre, Barroso still had "unfinished business" to deal with.

"We are still waiting for him to come back with a complete and acceptable package," he said. "There are a number of people, including Kovács, who one would expect to be reassigned to other posts. This is not a question of a 'tit-for-tat' response to Buttiglione. The fact is that other commissioners-designate also had a bad or indifferent hearing."

## Lobbyists in paralysis fear

BY MARTIN BANKS AND ANNA McLAUCHLIN

EU LOBBY groups and campaigners fear that if the failure to approve a new European Commission persists it could plunge the EU into a legislative limbo.

The outgoing Commission, led by Romano Prodi, is continuing in a caretaker role until the new team wins Parliamentary approval.

Daniela Vincenti-Mitchener, spokesperson of the Brussels-based Social Platform, said that its concern was that the development of the Commission's next Social Policy Agenda, the five-year plan for Europe's social policies, might be delayed.

She said: "This is a key document which should be published early in 2005. The delay in appointing the new Commission could delay or derail this work. Worse still, a lack of political leadership within the Commission could lead to a weak plan being produced."

Sylvain Lhote, of GPC International, said: "Competition will be a tricky area because the clock is ticking on those issues and it will be up to Mario Monti [outgoing competition commissioner] to close particular cases."

He warned that areas of environmental policy could be delayed, most notably negotiations on climate change policy after 2012.

The European Banking Federation (EBF), which represents 4,500 banks throughout Europe, warned that the impasse might have more of an impact on the work of the European Parliament.

An EBF source said: "Votes on proposed legislation may be delayed because the Parliament will be preoccupied over the next few weeks with what's happening with the Commission."

But a spokesman for the European People's Party, Parliament's biggest group, disputed this. He said: "The general routine will be interrupted for up to six weeks and, though this is disappointing, we do not expect there will be any crisis in terms of the legislative process."

"In any case, I expect the incoming Commission will be able to catch up with any delays or backlog of work very quickly."

An official at the US Mission to the EU said it was not worried. "We are very busy with our work with the Commission and we plan to continue on all fronts, including our dialogue on border and transport security," he said.

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**4-5 November:** EU summit in Brussels. EU leaders will discuss the Union's agenda of economic reforms, a five-year programme of immigration and asylum measures; Commission president-elect José Manuel Barroso is expected to put forward a revised team of commissioners;

**5 November:** Germany, the UK and France to hold another round of talks in Paris with Iran on its nuclear programme. Similar talks on 27 October ended without agreement;

**8 November:** The French Institute of International Relations holds conference on 'France-Germany-Poland': a leadership for Europe? in Paris;

**8 November:** EU-India summit takes place in The Hague. Talks will focus on new areas of cooperation, including technology and the fight against terror;

**9 November:** Integration conference in Groningen. EU ministers are to tackle the integration of immigrants and the implementation of a successful integration policy.