

In the air

The „Van-Ashton“ Moment

Ariel Wagner-Parker

Catherine Ashton slammed down the newspaper sending the rest of the pile slithering to the floor. „Right. That does it. That is the last bloody ‘Cathy who?’ I’m ever going to read!“

She picked up the phone and dialled Van Rompuy.

„Herman? Seen the papers today? Nothing but: ‘*Low-profile, uncharismatic-garden-gnomes, compromise-candidates, never-heard-of-them, no-experience; colourless-Belgian-nobody; quota-woman, never-been-elected, anti-European-Brit; typical-European-stitch-up*’ and so on and so forth. I’m not an ego on legs but I’m sick of it! We’ve got to show them we’re not nobody and Europe’s not nothing.“

„I know. I am fed up too. Can we meet?“

* * *

„Don’t suppose you wanted the job any more than I did. But now we’ve got them, we’re damn well going to do them.“

„The media are deliberately trying to undermine us before we even get started. You are far from being a nobody: someone who can manage an English health authority successfully can manage European foreign policy.“

„And someone who sorted out Belgium can sort out Europe.“

„We agree then. We must start by making a sensation. Get the people of Europe on our side. Let us ask what we all really want – not just we two but the European in the street.“

„When I worked for CND – you know, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament –, what we wanted was peace, an end to nuclear weapons.“

„A perfect place to start. That is what Obama wants, the reason he got his Nobel.“

„EU/US: Partners for Peace’. Sounds good.“

„And you both speak the same language. Believe me, it is impossible to overestimate the value of that!“

„A world without nuclear weapons was in the Queen’s Speech. So Gordon’ll have to back us too.“

„Good. Now, how can we find out what the average citizen expects from Europe? A referendum would be the obvious way, but the governments would never agree.“

„We could do it on the Web. My husband can help; he knows about these things from *YouGov*. We’ll do an on-line poll. Then put the results into practice...“

„... And announce them at a press confe-



Can they? Will they?

rence before the governments can stop us.“

„That’d get the people back on board all right.“

„Excellent. Of course, we must frame the questions carefully, otherwise we shall have people asking for family allowances for pets or something, God help us!“

Ashton looked at him quizzically. „Er, Herman... I know it’s none of my business, but is it true that they say about your being ultra Catholic?“

Van Rompuy chuckled. „Not really. I was brought up a Catholic, and it can be useful for getting on in politics. But the more I become familiar with Japanese culture...“

„Ah yes, the *haikus*.“

„Mine are not good, but I prefer them to *sudoku*...“ He looked quizzically at her. „But tell me, Catherine: do you really have a life-size Dalek in your living-room?“

Ashton made a wry face. „Let’s just get on with our questions, Herman, okay?“

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The President and the High Representative met regularly over the next few weeks and the corridors of Europower buzzed with excitement. When asked what they were discussing, „Van-Ashton“ smiled charmingly and said nothing; and the members of their meanwhile considerable staff invoked professional secrecy.

„Shouldn’t we tell Barroso what we’re doing?“ worried Ashton.

Van Rompuy frowned. „I rather think not. We will invite him to the press conference. That is soon enough.“

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Response to the on-line poll was enormous and Internet nearly crashed several times. Then the deadline expired, staffers finished analysing the data and the report lay on the President’s desk.

He and Ashton read it and looked at each other.

„Well, that is clear, is it not?“

„Absolutely crystal. Let’s get to work.“

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29 February 2010: „Another bloody press conference,“ grumbled the journalists, shouldering their equipment. „Just to hear the same old Eurocrap yet again. Where is Schengen anyway?“

„Dunno why you bother going“, grinned one hack from a popular tabloid. „My copy went in this morning: ‘*No, They Can’t!*’“

But they could. And did. They read out their joint policy statement – the internal measures that would put Europe back on course socially and ideologically and the foreign policy objectives to bring about a peaceful, secure world.

Van Rompuy quoted the Schuman Declaration: „*World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it.*“ He then laid out concrete actions to fight unemployment (including an obligation on firms laying off staff unnecessarily to make large contributions to a social security fund), alleviate poverty and lessen social divisions; to reinstate the civil liberties lost during the „war on terror“ and bring morality back to public life (among other things, a ban on heads of government owning controlling interests in media concerns).

Baroness Ashton announced the immediate withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and two Summits, one on nuclear disarmament, one on the Middle East, with President Ahmadinejad and Premiers Putin and Netanyahu attending.

In live satellite link-ups, Barack Obama and Hu Jintao offered congratulations and unconditional support and confirmed their presence at the Summits.

There was a stunned silence in the hall then uproar, an explosion of flash-bulbs and a tsunami of photographers and cameramen surging towards the rostrum. At the same time a stampede of journalists elbowed each other out of the way as they rushed for the exit.

President Barroso was left sitting alone, open-mouthed, his face drained of colour.

Half an hour later, the media filled with the *Breaking News*. Everyone sat glued to their TVs and next morning rushed out to buy the papers. The „*No, they can’t!*“ popular tabloid did not appear „for technical reasons“.

The heads of government picked up their phones and began quarrelling furiously with each other.

The citizens of Europe took to the streets brandishing jubilant pro EU banners.

The Nobel committee pencilled in „Van-Ashton“ for the 2010 Peace Prize.

And my alarm went off and woke me up.