



**PRESS RELEASE**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> April 2004**

New CER working paper

## **AN UNSTABLE HOUSE? RECONSTRUCTING THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

**By Alasdair Murray**

Although the current Commission formally steps down in October, its members have already started leaving in droves, to take up domestic political positions. The spectre of a lame-duck Commission at this crucial time – when constitutional and budget talks beckon – has reminded the EU of the huge importance of its Brussels executive.

The European Commission is the institutional heart of the European Union. For fifty years, the Commission has not only overseen the EU's day-to-day functioning, it has also often led the debate on the Union's direction and future. However, over the last decade or so, the Commission has lost much of its credibility. Fraud allegations and corruption scandals have tarnished its reputation. Weak leadership and ineffective management have eroded its standing vis-à-vis other EU institutions, such as the Council, which is dominated by the member-states.

Some member-states would like to see the Commission cut down to size. They should think again. The EU needs a strong and effective Commission. Who else can enforce the rules of the single market – a task that will become all the more important now that ten new members are joining the EU? Who else will stand up in defence of the smaller member-states and remind the big countries that they, too, are bound by EU rules, such as the Stability and Growth pact? Who else can ensure continuity in policy making amid the ebb and flow of national politics?

The member-states should offer more support to Commission, rather than using it as a punch-bag. But the main responsibility for its effective functioning and credibility lies with the Commission itself. The Commission has started to streamline its internal bureaucracy. But it must do much more. It needs to improve its recruitment systems, tighten its accounting rules, enforce professional standards and rethink the way it communicates with the press. The commissioners need to co-operate better. The Commission president must lead with a firmer hand. Better leadership would alleviate fears that a Commission with 25 or more commissioners would degenerate into chaos. And only a Commission that contains leading politicians from all EU countries will be seen as legitimate and credible by the people of Europe.

Above all, the new Commission president must make saying no a habit. In the past, the Commission has often bitten off more than it can chew. Instead, the Brussels institution should concentrate on what it does best – managing the single market, concluding trade deals, enforcing competition rules, for example – and get rid of superfluous policies and programmes.

### Notes for editors:

1. Alasdair Murray is the director of the business and social policy unit at the CER. For further comment, please call 00 44 20 7233 1199.

2. This paper can be ordered from the CER website ([www.cer.org.uk](http://www.cer.org.uk)) or by contacting [kate@cer.org.uk](mailto:kate@cer.org.uk).