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EU Irish presidency seeks new Delors as Commission head

By George Parker in Brussels
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The incoming Irish presidency of the European Union is seeking an efficient technocrat in the style of master administrator Jacques Delors to rebuild the reputation of the European Commission, the guardian of the European Community and EU treaties.

The Irish government will next month start taking soundings in national capitals about who should replace Romano Prodi as European Commission president when his term of office expires next October.

But Irish officials are making it clear they will not be bound by the recent convention that Commission presidents should automatically come from the ranks of former EU leaders.

They point out that Mr Delors, a former French finance minister, was the most successful and authoritative holder of the post in recent years.

"You don't need a political colossus there, you need a technocratic guy who has the confidence of the political heads of the union," said a senior Irish official.

"We don't buy the argument that whatever major luminary is leaving office, about to leave office or about to get kicked out of office, should be put up for this job."

There is no clear frontrunner for the job among former or current EU leaders. Jean-Claude Juncker of Luxembourg, Paavo Lipponen of Finland, Guy Verhofstadt of Belgium and Costas Simitis of Greece are among the names most frequently mentioned.

Among the alternative candidates likely to be floated by Ireland, which will hold the EU presidency for six months, are Antonio Vitorino, the Portuguese justice and home affairs commissioner, and Günter Verheugen, the German enlargement commissioner, both of whom have shone in their current jobs.

Pat Cox, the Irish president of the European parliament, might be another candidate, although Dublin could not be seen to be pushing its own man. A skilled political operator, he has pushed through a painful pay and expenses reform package at the parliament.

Jacques Delors was so influential that EU leaders decided that only former heads of government could hope to match his stature and maintain the Commission president's high profile when he stepped down in 1995.

However, the experience has been the opposite. Jacques Santer, the former Luxembourg prime minister, was seen as ineffectual and his Commission had to resign in disgrace in 1999 because of a series of financial scandals.

Romano Prodi, a former Italian prime minister, is well regarded in Italy but his influence among EU heads of government is low, and the Commission's standing generally remains at a low ebb.

Some diplomats say Mr Prodi's inability to shape events, particularly at the European Council - the summits of EU leaders - stems from his lack of grasp of detail.

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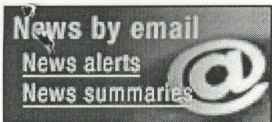
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Mr Delors was indispensable at summits because he mastered all the dossiers.

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Ireland, which has to find a suitable successor in time for the EU summit in June 2004, believes the Commission needs someone to make itself more relevant again.

George Parker



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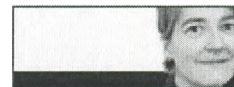


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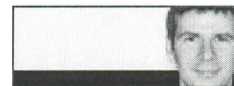
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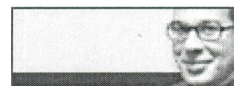
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