

Society

The First President of Europe

Herman Van Rompuy

Herman Van Rompuy – born in 1947 – went off on a skiing holiday in Austria soon after he unexpectedly became Prime Minister of Belgium in late 2008. He took the night bus, saying he had no intention of leading the grand life. Only a few days prior to that, he was still Speaker in the Belgian parliament, a nice relaxed position in which to round off his long career.

Last year he went further – to Australia – but insisted on flying economy class. One thing is clear: Van Rompuy likes to be modest. In an interview some time ago he casually mentioned that he still didn't dare address the German Chancellor Merkel as Angela. 'I can't manage it', he said 'I'm far too shy.'

'Calm firmness' is this Flemish Christian Democrat's motto. And that's also the name of his house in the commune of Sint-Genesius-Rode, south of Brussels,

near the language border. French-speaking Belgians were unhappy to see him leave for Europe. As Premier, Herman Van Rompuy had restored calm to Belgium following the longest lasting political crisis experienced in the country, in 2007 and 2008.

On 1 January 2009, Van Rompuy was given a new job. He is now 'President of Europe' (officially: President of the European Council), the very first in history. It was not clear when he took on the post whether he had many ideas about Europe. Only one old statement he had once made about Turkey was circulated in the weeks prior to his appointment. Speaking to the Belgian parliament in 2004 he said that '*the universal values that hold in Europe, which are also fundamental to Christian doctrine would be watered down were a large Islamic country like Turkey to join [the EU]*'. Immediately after he was nominated 'President of Europe', Van Rompuy reminded us that mutual understanding had always been central to his political life and that he



Herman Van Rompuy (1947-) and EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton (1956-) congratulate each other.

would continue to follow that path. As a Belgian, Van Rompuy is all too aware of the important role language plays in Europe. He can switch with ease from English to French. And in Dutch he said that there had been much debate recently on what the right profile should be for the first President. But in fact there is only one profile: *'one of dialogue, of unity and of action'*.

Van Rompuy is a practicing Catholic and belongs to the conservative wing of his party, the Christian Democratic CD&V. Along with his brother Eric, who is also active in politics, he once appeared on the cover of the not exactly Catholic Flemish weekly, Humo, under the heading *'The conscience of Flanders'*. He admits in interviews that the 60s passed him by in the main. He did go to see the film of the famous 1969 festival, *Woodstock*, with his brother but came to the realisation that it wasn't his world. He'd rather listen to Leonard Cohen than to the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. But Van Rompuy is no arch-conservative. Many years ago, when Elio di Rupo, the gay leader of the French-speaking Belgian Socialists, was falsely accused of being a paedophile, Van Rompuy immediately sprung to his defence.

Van Rompuy's father was a professor of economics. He himself studied philosophy and economics, which stood him in good stead during his many years as the Belgian Minister for the Budget. As Minister he prepared his country for the Euro towards the end of the last century, a task that seemed almost impossible at the time. At one time, he narrowly missed becoming Prime Minister of Belgium. In 1994 the then Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene was very close to becoming the President of the European Commission. Herman Van Rompuy would have succeeded him had he been elected, but ultimately Dehaene was not given the job.

The fact that Van Rompuy was ultimately awarded this important post in Europe was considered by many political commentators as being painful for Guy Verhofstadt, the other former Premier of Belgium and a close contender for the Commission presidency. Van Rompuy is somewhat the polar opposite of Verhofstadt, an optimistic Flemish liberal brimming over with big ideas about Europe. Van Rompuy loves

to write tiny poems called haikus. According to him an optimist is a *'badly informed pessimist'*.

Herman van Rompuy was quickly succeeded as the Prime Minister of Belgium by his fellow party member and predecessor, Yves Leterme. Leterme had to resign in 2008 after allegedly trying to influence the judiciary in a case involving the takeover of Fortis bank by the French BNP Paribas. Both parliamentary and police investigations failed to provide any evidence that Leterme had done anything untoward, but there was still considerable distrust in the French-speaking part of the country in particular. There they hadn't forgotten that Leterme had once said he wished to be Premier 'for Flanders', that he confused the Belgian national anthem with the French anthem, the *Marseillaise*, and that he once – rather jokingly – suggested that French-speakers from Brussels and the surrounding areas seemed intellectually incapable of learning Dutch. In any case, Herman Van Rompuy had not managed to present the outline of a model that would provide Flemings and Walloons with the possibility of living together in future harmony either. He did restore calm to the country, mainly by not addressing community problems.

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Translated by Peter Flynn

Revised version of the article published in the Dutch daily *NRC Handelsblad* on the 20th of November 2009.