

Europe's Business

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In a speech at the Financial Times debate 'Does Europe really mean business?' earlier this month in Brussels, José Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, spoke of the relevance of the Commission in preparing the EU for the global challenges. He claimed that the future will not go away; indeed, he said, it would come at us even faster than we expect.

Though he was right about the EU's positive and crucial role in the operation of the internal market and about economic growth beginning to pick up, he overstated the EU's role in the world, particularly after it again proved unable to act in a concerted way over the war in Lebanon. He said external relations is an area where Europe is doing 'a great deal', but must do more claiming that the Union was providing a major part of troops and aid in Lebanon and was taking the lead in Congo - the site of the biggest UN operation in the world. Compare that, he challenged, with Europe's performance in the Balkans in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, the world has changed a great deal since the 1990s. Doing slightly better than what the EU did in the Balkans is regressive if one is to consider how fast and deep the balance and quality of the risks have changed and how new threats and needs have emerged.

Going further in the area of external relations – as Barroso implied was necessary - is far from adequate. The EU had a chance to punch its weight in world affairs but failed to take it, losing time and credibility in the process. The Commission president must be deeply concerned that EU citizens are tired of the EU's performance and its institutions. He must be more concerned that EU leaders seem, simply, very tired, unwilling to rise up to the challenge.

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It is not so much whether Europe really means business but whether Europe has the leaders to do the business. With Segolene Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy heading into elections in France, Tony Blair bowing out in the UK, Angela Merkel strengthening Germany and Romano Prodi managing to pass the early tests in Italy, it is still possible that a new breed of more confident leaders may emerge to do more than just the business.

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