

EU leaders pick Belgian premier as their president

European Union leaders agreed to appoint Herman Van Rompuy, a relatively inexperienced prime minister from Belgium, as their first-ever full-time president.

Heads of state and government attending an extraordinary summit in Brussels also named Britain's Catherine Ashton as the EU's new foreign policy supremo, diplomats said Thursday.

Van Rompuy, 62, had entered the race for 'Mr Europe' as favourite thanks to the backing of powerbrokers Germany and France.

A prolific author of poems in the Japanese form called haiku, Van Rompuy had been prime minister of Belgium for only 11 months. But, during this short time, he succeeded in restoring the relative harmony between the country's divisive Flemish and Wallonian communities.

Experts said his negotiating skills and his low-profile image played a crucial role in securing his appointment.

The decision to appoint Ashton as foreign policy high representative came after British Premier Gordon Brown dropped his long-held support for Tony Blair during pre-summit talks with the fellow socialist leaders.

Currently the EU's trade commissioner, Baroness Ashton has limited foreign policy experience.

Ashton, seen in London as a quietly effective politician, had held a number of middle-ranking posts in the British government before Brown sent her to Brussels to succeed the flamboyant Peter Mandelson an year ago.

The two EU posts were created by the Lisbon Treaty, which comes into force Dec 1, and are designed to give the 27-member bloc a stronger voice on the world stage.

'This is the breakthrough,' Martin Schulz, the head of the socialist grouping in the European Parliament, said after Brown's decision to back Ashton.

British diplomats said Brown had agreed to drop Blair's candidacy amid opposition from many member-states.

'As it became clearer that the chances of a Blair presidency, for a number of good reasons, were declining, the prime minister made a decisive intervention ... to ensure that the high representative is going to be proposed by the (socialist group) and that it will be a British person,' Brown's spokesman, Simon Lewis, said.

'What has been concluded ... was that the preferred candidate would be an existing commissioner and a woman, and that's Cathy Ashton,' Lewis said.

At a summit last month, conservative and socialist leaders struck a deal whereby the EU council president should be picked from the political centre-right and the foreign policy chief from the centre-left.

The third and final post up for grabs at Thursday evening's summit was that of secretary general of the council, a largely bureaucratic but potentially influential position.

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