



► One of the tasks of the new Offices was to prepare for enlargement – also of the College meeting table in Breydel

by Dirk Volckaerts, CEND

It was a first, exactly 20 years ago: three brand new Commission Offices and one interinstitutional Office officially started working on 1 January 2003: PMO, OIB, OIL and EPSO. To highlight their 20th anniversary, Commission en direct will publish a series of interviews with the current Heads of these key services over the next few weeks. But first: a short trip in the time-travel machine, back to the year 2003.

The early weeks of January, 20 years ago in the Commission, were not that different compared to today. Staff were returning from their Christmas holiday. The Prodi Commission had a meeting with the incoming Greek Presidency of the Council. Preparations for the planned enlargement, a year later, were well underway. The Commission published a new Communication on Industrial Policy and one on Migration and Third Countries. Colleagues worried about a possible war in Iraq, or discussed Prodi's newly published project for an EU Constitution.

In the readers' letters section of *Commission en direct* (then a printed weekly newspaper, with 45,500 copies in two colours on eight A4 pages), our colleagues of the time commented on the food quality in Commission canteens (some things never change), the 'Green Housekeeping' project, the punctuality of the Eurostar, and ... the imminent reform of the Commission.

“ *Times have changed, but PMO, OIB, OIL and EPSO are still alive and kicking*

The latter had been under way for some time. Barely a month after taking office in December 1999, the Prodi Commission launched a consultation for detailed discussion on the proposed reform strategy, with the aim of making its administration more efficient and stronger, and preparing it for the arrival of new colleagues from the enlargement countries.

"The degree to which Commission staff participated individually and collectively in the consultation exercise was unprecedented," the Commission reported later. The responses were *"highly constructive"* and led to *"significant modifications in the proposed approach."*

The creation of specialised Offices

A White Paper and an Action Plan followed, with one of the proposed measures being the creation of *"a new type of implementing bodies headed by Commission staff."* The then DG ADMIN was bursting at the seams, and the Commission judged that some of its tasks would be better done in a decentralised way, in specialised Offices.

And so already in June 2002, by a joint Decision of the seven European institutions and the Ombudsman, the interinstitutional European Communities Personnel Selection Office was set up, and in early November of the same year, by a Commission Decision, the Offices PMO, OIB and OIL. All four would start work on 1 January 2003 - much earlier than the rest of the reforms, some provisions of which remained difficult for staff representatives.

A CEND article from the past

Commission en direct devoted an article to the three new Commission Offices, in issue 266 from 10 to 16 January 2003 (link below). Entitled *'Création de trois offices'*, it featured a photo with the three acting Directors Dominique Deshayes (PMO), Ole Bjorn Pedersen (OIB) and Martine Reicherts (OIL), in the company of then DG ADMIN Director-General Horst Reichenbach and other members of the DG ADMIN management.



► Acting Directors of the new Offices (front row from left): Dominique Deshayes, Ole Bjorn Petersen, and Martine Reicherts

The article was short and to the point, listing the main tasks of the three Offices, their organisational chart (including senior management's telephone numbers!), while underlining that *"dans les domaines couverts par les Offices, les décisions de politique et de principe relèvent de la compétence de la Commission (DG ADMIN) tandis que les Offices en effectuent la mise en œuvre,"* to make clear who did what.

The challenges were not minor. Not only did the Offices have to build their own operations from scratch, they had to do so with a view to the impending enlargement from 15 to 25 Member States. In 2003 the Berlaymont building was still unfinished – the College was meeting in the Breydel building. It was also the year in which the Commission-run *Economat* was being privatised (Delhaize won the first call for tenders), and major IT revolutions were in the pipeline (ASSMAL was to become e-ASSMAL, later JSIS Online, and SYSPER2 was being diligently developed).

It was a time when mail was still delivered and collected individually in each office several times a day, when there was still a 'microfilm production' service, two *à la carte* restaurants for Brussels-based staff, and a shuttle to the airport.

Times have changed, but PMO, OIB, OIL and EPSO are still alive and kicking. How have they evolved over the past 20 years? What have been the biggest challenges? How do they themselves see their future? You'll get the answers right here, in *Commission and direct* over the next few weeks, so stay tuned. And before we forget: happy birthday Offices!

- **Interinstitutional Decision on the organisation and operation of the European Communities Personnel Selection Office**
- **Commission Decision establishing an Office for the administration and payment of individual entitlements**
- **Commission Decision establishing the Office for infrastructure and logistics in Brussels**
- **Commission Decision establishing the Office for infrastructure and logistics in Luxembourg**
- **Commission en direct article from issue N° 266 (pg3)**

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