EU urged to appoint more women to top jobs

Call from Brussels' female elite

Barroso keen to reach gender parity

By Stanley Pignal in Brussels

Some of Brussels' most powerful women are warning about the dearth of female candidates being considered for the European Union's top jobs, as the bloc's 27 leaders prepare to meet on Thursday to appoint the EU's first permanent president and foreign policy chief.

Neelie Kroes, the competition commissioner, Margot Wallström, vice-president of the European Commission, and Diana Wallis, vice-president of the European parliament, warn in a letter in today's Financial Times that "it is time to move from words to deeds by appointing women to leading positions in the EU".

Few of the candidates being mentioned for the presidency or the foreign policy job are women.

Herman Van Rompuy, the Belgian prime minister, remains favourite for the presidency, with his Dutch counterpart Jan Peter Balkenende and former British prime minister Tony Blair still in the running.

With David Miliband, the British foreign secretary, bowing out of the race for high representative last week, the former Italian prime minister Massimo D'Alema is often mentioned for the job, along with Olli Rehn, enlargement commissioner.

Beyond the highest echelons, there has been little progress in appointing women to influential jobs in Brussels, the letter argues.

Only three of the 20 countries that have publicly announced their choice for the next Commission have appointed women, despite repeated pleas from José Manuel Barroso, its reappointed president, to help him reach gender parity. Mr Barroso has even gone as far as hinting he will offer better portfolios to qualified women to sway the seven undecided countries.

"It still looks like the new Commission will have fewer women than the current one," the letter notes.

The first Barroso Commission consisted of eight women out of 25 posts. So far only Luxembourg, Cyprus and Romania have nominated women commissioners, though Denmark, Sweden and Ireland, among others, are expected to follow suit this week.

As Mr Barroso pointed out last week that will still make the Commission more balanced than the meetings of EU heads of state and government. Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, is the only woman head of government in the EU; Finland and Lithuania both have female presidents.

In a letter to European Voice, a Brussels-based weekly, a cross-party group of 10 female MEPs threatened to bring up the gender imbalance in the parliamentary hearings for the new Commission. "There is a growing feeling that if the European parliament does not see more female candidates ... it will reject the whole Commission and ask for more female candidates," they wrote.

The rest of the Brussels bureaucracy is heavily male. The Czech Republic is alone in having a female permanent representative. Fifteen of the 16 Commission policy directorates are managed by men.

Neelie Kroes: one of only eight female commissioners

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Brown pressed to dump Blair

Tony Blair should be dumped by Gordon Brown, the UK prime minister, as a candidate for the European Union presidency in favour of a drive to secure a top economic job in the European Commission, William Hague, shadow foreign secretary, says today, **write George Parker and Alex Barker**.

Writing in the Financial Times, Mr Hague says the EU should not appoint a "limelight hungry" heavy hitter such as Mr Blair, the former British premier, arguing that he would "skew" power away from elected national leaders.

Mr Hague says the new full-time EU president should be a "chairman, not a chief", arguing the first incumbent should come from a small country.

He says Mr Brown should instead put all his efforts into securing an economic portfolio for a Briton in José Manuel Barroso's European Commission, to help head off protectionist tendencies.

The Eurosceptic Mr Hague's comments about Mr Blair are in line with the prevailing in mood in Brussels, ahead of a summit this Thursday intended to carve up the big jobs in the EU.

Mr Blair's star has waned, as EU leaders appeared to shy away from appointing a big figure to the presidency. Herman Van Rompuy, the Belgian premier, remains the frontrunner for the post.

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