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### **Can the EU win love of Europeans?**

By Graham Bowley, International Herald Tribune

FRINTON-ON-SEA, England One afternoon this week, Jeffrey Titford, who has a Union Jack flag on a pole in his garden, stared out to sea and blamed the European Union for most things that have gone wrong in recent years in this frayed tourist town on England's east coast.

EU quotas let French trawlers decimate the local fish stocks, said Titford, 70, who wears a silver lapel badge in the shape of the symbol for the pound sterling. Brussels' regulations had killed British car- and shipbuilding, not to mention agriculture, he said, and were generally shackling the life force of the great British entrepreneurial spirit.

"It seems totally wrong that a country that has been in existence for a thousand years should have its laws and regulations imposed on it by politicians from other countries," said Titford, who retired as an undertaker in 1989. He joined the UK Independence Party and since then has dedicated himself to the party's cause of withdrawing Britain from the EU.

An observer might have expected that Frinton's proximity to Europe - the Dutch coast lies only a few hours by ferry directly east, and container ships from the Hook of Holland rake the horizon on their way to nearby Harwich - would have bred an enthusiasm for things continental.

But in elections to the European Parliament in June, less than 4 in 10 people in the Frinton region bothered to turn out for the polls.

And of those who did, 19.6 percent voted for Titford's EU-bashing UK Independence Party.

The apathy and plunging popularity of the European Union in places like Frinton is causing the people who run the European Commission in Brussels to rethink the image of the EU. On Nov. 1, when a new college of commissioners under the president-designate, José Manuel Barroso of Portugal, is due to take office, the commission will begin an unprecedented public relations drive to win back apathetic voters and counter skeptics like Titford.

This is a break from the past, when the commission would deliver its dry edicts from on high. Barroso and his colleagues have realized they need a strong voice at the center spelling out the benefits of the European club to member states.

The EU may, in reality, be the defining element of most national politics - and politicians spend weeks each month in Brussels meetings - but they rarely speak out in its favor because it is so unpopular among voters. Instead, they use it as an easy scapegoat for local failings.

Now there could not be more at stake. Europe is due to take another step toward political integration with the adoption by EU member states of a new constitutional treaty, probably in 2006.

The constitution strengthens the EU's reach into areas such as immigration and criminal law; critics view it as another attack on the independent power of the nation-state in favor of a federal Europe. It is so politically controversial that 11 countries have promised to put its adoption to a referendum.

This includes Britain, but also nations at the heart of Europe like France and the Netherlands. If Barroso doesn't win the new public relations battle and the experience of last summer's European elections is repeated, then a "no" in these referendums could stop the EU project in its tracks or even lead to its unraveling.

Barroso has appointed Margot Wallstrom, a former Swedish Social Democrat politician, as the EU's first communications commissioner. Her job is to rid the EU of its image of men in suits in office blocks in Brussels, and instead bring a new character and personality to the European project.

In the great push and pull of forces between nations in Europe, the commission hopes that better P.R. from Wallstrom will prevent the EU from coming apart.

"We need to explain what exactly it is we do," Wallstrom said in an interview with a handful of reporters in her fourth floor office in Brussels earlier this month. Wallstrom, 50, was a minister of culture and of social affairs in Sweden, and for the last five years held the environment portfolio in the European Commission. Even her most ardent euroskeptic opponents admit hers is a clever appointment as the new communications commissioner. She is a vice president, which means she could run the commission in Barroso's absence.

She is a left-leaning leader from Northern Europe, which balances Barroso, a former right-of-center Portuguese prime minister.

Wallstrom insists that from now on, professional P.R. will influence every step of Brussels' policy making.

"We want to reach out," she said. "We will use images and faces of real people who can explain in language that is not full of Eurojargon. There are so many problems that can't be solved by the nation-state. We have not been good at saying that."

But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Wallstrom's project is her plan to build a "common European narrative."

She is still vague on what this means, but she seems to want to create a story about Europe that will give meaning to the EU project. Since stories are one of the chief ways people understand the world, this may be the key to whether Europeans can learn to love the EU - or not.

The trouble for Wallstrom is that every nationality has a different story about the EU, and for many the narrative is now turning negative.

"We have no common people, no common feelings," says Jens-Peter Bonde, leader of the euroskeptic group in the European Parliament.

For Jeffrey Titford, who keeps a picture of Winston Churchill in his bathroom, the EU's meaning is clear: it began after the second world war as a useful form of cooperation and trade, but it has grown into a socialist superstate, run by national elites against the will of the people.

"It was done by the French for French benefit," he says. The only happy ending he desires is a free Britain that returns to the embrace of its former commonwealth.

The European narrative is turning sour not just for die-hard romantics for the British Empire, but for other nations too. Germans cleaved to the EU as a new source of identity as they rebuilt their country after the devastation of the second world war.

But optimism has turned to resentment that Germany continues to be the EU's chief paymaster, subsidizing poorer countries, even as EU rules such as the Stability and Growth Pact stifle its economic growth.

The French are concerned that their power is dwindling in an institution that was meant, they were told, to form Europe in France's image.

The disillusionment has fed into the polls. In the most recent Eurobarometer, only 43 percent of all EU citizens said they had a positive image of the Union, against 21 percent who had a negative image.

Even for the new countries, mainly from formerly Communist Central and Eastern Europe, which joined the EU in May, the EU has become a problem.

"For the first half of the 1990s, Poles thought that to get into the EU would solve their military problems, and living standards would equal Germany's," says Stefan Wolff, professor of political science at Bath University in Britain. "But it then became clear this came at a price. There was the feeling in the East that freedom won from Moscow was traded in for a more benign but restrictive regime from Brussels."

One problem with constructing a common European identity is a lack of common heroes that all Europeans can empathize with. Wolff of Bath University believes an opportunity was missed with Barroso's appointment as the new commission president.

"He is a compromise candidate and uninspiring," Wolff said. "If you could find someone who had gone through all the post-1945 changes, that would be a major bonus in creating a narrative around an individual."

A sharp focus is advocated by professionals in Europe's advertising industry when considering what advice they would give Wallstrom to help the new commissioner sell the EU.

According to Michael Parker, chief executive of Team Saatchi, part of the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi in London, the chief element of the new strategy should be "a vision statement, which is what the EU is about."

"This is not a mission statement, this is more inspiring," says Parker, who led the campaign to start the National Lottery in Britain in the 1990s (the catch phrase then: "It could be you.") The statement, he said, "should be apolitical and inclusive. It provides a rallying point."

Such advice may turn Wallstrom back to the grand rhetoric of the EU's postwar founding treaties. They emphasized freedom and peace, which experts say could

still resonate with present generations, especially when added to the achievement of the new freedoms won by Eastern Europeans after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"It is looking to what we share more than what divides us, looking at the common value of democracy and kinship," says Robert Crawshaw, from the department of European Languages and Culture at Lancaster University. "We actually come from a common root."

Such a reappraisal of Europe's heritage and values may invigorate the EU process and bring the apathetic back to the polls. But the new varnish, say critics, will not succeed if it is only that - varnish.

For all the new vision statements and P.R., the commission could fail to sway hardened doubters, such as Jeffrey Titford, if they believe that the underlying product being sold is a faulty one.

"I don't envy Margot Wallstrom," said Titford, sitting back in his mock-Tudor villa in the quiet avenues of Frinton. "What she's trying to sell is unsellable."