Tell a story

*Marcel Canoy
European Commission*

Tell a story: my *leitmotif* for many years. During my years as a PhD student at UvA, I wondered what the fun was in writing stuff that nobody reads. So I tried a few dialogues between a fox and an owl, illustrated by my sister (*Bertrand meets the fox and the owl*). I’ve never regretted this creative detour– there’s nothing wrong with science, but there is a world out there.

This world was opened for me after a few post docs in Leuven, Paris and Maastricht. Until recently I worked at CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, which has an excellent mix of scientifically and analytically based economics and the policy world. I was lucky enough to work in a field that has become increasingly important (competition and regulation). The knowledge in the Netherlands of this field was (and to a certain extent still is) rather poor.

Recently, I joined the European Commission, replacing André Sapir as the chief economist of the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA), the think tank of President Barroso. How does BEPA compare with CPB? Well, both think tanks rely on the quality of their work as the principal source of their reputation. BEPA is paradoxically both more influential and less influential than CPB.

It is less influential than CPB, since it has less tradition and (much) less outside exposure. It is more influential, since it works directly for the President and is therefore closer to the political ‘heat’. I experienced both aspects recently. I worked the entire summer on the so-called ‘European Social Model’, which was discussed on October 26 at an informal Summit in Hampton Court between Barroso and the Heads of State (the ‘heat’). At the same time, I also saw the other side of the coin, however, since nobody realised the work that BEPA did (and probably nobody has ever heard of BEPA to start with!).

Getting back to storytelling... Within the Social Model discussion a story needed to be told, too. The political debate is dominated by vested interests preaching fear that their social model will be destroyed by neo-liberals. The real story is that appropriate economic modernisation yields both social and economic benefits– albeit at the expense of (some) vested interests (think of early retirements), but ultimately to the benefit of many.