In June 2005, when introducing the European Commission’s Green Paper on energy efficiency (EC 2005), then energy commissioner Andris Piëbalgs declared energy efficiency to be the top priority during his term as commissioner. This was no bad choice. The Barroso Commission (2004–2009) would be the last commission to have an impact on the European Union’s (EU’s) compliance with its Kyoto commitment, and the recent enlargement to include ten new Member States was a strong reminder of the huge potential, still unexploited, in energy efficiency. In addition, the Green Paper correctly observed that within the EU-15, a lot of low-hanging “energy efficiency fruit” remained on the trees. And this, despite energy efficiency having been part of the EU’s “Energy and Environment” program since the early 1990s. In quantitative terms, the Green Paper estimated that 20 percent of Europe’s gross energy consumption was “wasted” unnecessarily.

As happens so often in politics, however, events have taken over. Beginning in early 2006, reinforced in 2007, and culminating with the Commission’s 2008 Energy and Climate Package (20–20–20: 20 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, 20 percent renewable energy, and 20 percent improvement in energy efficiency) and the subsequent Council and parliament decisions on the package in 2008 and 2009, energy efficiency has been put on the back burner in favor of more glamorous policies such as renewable energy, emissions trading, and energy security of supply. Nevertheless, energy efficiency is still fully alive, to a large extent thanks to legislation proposed by the earlier Prodi Commission (1999–2004) but only slowly working its way through the cumbersome process of Council and Parliament negotiations and subsequent implementation (or nonimplementation) in Member States’ legislation. Still, there is no evidence that energy efficiency has managed to make the quantum leap that would be justified by virtue of its being the most cost-effective policy option to reduce CO₂ emissions and improve energy security of supply.
In principle, energy efficiency is part of the EU’s overall 20–20–20 strategy, to be attained by 2020. Where the greenhouse gas and renewable energy objectives have been translated into binding legislation, however, this is not the case with the energy efficiency objective. It is not difficult to explain why. First, the 20 percent target is to be achieved against a business-as-usual scenario, something that is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. Second, energy efficiency cuts across virtually all economic sectors (industry, power production, appliances, buildings, transport, etc.), some of which are partly covered by other pieces of legislation. The result is that energy efficiency ends up as the second priority (if at all a priority), and it should be no surprise if some five to ten years in the future, we will see another Green paper on energy efficiency discussing how to pick the low-hanging fruit.

The Energy Efficiency Action Plan

In October 2006, the Commission presented an Energy Efficiency Action Plan as a follow-up to the 2005 Green Paper on Energy Efficiency (EC 2006). The plan exemplified the fact that it is easier to identify the efficiency improvement potential than to prescribe the measures that will turn the potential into reality. In fact, much of the plan simply reported on measures already proposed or agreed or measures following previous decisions to review existing policies or directives already in force. The annex listed 57 specific actions to be carried out in the course of the remaining years of the (first) Barroso Commission, a number that by itself should raise some suspicion of a lack of focus. Analysis by Commission Directorates-General led to the expectation that implementation of the action plan would deliver a 13 percent reduction in gross energy consumption by 2020 relative to business-as-usual projections. This was probably an optimistic expectation, and it was subject to the uncertainty of calculating future energy consumption using business-as-usual assumptions.

The action plan covered a number of areas. Among the most important were the following.

Appliances and Other Energy-Using Equipment

Inclusion of appliances and other energy-using equipment was particularly important because energy efficiency requirements for them