

## 'The Collegiate Nature and Independence of the European Commission' from the Europe Daily Bulletin (12-13 January 1981)

**Caption:** In his editorial in the 12–13 January 1981 edition, Emanuele Gazzo, Director of Agence Europe, criticises the British Government for its mistaken view that the primary task of the British Commissioner is to defend the interests of his Government. At the same time, he congratulates the new President of the European Commission, Gaston Thorn, for his speech about the principle of an independent collegiate body.

**Source:** Bulletin Quotidien Europe. Dir. of publ. Gazzo, Emanuele ; Editor Riccardi, Ferdinando. 12-13.01.1981, No 3054. Bruxelles: Agence Europe.

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**Publication date:** 17/09/2012

## The Collegiate Nature and Independence of the European Commission

It is something of a paradox (though no surprise) that the new Commission President scored a personal victory at his press conference on Thursday when he reported on the allocation of tasks amongst the new commissioners, despite the fact that the task of handing out portfolios was marked by a number of incidents, the most important one of which was undoubtedly Mrs Thatcher's personal intercession. This serves to illustrate the importance of the more unpredictable factors in assessing events and men. Not that skilful presentation justifies mediocre policy or that a good policy is any the less so for being presented in an uninspiring way.

In order to keep to the facts of the matter, the following points should be noted:

— The first is that the quarrels and contentions over what are regarded as the “valuable” or politically worthwhile portfolios are nothing new. Daggers have always been drawn at times like these, and this is partly due to the nature of things and of people.

— The second is that the quarrel becomes abnormal, i.e. “goes against the norm” where outside intervention is too overt, as that was the case with Mrs Thatcher. This is not the first time that there has been intervention of this kind, but it is the first where it has been so well-publicised — and heavy-handed.

— The third point to be made is that the incident could be interpreted as proof that the British Government regards the mandate of 30 May as a mere “budget operation” designed to ensure “fair returns”, which is not the case, and that it believes that the primary task of the British commissioner(s) is to support its views and interests, which is similarly untrue.

This not only runs counter to the letter and spirit of the Treaties, but is also extremely harmful to the Community as a whole, and hence to each of the Member States. Carried to its ultimate extreme, this approach would reduce the Commission to a technical secretariat and defeat the object of the interplay between the various parties according to a definite set of rules. Under these circumstances, the departments of the Commission might as well be incorporated into the Council Secretariat, allowing the commissioners to look after the national interests dearest to their hearts. We should realise that what is happening is the result of a steady decline for which the responsibility lies not only with the “outside” adversaries of an independent Commission but also the gradual reversion to nationalist thinking at all levels within Community bodies.

Mr Thorn stood his ground admirably. More importantly, he defended the Commission. Firstly, he made his position clear without beating around the bush. Secondly, he presented the British Premier's move as an exercise in providing “information”. Thirdly, he stuck to the decision he had reached, which could be interpreted in no other way than as he had defined it. Finally, and most importantly, he explained that the Commission was a collegiate body and that the responsibilities of each commissioner were inseparable from their collective responsibilities. There is therefore no “private domain”. Mr Thorn found that normal and fitting that the President of the Commission and a Prime Minister should confer “within certain limits”. We would go as far as to say consultation of this kind may be proof of the importance Governments attach to the Commission. They should play the Community game respecting the Commission's prerogatives, not denying them. But one might wonder how those commissioners who at one time or another have overtly or otherwise sought the intervention of their governments felt this morning as they were sworn in at the Court of Justice. And yet, as a newcomer to the Commission, Mr Contogeorgis said yesterday, the commissioners' oath is so clearly worded that there is no room for lax interpretation.

Emanuele Gazzo.