

## 'The European Parliament lays down the gauntlet to Prodi' from El País (5 September 1999)

**Caption:** Published in the Spanish daily newspaper El País on 5 September 1999, this article criticizes the challenging attitude of some MEPs, on the occasion of the nomination of the Prodi Commission, as the European Parliament questions all the designated members of the future executive before giving its approval.

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## The European Parliament lays down the gauntlet to Prodi

### The House uses the investiture of the Commission to try to wrest more powers from it

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Special correspondent. The threat of mutiny lives on. The new European Parliament has inherited its predecessor's passionate desire to secure more power at the expense of the Community's executive body. That is what the parliamentary hearings of those hoping to form part of the Commission headed by Romano Prodi demonstrate. Although envisaged as a technical and political requirement prior to investiture, the three-hour hearings which began this week and reach their climax on Tuesday are becoming an interinstitutional barometer and a bitter battlefield between left and right in the House. The feverish German Christian Democrats and British Conservative Eurosceptics are making all the running.

Although the Commission in Brussels is not a true Government and the House in Strasbourg is not a true Parliament, the skirmishing between the two European institutions — the Commission on the defensive, the Parliament on the attack — has become a running battle.

That is the major conclusion to be drawn from the first week of hearings in which MEPs have interviewed 16 nominee Commissioners. Although three are still to be heard — Neil Kinnock from Britain, Michel Barnier from France and Frits Bolkestein from the Netherlands, it is already widely-known that the almost certain approval for Prodi's team depends more on the powers that the *professore* from Bologna is willing to give up than on the quality shown by his charges.

Almost all the MEPs spoke out for the first time in June, giving assurances of their intent to be constructive, perhaps in self-criticism, because their lynching of Jacques Santer's weak Commission resulted in a level of electoral abstention that also damaged Parliament's reputation.

#### Exceptions

There were two exceptions, both within the EPP: the German Christian Democrats, irritated by the factionalism of the Social Democrat Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, who denied them a place in Prodi's team, and the British Conservatives who are prepared to boycott any progress towards European unity, which is why they chose to be obstructionist and targeted the four continuing Commissioners who are allegedly tainted by Santerism, namely Vice-President Neil Kinnock, the Finn Erkki Liikanen (Enterprise), the Austrian Franz Fischler (Agriculture) and the Italian Mario Monti (Competition). When the hearings-cum-examinations began on Monday, the President of the House, Nicole Fontaine, gave an assurance that there would be no 'witch-hunt' and that the only aspects that would be judged would be the candidates' 'personal integrity, competence and willingness to cooperate with Parliament'.

Scarcely any of that has come to pass. There new boys (and girls) came under fire. Although not as much as could have been the case: reservations were piled high against the Spanish Conservative Loyola de Palacio (Vice-President, Energy and Transport), whom a sizeable minority has not forgiven for abuses, by officials in her former Ministry, of European subsidies for the cultivation of Spanish flax; because of that, her 'ability to safeguard the proper control of management of public funds' was called into question, although she was approved. Neither is there any logic behind their criticism of the former Budget Commissioner, the Socialist Liikanen, one of the people who came off worst in the report by the controversial Committee of Wise Men which did away with Santer's team, who expressed their 'serious reservations' at the failure of the Commissioners concerned to act at an earlier stage. In both cases, although the ideologies of those involved are different, the issues involved probably had a common origin.

Heavy fire was directed at, surprise, surprise, the head of the Belgian Socialist Philippe Busquin (Research), who clumsily kindled the wrath of Flemish MEPs when he referred to the Dutch 'question', Dutch being an unknown language in a country tied up in knots over the hot potato of ill-digested bilingualism. The EPP went for the jugular, blaming all the ills of Belgian corruption on a good-natured fellow who had taken a stand

alongside the leader of his party three years after (!) the Agusta-Dassault scandals which put an end to the career of the then NATO Secretary-General, the Socialist and ... Flemish Willy Claes, and who took the lead in the operation to clean up his corrupt party.

To disguise the lynching, or to increase confusion, the Honourable MEPs, especially the ultramontane lady Germans and Brits, then began to express reservations, although only very minor ones. The future Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, the Spanish Socialist Pedro Solbes, one of the three people who came in for the least criticism and who, alongside the British Conservative Chris Patten (External Relations) and the German Social Democrat Günter Verheugen (Enlargement), were strongest at their hearings, was accused of being 'vague' in his commitment to cooperate with the House.

The surprising aspect of these skirmishes is that, in many cases, the calm atmosphere of the open oral hearing has borne no relation to the bitter and controversial meeting behind closed doors which took place subsequently so that the interviewers could put their decision in writing. That was what happened to the Socialist Pascal Lamy, the sleuth for Jacques Delors (Trade), who was convincing in public but whose success was bargained away at the closed session. Another example was the less assured but well-mannered Green Commissioner, Michael Schreyer (Budget), whose life was ultimately spared: 'We need to give her a chance to show what she is capable of,' conceded the head of the EPP MEPs, the German Hans-Gert Poettering. Strangely enough, the German Christian Democrats backed down and failed to attack any of the Commissioners from their own country, despite the fact that their political hue was the source of their discord and rebellion.

What was going on? Poettering was laying down the gauntlet to Prodi. The right-wing of Parliament, with the exception of a few delegations including the Spanish, French and Italians, was unfairly using a mechanism devised to scrutinise the next executive body, indeed, it was abusing it with the intention of achieving another objective, an objective which is, if you like, legitimate but separate, namely an increase in the powers of the House. And they were doing it without any scruples whatsoever by sometimes showing forbearance in the open arena and writing unfair comments behind closed doors.

By contrast to what happens in the US Senate, the European Parliament cannot reject a candidate, even if it does not approve him or her. It can only applaud or criticise the investiture of the Commission as a team, which is what it will be doing on the 15th of this month.

So. Once the German and British Conservatives had established that they were unable to throw any candidate out because they failed to assert themselves over Socialists and moderate right wingers, they changed their approach to the hearings. Poettering threatened to make Prodi have to undergo two investitures in January, which, legally speaking, is a possibility but one that has been discarded by the Heads of State or Government meeting as the European Council on the grounds that it would be very damaging and difficult for the dignity of the new Commission, because it would mean the Commission undergoing a three-month probationary period. The *professore* threatened to resign.

Between Wednesday and Thursday, there was much haggling involving the killer blow of double investiture and the possible non-approval of candidates in exchange for the President of the Commission giving some loving attention to assorted Conservative demands, some of which were irrelevant, others of decisive importance: 'This is a route which we are more than willing to explore,' said Romano Prodi.

### **Aznar asks for approval**

The Spanish Prime Minister, José María Aznar, said yesterday that the European Parliament 'must issue a favourable report which leaves no room for doubt' on the Commission, reports Miguel González in Cernobbio (northern Italy). At the same time, Aznar warned that the European Parliament risked being 'used by people' to 'try to achieve in the European Parliament' something which they cannot achieve in their national parliaments. In Cernobbio, where he is participating in the international Ambrosetti Debate, Aznar said he had seen 'indications' over the last week that 'attempts' were being made to use such a manoeuvre, and he alluded to Poettering, 'either at the expense of creating unnecessary and unjustifiable difficulties for the Commission,

or at the expense of obstructing the process of European integration.’

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