

Interview with Jacques Santer published in the Luxemburger Wort (2 September 1994)

Caption: On 2 September 1994, Jacques Santer, the new President of the European Commission, replies to questions from the Luxembourg newspaper Luxemburger Wort regarding the composition and tasks of the new Commission.

Source: Luxemburger Wort. Für Wahrheit und Recht. 02.09.1994; 147e année, n° Luxembourg. Luxembourg: Imprimerie Saint-Paul. "Ich will eine starke und effiziente Kommission", p. 3.

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Jacques Santer

‘I want a strong and efficient Commission’

LW interview with the President-designate of the EU Commission

LW: Mr Santer, most of the governments of the EU Member States have now nominated their Commissioners. When will you start to allocate their portfolios?

Jacques Santer: It is still too early to talk about allocating portfolios. I shall not be thinking about allocating portfolios until I have visited all the capital cities — and, by ‘all’, I mean both the capitals of the twelve existing EU Member States and those of the four applicant countries. I should like to discuss the matter first with all my colleagues before I take any decision which may, either directly or indirectly, have anything to do with the allocation of portfolios. Since in some countries (Germany and Denmark) elections are taking place and elsewhere (Sweden) a new government is in the process of being installed, talks in the capitals of those countries will not be possible or meaningful until the new governments are in office. Added to that is the fact that, until the end of November, I shall not know definitely how big the new EC Commission will be, in other words how many Members it will have.

LW: Does that mean that you will not start to allocate portfolios until the beginning of December?

Jacques Santer: No, not necessarily. That would go against the agreements which I recently reached with the President of the European Parliament, Mr Klaus Hänsch. I agreed with Mr Hänsch that, in early November, I would submit an initial proposal which would take into account the fact that the final number of EU Member States has not yet been finally determined. If I did not make my proposals known until the beginning of December, that would not give the Members of the European Parliament enough time to arrange hearings with the newly appointed Commissioners.

Closer cooperation with the European Parliament

LW: If I understand you correctly, you are in favour of holding hearings with individual Commissioners?

Jacques Santer: Yes, I support the idea, because these hearings, as they are called, have nothing in common with the events of the same name which take place in the US Senate but are regarded more as a way of establishing contact. It is more a question of giving Members of the European Parliament the opportunity to find out about the European views of the individual Commissioners. In other words, the Commissioners will explain their basic thinking on European policy to the Members of the European Parliament. It is not a matter of answering detailed questions on technical issues. The individual Commissioners will have plenty of opportunity to do that once the Commission has started work. I am strictly against the ‘mayfly principle,’ whereby Commissioners attend a hearing when they first take office and then never appear in the European Parliament again. The hearing is an initial contact which should be followed by a whole series of further contacts.

LW: You are very optimistic. Do you believe that the individual Commissioners will go along with that or take heed of what you are saying? Is there not a risk that some of the ‘heavyweights’ will ignore the instructions of their President?

Jacques Santer: Your question leads me to conclude that you are not sufficiently familiar with my views on the nature of the Commission. The Commission is a team, and it operates on the basis of teamwork: ‘All for one and one for all’. The President is only *primus inter pares*, although he has the very difficult task of coordinating things. I see my job, then, primarily as one of bringing together individual opinions and giving them a common denominator — the Commission denominator.

LW: Do you think that you will manage to persuade political heavyweights such as Leon Brittan, Edith Cresson and Hans van den Broek to agree on this Commission denominator?

Jacques Santer: I want a strong and efficient Commission, and such a Commission has to be headed by a strong President. Strength, however, does not mean ruling with a rod of iron. Only by standing together can we be strong: *l'union fait la force*. I shall therefore be doing my utmost to ensure solidarity. The Commission is a complete entity, and that is how it should appear to the outside observer. How can the public gain confidence in Europe if individual institutions always speak with several different voices? Of course, each Commissioner has his or her private opinion on this or that issue. However, the private views of a Commissioner are something quite different from the position or view of the Commission.

Only one principle: the fair allocation of portfolios

LW: Let us come back to the question of the allocation of portfolios. Some Member States are demanding major portfolios for their Commissioners. Others are making the nomination of their Commissioner or Commissioners conditional upon the portfolio which will be allocated to each of them. Does that not mean that you are faced with an impossible task in allocating portfolios?

Jacques Santer: It certainly does not make my task any easier. I listen, as I have said, to the wishes of the individual national governments, but I always bear in mind that the Commission is an institution which is completely independent of national governments — or at least it ought to be — and, consequently, its President and Members are also independent of the national states.

One of the most important tasks which falls to the President is to allocate portfolios among the Commissioners. In carrying out that task, I shall allow myself to be guided by only one principle, namely the fair allocation of portfolios. I shall not allow anyone to interfere. When I accepted this office, I assumed certain responsibilities, and I am determined to bear the burden of those responsibilities.

LW: By what criteria will you be guided when allocating portfolios? Does the size of the individual Member States play a part?

Jacques Santer: It plays a part only insofar as the larger Member States send two Commissioners to Brussels, but it does not play any part in the allocation of portfolios. Every Member State is treated the same, because only that procedure corresponds to the European spirit. Commissioners from smaller Member States could quite easily take on important portfolios and do excellent work. As a native of Luxembourg myself, allow me to cite as an example the Luxembourg Agriculture Commissioner, René Steichen, whose competence is recognised and appreciated on all sides and whose early withdrawal from the Commission is regretted by many people.