

'The three tasks facing Jacques Santer' from Le Monde (24 January 1995)

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The three tasks facing Jacques Santer

The new European Commission, presided by Jacques Santer, takes up its duties on Monday 23 January. In the course of its five-year term of office, it will need to produce results in three areas. First, it will have to speed up implementation of the Maastricht Treaty, i.e. consolidate the single market, successfully complete the economic and monetary union (EMU) programme and give substance to the common foreign and security policy (CFSP).

Second, it will have to steer the work of the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference (IGC), which will be revising the Maastricht Treaty to remedy its shortcomings and adapt it to a European Union in the process of enlargement. The EU now has 15 Member States: it will probably have around 30 by 2010.

Third, as decided at the last European summit in Essen, the Commission will have to prepare for enlargement of the Union to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs) and to Malta, Cyprus and possibly Turkey, and at the same time consolidate its relations with its neighbours to the east (Russia and Ukraine) and south (the Maghreb and eastern Mediterranean countries), which are not potential members.

The first of these tasks is managerial, since the way forward has been mapped out and the necessary regulations adopted. Nevertheless, it will not be enough to evaluate the progress of the single market on the basis of legal criteria (number of directives adopted and transposed into national legislation). The Commission will have to make sure that the arrangements adopted work fairly on the ground.

Making the single market work means supplementing it where provided for (in the fiscal area, for example) and amending it in the light of world developments. It means continuing to apply the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment drawn up by the Delors Commission, which should remain the frame of reference for economic and social action. It means setting in train the 'information society' revolution, i.e. freeing the market so that it may develop its full potential while at the same time imposing the necessary framework so as to avoid chaos and promote industrial cooperation.

The Commission will also have to find suitable ways to reduce labour costs without stripping employees of the rights and benefits that they already enjoy. To find the money needed for this operation and meet the commitments given following the Rio Conference, it will have to impose a tax on carbon dioxide emissions. It will also have to think about ways of removing taxes on training and research.

If the single currency is to be introduced by 1 January 1999 at the latest, the Commission will need to ensure that governments take the convergence measures to which they have committed themselves. The new growth cycle that began in 1994 will help in this respect, but the turbulence affecting the lira and peseta at the present time shows that economic calm can never be taken for granted.

The new Commission seems prepared for the work of consolidation which business and industry are again expecting of it. In his investiture address to the European Parliament, Mr Santer said that he was determined to 'mobilise the necessary funds' to ensure that work on the 14 transport infrastructure projects assigned priority at Essen actually began by the end of 1996. He called for closer links between research and industry. He spoke with determination of the telematics revolution. 'Europe must not miss the boat ... I want the Union to be in the forefront, with European technologies, products and services ... We also need to formulate a contents strategy. I want to see European traffic on the information highways.'

He will be supported by an efficient team that includes some old hands like the German Commissioner Martin Bangemann (industrial affairs, author of the Bangemann report on the information society) and his Belgian colleague Karel Van Miert (competition policy) who are well versed in these issues.

They are joined by some highly motivated newcomers who are by no means beginners, like Edith Cresson (research, education and training), Italian economist Mario Monti, who comes to Brussels with an excellent reputation, and Yves-Thibaut de Silguy, who will be dealing with EMU and has been a professional European — as he pointed out during his hearing by the European Parliament — for the last 20 years.

The other two tasks — reform and enlargement — will be more matters of imagination and diplomacy. They are interconnected: while institutional reform will be undertaken with a view to gradual enlargement of the Union, the Fifteen have made it clear that they will not embark on accession negotiations until the 1996 IGC has completed its work. Will the Commission be able to act as a stimulus, as it did in the case of previous IGCs, both the 1985 conference that gave rise to the single market and the relevant supporting policies, and the 1991 conference on EMU?

The circumstances are different, and there is no indication that Jacques Santer will be able to take on a leadership role of that kind. In 1985, Jacques Delors had the single market practically in his pocket. In 1989, the second Delors Commission knew exactly where it wanted to move the Twelve with its EMU programme. There is nothing like that today. Jacques Santer's speech to Parliament set out a series of problems but provided no overall vision of the way ahead. In previous Commissions, Jacques Delors took on the visionary role, which nobody disputed. Even if he wished to do so, could the new President carry with him a Commission that appears to lack cohesion on these sensitive issues?

The Commission will have to take a stand, make hard choices, and exercise its primary power, the right to propose legislation, to the full.

Although the two issues are linked, the Commission will have to ensure that enlargement, and particularly the question of its funding, does not sour the debate on the institutions. The latter has priority, since enlargement negotiations will not begin before 1998. The high-level task force assigned to test the ground on institutional reform will start work in June.

At the centre of the discussions will be the need for greater recourse to qualified majority voting on a range of issues including the CFSP, the number of Commissioners, possible arrangements for flexibility, i.e. the conditions to be met for a restricted number of Member States to act as an '*avant garde*', as Mr Santer calls it. On all these points, the Member States may be expected to adopt clear-cut positions. The Commission must not fan the flames. But nor must it be content — although its President might be so inclined — with the role of mediator. The Commission will have to take a stand, make hard choices, and exercise its primary power, the right to propose legislation, to the full.

The pre-accession strategy defined at Essen will have to be pursued in tangible form without delay, albeit cautiously. We need to know where the Union is heading, what route it is taking and what means are at its disposal. Since the financial perspective has been fixed only up to 1999, the Commission has a difficult budget encounter in store. The drafting of the White Paper on the gradual alignment of the CEECs' legislation with a view to their integration in the single market, which will have to be completed by the spring, is a first challenge.

But, despite the complicated issues at stake, care will have to be taken to ensure that premature controversy (about the common agricultural policy and the structural funds, for example) does not put paid to institutional reform — a delicate task for Jacques Santer and Hans Van den Broek, the Commissioner with special responsibility for future enlargements.

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