

'Santer wanted to be judged by his actions, and thus has he been judged' from La Libre Belgique

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Santer wanted to be judged by his actions, and thus has he been judged

Doomed right from the start, the President of the European Commission was unable to manage a number of the portfolios dating from the Delors years. Santer's Commission had tried to do too much with the minimal resources allocated to it. The European Parliament put the final nail in its coffin. However, Commission responsibilities will continue to include the euro, taxation, competition and telecommunications.

Analysis by Christophe Lamfalussy

'I ask you to judge me by my actions,' Jacques Santer stated in July 1994, dismissing the criticisms of those who saw the former Prime Minister of Luxembourg as nothing more than a pale reflection of his predecessor, Jacques Delors, and a poor substitute for Jean-Luc Dehaene, whose candidacy was opposed by John Major.

The verdict on Monday evening came like a bombshell to the 20-strong College of Commissioners. A single statement by the 'Committee of Wise Men' was enough to seal its fate: the Commission had lost 'control ... over the Administration that [it is] supposedly running. This loss of control implies at the outset a heavy responsibility for both the Commissioners individually and the Commission as a whole.'

Less than five years have elapsed between the first and second statements. Some Commissioners have worked diligently, others have acted negligently. But, when all is said and done, it is Santer personally who bears the risks and responsibilities.

Some take the view that the Santer Commission fell down straight away by allowing its Commissioners too much leeway as individuals and that Santer should have righted the helm promptly. Others think that the consequences of all this are not as negative as might be suggested.

Fernand Herman is in the former camp; he was one of the first publicly to describe Jacques Santer as a nice chap who was anything but a great leader.

Today the MEP, a Christian Socialist, believes that the Commission has been outstanding in four areas, namely in the introduction of the euro, competition, taxation and the deregulation of the telecommunications sector. Those were the four areas — he claims — in which the Commission had excelled, and credit for that had to go to Commissioners de Silguy, Van Miert, Monti and Bangemann.

However, the EU's executive body — he adds — made a disastrous error in agreeing to manage areas of responsibility (aid to Eastern Europe and humanitarian issues, for example) for which it had neither the necessary expertise nor the staff. Cases of fraud came to light in the subcontracting of such managerial functions.

Jacques Santer's ineffective, faint-hearted approach to the press did the rest. While the media were delving over and over again into the Commission's affairs, attention was being diverted from the fraud committed in the Member States against the EU budget. Out of 954 cases identified by the anti-fraud unit UCLAF, 927 were committed by Member States or private undertakings and only 27 by EU officials.

One final fact, which is often overlooked but to which Mr Santer referred briefly on Tuesday at a press conference, is that four out of the six cases of fraud established by the 'Committee of Wise Men' date back to the Delors years. Santer has, admittedly, failed to rectify the mistakes of the past, but, according to a source close to the outgoing President, 'We are paying for a particular kind of politics practised by Delors. He installed his networks in the Commission. Edith Cresson is proof enough of that.'

Difficult relations with Parliament

In the eyes of a number of observers, the Commission could not withstand the fallout from at least two situations, the first involving its difficult relationship with a European Parliament seeking to bolster its power

in the run-up to the elections on 13 June, and the second concerning its position — considered to echo too closely that of Austria and Germany — in the negotiations for the accession of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Speaking on the telephone that morning to an official from the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, a source close to the Brussels executive body congratulated the Group for getting what it wanted: the collective resignation of the Commission.

The largest political group in Parliament, the Socialists have never liked Jacques Santer. In July 1994, a majority of its members declared their opposition to his appointment as President. Since then, MEPs have tabled five motions of censure, none of which has been carried.

On the most recent occasion, last January, the motion related to the said instances of fraud. The Socialists were seeking the collective resignation of Santer's team. By contrast, their Christian Democrat counterparts were calling only for Socialist Commissioners Edith Cresson and Manuel Marin to stand down. The two Groups arrived at a compromise just before the vote, calling for the establishment of the much-talked-about 'Committee of Wise Men'. On 15 January, 232 votes were cast in favour of the motion of censure, whilst 293 Members voted against it and 27 abstained.

Although those motions came to nothing, they still indicate a shift in the power balance in favour of the European Parliament. The Maastricht Treaty had already conferred on it the power to hold a vote on the appointment of an entire new Commission. And it certainly did not pass up the opportunity, subjecting every nominee Commissioner to examination with a fine-tooth comb and singling out Edith Cresson for criticism for forgetting to mention at her hearing in January 1995 that education was in her portfolio.

The Amsterdam Treaty, which is scheduled to enter into force around 1 June, is even more generous. It grants MEPs the right to vote on the appointment of the President of the European Commission following his nomination by the Fifteen.

The second criticism levelled against Santer's team is that it gave in too quickly to pressure from Member States to reach at least some form of agreement on the financial reform of the Union. According to one senior diplomat, there was a sense in Agenda 2000 that the Santer Commission was heading for its demise. After all, it had been too quick to follow the lead of the eight countries seeking to stabilise EU expenditure at a time when preparations were under way for a major enlargement.

Monday evening's *coup de grâce*

By and large weakened by those developments, the stunned EU executive body gathered on Monday evening for the reading of the full report handed over by the 'Wise Men'. The Commissioners declared themselves unanimously in favour of resignation *en bloc*, but only after UK Commissioner Sir Leon Brittan had proposed sacrificing some Commissioners, Santer included, on the altar of the Union and withdrawing some questionable programmes. They eventually gave up the fight at approximately 10 p.m. when Pauline Green, Chairman of Parliament's Group of European Socialists, demanded the wholesale resignation of the Brussels executive body. Faced with such a threat, they knew that their time was well and truly up.