

Europolitics: New Commission: "Parliament is going to have to adapt"

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Interview with MEP Danuta Hübner (EPP, Poland), chair, AFCO committee

Danuta Hübner, the former commissioner, has been a member of the European Parliament since 2009. She chairs the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO).

Certain commissioners have admitted after the fact that they were nervous for their hearing before the European Parliament. How do you remember yours?

I went through two hearings, the first for the trade portfolio with Pascal Lamy [in May 2004, when Poland joined the EU – Ed] and then another seven months later for regional development. For the first, I didn't know anybody. Now it's very different. The candidates meet a lot of people and see the coordinators. They can have informal contacts ahead of the hearing and are more familiar with the MEPs. But the commissioners also hear that people are unhappy. Emotion is unavoidable. In any case, both sides take this exercise very seriously.

Now that Parliament has won this first battle and that the hearings are taken seriously by the commissioners-designate, what is the next stage for Parliament?

The big challenge for Parliament is to adapt to the Commission's new structure. Cooperation with the Commission will have to be organised differently. After the hearings, we will consider how to make the adjustments needed for good cooperation over the next five years. A rapporteur has been appointed [Richard Corbett, S&D, UK – Ed] to work on the hearings procedure and to come up with ideas on how to adjust to the Commission's new structure.

According to MEPs, the large groups have a tacit non-aggression pact such that, if the S&D group plans to reject an EPP commissioner, the EPP will do the same with a Socialist. Does this principle defeat the objective of the hearings?

The challenge for Parliament is to have a good Commission that will deliver its programme. We take the hearings very seriously and we think that Europe cannot afford to have a weak

Commission. So we will evaluate the commissioners thoroughly. Coalition and commitments go together. The individual approach can lead to the opinion, 'if you touch ours, we'll get one of yours'. But this attitude will not be decisive in the procedure. It comes from a few individuals looking for political controversy, not from the groups. A balance will have to be struck between the need to ensure that the candidates meet the criteria and the fact that we will vote on the full college. I trust that Jean-Claude Juncker will spare no effort to make sure the best people are in the right place.

What are the big issues that will be coming up next for the Committee on Constitutional Affairs?

We want to identify the areas where the treaty's potential is not fully exploited to know where we can go further. We'll be looking, for example, at the European citizens' initiatives and defence policy. But not everyone has an appetite for reform. The treaty also leaves room for a common energy market. We'll have to explore how to strengthen the eurozone without deepening fragmentation in the EU. We'll also review Parliament's internal rules. They were revised ten years ago and since then are adapted regularly in bits and pieces, so that today we have something that looks like a Christmas tree. We also want to work on a new election law with common lists - an idea put forward by Andrew Duff [MEP not re-elected in 2014 – Ed] -, election thresholds, election date and formula for calculating the number of MEPs per member state.

This is a sensitive area. The 1976 Elections Act has remained virtually intact since its adoption because member states are very touchy on these issues... It won't be easy but there's a growing expectation and Parliament has the right of initiative in this area.

What do you think of the new structure of the Juncker Commission?

The structure is smart, suited to the 21st century, a holistic approach. It was necessary to allow teamwork. The Commission's weakness today is that it works in silos. There is a need to develop a culture of cooperation between services. An attempt was made back when I was in the Commission. It won't be easy but we are better prepared today than ten years ago. It is up to the Commission to create the conditions. At the convention 12 years ago, in which I participated, we had hoped to get a smaller Commission. Now I think it's not such a bad thing to have 28 commissioners since each one can communicate in his or her national language and especially because no commissioner ends up without a portfolio. Another appreciable aspect is that the vice-presidencies have been given to small member states. I hope that this Commission will work well in practice and develop cooperation with Parliament without delay. In Parliament, we also need to improve our coordination between committees to prevent the current situation where there are conflicts of competence over certain pieces of legislation, which delays the start of their work. This is something we'll look into with the EP's new rules of procedure.