



BRIEFING NOTE: Commissioner hearings

Overview

Every five years a new European Commission is appointed – but before it can start work the European Parliament must confirm these nominations. From the 11-19 January 2010, twenty-six Commissioner-designates will be put through their paces by our MEPs as they argue why they are the best person for a particular Commissionership.

It looks as though these hearings are set to be pretty interesting over the next few days. There is a real sense that the European Parliament is keen to use its powers to the full and will not shy away from asking the tough questions. Already rumours have been circulating about who has a shoe-in and who will have to fight hard for their place on the team.

It is important to note that the European Parliament does not vote on the individual nominees. The European Commissioners are referred to as a College and the European Parliament will vote to approve or reject the entire college. However it is well known that MEPs can apply pressure to have portfolios reshuffled. Below is a brief outline of how this whole process works.

How this process works

There are four main steps in this process:

1. National Nomination (COMPLETED)

Firstly, the national government from each EU country nominates a person it believes would serve well as a European Commissioner. Portugal's nominee - Manuel Barroso has already been confirmed as the President of the Commission. Some of the nominees have been Commissioners before, and some are brand new to the game. However most have been involved in some kind of European politics before, such as the Irish nominee is Máire Geoghegan Quinn who was formerly at the European Court of Auditors. Once all of the nominations are in we have our College.

2. Written question time (COMPLETED)

The nominees are then sent a list of written questions from the European Parliament. The questions fall under the following categories – general competence, European commitment and personal independence; management of the proposed portfolio and cooperation with the European Parliament and its Committees; and policy-related questions. All nominees submitted their answers to these questions before Christmas and their responses can be

viewed at

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/hearings/documents/default.htm?language=EN&foliold=3>

3. Hearings (11-19 JANUARY)

Next comes the time for hearings... Each nominee will appear before the European Parliament Committee relevant to their sought after portfolio and make their case. These hearings take place between 11-19 January and each hearing is estimated to last not longer than three hours.

The hearings begin with a presentation by the nominee and the members of the Parliamentary Committees are then free to ask the nominee some questions. It is likely that if a nominee has been a Commissioner before that their work in their previous portfolio will be examined and scrutinised. However, the scrutiny is not limited to previous European work and questions can relate to any period of a nominee's career and in some cases relevant questions to their personal life and relationships. While the hearings will concentrate mostly on policy and less on the personality of the candidates, some will need to "come clean" about their past or conflicts of interest.

It is handy to note that Each of the hearings in the European Parliament Committees will be webstreamed on <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/eng-internet-publisher/eplive/public/default.do?language=en> and shown on Europarl TV.

4. Evaluation and Vote (21 & 26 JANUARY)

Once the hearings are done, the Committees will then forward their evaluations to the President of the European Parliament, Mr Jerzy Buzek. Mr Buzek will then convene a meeting of the Conference of Presidents, which is made up of the President of the European Parliament and the Presidents of each of the Parliament's political groups. This meeting is scheduled to take place on Thursday 21 January in Strasbourg. However before this meeting takes place each political group will meet to discuss the different nominees so that they are clear on where they stand.

The Conference of Presidents will then decide whether a vote on the College should take place. If it is agreed to proceed, the vote on the College of Commissioners will take place at a special plenary hearing of the European Parliament on Tuesday 26 January in Brussels.

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If problems arise with individual nominees and the European Parliament feels it cannot vote on the college, President Barroso will have to return to discussions with the national governments and the European Parliament's vote will be postponed. In some cases, countries are forced to change their nominees in order to prevent the entire Commission from being voted down. This has happened before. In 2004, Commissioner-designates

Buttiglione and Kovacs were rejected in their original posts – and a new candidate as well as a reshuffle of posts had to take place to avoid a crisis.

And finally, we're here to help...

Here at European Movement Ireland we have a team dedicated to finding out what the big stories are, what little nuggets of information are doing the rounds and what is being whispered in the corridors. If you would like any further information on any of the nominees, the process or even on the rumours circulating please get in touch on 662 5815. We look forward to hearing from you.

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