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EUROPOLITICS

The European affairs dally

Maltese Dalli wraps MEPs around his finger

By Marianne Slegers | Thursday 14 January 2010



At his hearing, on 14 January, it was obvious that the Commissioner-designate for Health and Consumer Policy, Maltese John Dalli, had plenty of political experience. Dalli was able to answer all the questions flawlessly. He even made the MEPs laugh and clap their hands on several occasions. Wrapping the MEPs around his fingers, Dalli knew exactly the kind of answers they wanted to hear on several politically sensitive issues, such as what action the European Commission would take on animal cloning and in which direction the Commission would move with the directive on cross-border health care. According to Conservative MEP Malcom Harbour (UK), his performance was “very impressive”. Harbour said after the session, “You can definitely tell he has served in a cabinet for several years”.

Talking to MEPs, Dalli promised to “put patients and consumers first”. According to him, the fact that he has been a cabinet member in his home country would prove useful in his new job. “I will bring my consensus-building experience and the expertise I have in various kind of sectors,” he said. Dalli, minister for economics, finance and currently social policy, showed himself committed to increase awareness in the member states on “health determinants,” such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol and other bad habits. According to him, it is in the long term much more productive and effective to focus on educating people about a healthier lifestyle than on focusing on research on one particular disease. He pledged to ensure high standards of consumer protection as well as food safety for all; said he would take action on animal transport; and promised to come up with a “report” on animal cloning within one year. On the latter issue, he said that “We need to have certainty but first we need to understand everybody’s point of view and then come up with adequate solutions”.

He promised to revisit the pharmaceutical package and said he will likely come up with amendments to the information to patients part of the package. This package has three parts, of which the information to patients’ string is currently blocked by the Council. Responsibility for the pharmaceutical industry has moved from DG Industry and Enterprise to Dalli’s future DG SANCO. “Patients have the right to have access to proper information on prescribed medicines, we have to re-assess the proposal and put a better one on the table,” he said.

CROSS-BORDER HEALTH CARE

In response to a question whether he would come back to the negotiating table to find a solution with the member states on the cross-border health care directive, he said that he was definitely willing to hammer out an agreement as soon as possible. Whether the Commission wanted to continue with this legislative proposal was questionable for a while: when the member states did not agree on the final text of the cross-border health care directive during the Health Council in December, Health Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou told journalists that withdrawing the whole proposal was “definitely something the new College of Commissioners had to consider”. At the hearing, Dalli promised Dagmar Roth-Berendt (S&D, Germany) to take up the fight against the member states that are reluctant to have an EU law on cross-border health care. To Roth-

Berendt's question, "Will you force them and kick them when this is needed?" he replied, "I will be strong". He was rewarded with a big round of applause.

Responding to MEP Linda McAvan (S&D, UK), he said that he intends to be tough on tackling health problems, such as alcohol abuse and obesity. "Five years from here, I want to be remembered as the commissioner who brought the debate on a healthy lifestyle to the schools." He added that education on this issue should start from the youngest age possible.

PHARMA PACKAGE

On the question of the information to patients string of the pharmaceutical package put to him by Cristofer Fjellner (EPP, Sweden), Dalli answered that he intends to make a clearer distinction in the proposal between information and advertisement, which is exactly the point the member states thought was lacking in the current proposal.

Dalli concluded the meeting by saying "Let us move together in the future and let us work hard to put the interest of consumers and patients first," which was, again, rewarded, with a big applause.

Background

Born in 1948, Dalli has been in politics for over 20 years. He has been minister in his country several times and was responsible for the Maltese economy, served twice as a finance minister and is currently the social policy minister. Dalli, who worked as an accountant before entering the political arena, resigned from the Maltese cabinet in 2004 after allegations from members of his own Nationalist Party of abusing his power. The Maltese police did not find any proof against him. Dalli was fully rehabilitated in 2007.

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John DALLI Hearing Report



[EN CV](#)

John DALLI

Health and Consumer Policy

Our rating: ★★★★★

Quotes

“I do not want to tell European citizens what to eat, but I want to tell them what they are

Dalli clearly impressed MEP's, many of whom were waiting for someone to turn up with a clear vision and agenda. He made it clear that his priorities were the interests of citizens and he showed that he had the toughness required to tackle both industry and criminals. He said that his aim is to "empower the consumer" saying that "must be informed, so they can decide for themselves what is good or bad for them". He was pragmatic on how to achieve his ambitions. On the pharma package, he wanted to move very quickly on the non-controversial parts of the pharmaceutical package, including the proposals on falsified medicinal products and pharmacovigilance. He said counterfeit medicines are "not only a danger to consumers but also to innovation," adding that he will

eating."

“ *"Let us move together in the future and let us work hard to put the interest of consumers and patients first"*

“ *"Making enemies comes with the job, so it is not something that is going to frighten me"*

"work hard to make sure that the same controls which apply to the offline world also apply to the online one." The controversial part of the package, on information to patients, would have to be reassessed to "bring more patient perspective in the proposal". He did promised a reassessment of the draft directive, noting "there might be a harder demarcation between industry and advertising", something MEP's feel very strongly about.

On the cross-border healthcare, he would meet the Spanish health minister to "chart out a way on which understanding can be reached". Questioned on the suspected fragmentation of consumer protection rights in the new portfolios, Dalli pledged that "I am the consumer's guardian in the college". Dagmar Roth-Berendt (S&D) asked him to take up the fight against the member states that are reluctant to have an EU law on cross-border health care, asking, "Will you force them and kick them when this is needed?" Dalli replied, "I will be strong".

He had also briefed himself on the more controversial aspects of his job, but didn't want to announce anything specific on contentious areas like cloning, where he said hoped "that within one year we can come up with a report on how to tackle the cloning issue", which he would present to parliament. GMO's were another touchy issue, and he was cautious, stating that "the basis of our decisions is science", but that it would be "extra important to ensure that the advice given is independent". However, he was clear on animal hormones, stating that "Animals treated with hormones are not allowed to be imported to the EU" and he "would defend this position internationally".

He also pledged action on health determinants, such as obesity alcohol abuse and smoking and he thought the answer was in education, "Five years from here, I want to be remembered as the commissioner who brought the debate on a healthy lifestyle to the schools." He also said that education should start at the earliest possible age. By the end of the meeting Dalli had charmed the meeting and showed that a small island could produce politicians who could fill a large role in European politics and he won plaudits from MEP's across the political spectrum