



Ashton backs Doha rescue in Q&A with MEPs

The Doha trade round and the financial crisis were just two subjects MEPs questioned the prospective new Trade Commissioner Catherine Ashton about on Monday. She also faced questions about her experience for such a demanding international job. A full account of the question and answer session is available in the 3rd section of this feature "Summary of hearing of Catherine Ashton".

All new Commissioners must be approved by a vote in the European Parliament. Prior to the vote they face an often tough question and answer session with MEPs from the Committee or Committees that cover their policy areas.

1. An **introduction** to the hearing
2. A **profile** of Catherine Ashton
3. A **full round-up** of her **question and answer session with MEPs**

The trade commissioner is mandated by the 27 members of the European Union to negotiate international trade deals on their behalf. With the European Union accounting for 19% of the globe's total trade, the commissioner for trade is one of the most important jobs in Brussels.

MEPs and the hearing

On Monday in Strasbourg Baroness Ashton faced Parliament's cross party Trade Committee and its Chairman Helmuth Markov of the leftist GUE/NGL group. MEPs probed the candidate on her political outlook, her knowledge of trade issues and her readiness to assume the position of European commissioner.

Given the global nature of trade and the fact that the latest Doha trade round has been termed a "Development" one, MEPs from the Development committee led by Spanish Socialist MEP Josep Borrell and the Foreign Affairs committee under Polish MEP Jacek Saryusz-Wolski (EPP-ED), also participated.

These question and answer sessions are by no means a formality. Just four years ago an Italian prospective Commissioner failed to win over MEPs and had to withdraw his candidacy, while in other cases the Commission president was forced to reshuffle portfolios between commissioners.

After the hearing

After the hearing the Committees will make an assessment of Baroness Ashton's suitability. Her confirmation will then be the subject of a vote on Wednesday by the full Parliament on her appointment.

Profile of Baroness Ashton

Whilst Peter Mandelson was rarely out of the British press, Baroness Ashton has had a more low profile rise through the political establishment. At the time of her appointment she was leader of the British Labour party in the second chamber of the UK's parliament - the House of Lords.

The 52 year old from Upholland in Lancashire was appointed to be leader in the House of Lords in 2007 on the nomination of Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Prior to this she had been in the parliamentary Chamber for eight years - serving for a time as a Minister for Education and skills.

As leader of the Lords, she recently had the job of guiding through the House the government legislation leading to UK ratification of the Lisbon Treaty.

Active in local business and healthcare

Before joining the Lords she was active in running her local health authority and in encouraging businesses in the community.

Previous posts held by Baroness Ashton include Director of Business in the Community, founder of The Employers' Forum on Disability, Opportunity Now, and the Windsor Fellowship.

She has also been on her children's school governing body, and later became a vice president of the National Council for One Parent Families.

She has 2 children and 3 stepchildren and studied economics at London University.

The 10th female Commissioner?

If MEPs appoint Baroness Ashton she would be the 10th female commissioner during this current term - which is due to expire in October 2009. EC President José Manuel Barroso has always publicly spoken of his desire for a higher percentage of women in top jobs during his term compared to previous ones.

If appointed she would also be the third Briton to hold the trade post after Peter Mandelson and Leon Brittan.

The compatibility of a position in the UK House of Lords with being a Commissioner has been raised by a couple of voices.

However, the Commission's spokesman, Johannes Laitenberger, confirmed it is compatible saying that it was "fully in line with the rules" for Ashton to remain a peer (while taking a leave of absence from the Lords). "A life peerage is an honour, not a job" he said.

Summary of Catherine Ashton hearing - Commissioner-designate for Trade

Commissioner-designate Catherine Ashton faced a hearing at the European Parliament on Monday. She has been nominated to replace Peter Mandelson as Trade Commissioner following his appointment to the British government. MEPs questioned Baroness Ashton on the future of the Doha Round, the financial crisis, bilateral trade negotiations - and on her own experience. The outcome will be considered on Tuesday by the Conference of Presidents, with the full Parliament due to vote on Wednesday.

"I believe that the gradual building of an open global trading system based on shared rules is one of the great achievements of the twentieth century. The WTO system might not be perfect, but it is easy to underestimate just how unpredictable the global economy would be without it", said Catherine Ashton. If approved by Parliament, she said she would pay her first visit to Pascal Lamy in Geneva on Wednesday to assure him that pursuing a successful Doha Round remains absolutely central to Europe's trade policy.

"Plenty of people have noted that I would be the first female British Commissioner and the first female Trade Commissioner, to which I say – it's time", she said in her opening statement.

Doha round and WTO reform

Asked by Robert Sturdy (EPP-ED, UK) how she would have acted differently given her predecessor's "failure" over the Doha Round, Baroness Ashton asserted that the Doha Round was "not over yet" after 7 years of discussions and reminded Members that the Uruguay Round lasted 8 years.

Erika Mann (PES, DE) asked how, in the complexity of the trade talks, she would shape the agenda for "fair, just and sustainable trade." Baroness Ashton replied that she would both recognise the value and importance to EU citizens of trade for prosperity but also the need to create sustainable economies worldwide. Considerations of agriculture or development needed to be built into discussions - there should not be just one perspective

"Would Baroness Ashton consider changing the proposals to allay the fears of small farmers surviving at the margins", asked Sean Ó Neachtain (UEN, IE) referring to the last set of WTO proposals. The Commissioner-designate stressed the importance of restarting talks and she was keen that the results would mean farming was open and transparent and would embed the CAP reforms of 2003.

Frithjof Schmidt (Greens/EFA, DE) insisted that the Singapore issues remain out of the Doha Development Agenda, while Jacky Henin (GUE/NGL, FR) asked about revolutionising the WTO, by including human and trade union rights. Baroness Ashton said that under current critical circumstances it was a time for making optimal use of what we have, not to renegotiate the existing structures of the organisation.

Responding to Zbigniew Zalewski (EPP-ED, PL) on Russia and the WTO she said, "I want to see Russia join the World Trade Organisation".

Commissioner-designate's experience and profile

Ms Mann also asked what in personal and professional background had equipped her for the role of Trade Commissioner. Baroness Ashton firstly stressed her personal commitment to Europe. She recalled her first visit to Strasbourg to seek support for UK SME exporters, saying she had succeeded through working closely with the Parliament, Commission and Council. She then pointed to her negotiating skills throughout her career and the breadth of her values.

For the IND/DEM Group, Nigel Farage (UK) asked whether Baroness Ashton would not have been happier with another policy brief, given that she has no direct experience in international trade. "I have hundreds of technical experts who have been working on the trade portfolio for years," she said. "But I do have the experience to go and negotiate on behalf of the EU because I am a negotiator - it's what I do."

Financial crisis

"I don't believe that the answers to any of our problems – that includes the current financial crisis – lie in reversing the current openness of the global economy. I believe they lie in managing economic globalisation better", said the Commissioner-designate in her opening statement.

For the Development Committee, Thijs Berman (PES, NL) referred to the triple crises of food, energy and financial markets and asked how development co-operation can be integrated into trade policy. Catherine Ashton said she shared concerns about the impact on the world's poorest and that was also worried that the economic downturn should not challenge our commitment to aid. "We have to develop a negotiating style to help overcome that," she said.

Bilateral negotiations

Jacek Saryusz-Wolski (EPP-ED, PL), Foreign Affairs Committee Chair, and Christopher Fjerner (EPP-ED, SE) asked the Baroness whether she would pursue stronger engagement with the Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia through closer free trade agreements. Baroness Ashton did not claim to be an expert in this area but said she was capable of recognising the importance of developing closer trade and other relations.

In looking further east to Central Asia, Mr Saryusz-Wolski asked whether we should link questions of free trade with human rights. The Baroness reemphasised that trade is only one strand of the Commission's work. Commissioners with different portfolios should work in partnership. "Trade is just one piece of the jigsaw for finding solutions."

MEPs also questioned the Commissioner-designate on reviving the negotiations with the Mercosur block. "I am keen on resuming negotiations with this group of countries", she told Daniel Varela (EPP-ED, ES) and Ioan Mircea Pascu (PES, RO). Ignasi Guardans (ALDE, ES) raised the permanent dilemma between negotiating with regions or on a country basis.

Responding to Glyn Ford (PES, UK), Baroness Ashton expressed her support for a partnership agreement with China and an economic integration scheme with Japan.

Economic Partnership Agreements

"I don't think there is any single model for trade liberalisation that works everywhere and at all times. There are only tailored solutions to the specific needs and the potential strengths of different countries. This would guide my approach in areas such as the Economic Partnership Agreements, where I want to listen to and learn from our ACP partners how best to take forward final agreements", said Baroness Ashton.

"On the Development model entrenched in the EPAs, would the Commissioner-designate be ready to fight internally and stand up against her administration", asked David Martin (PES, UK), EP rapporteur for the EPA on the Caribbean. "It has to be, in the end, my decision", she replied, looking over at the Commission officials present in the room.