

Hearing of Mr Jan Figel (education, culture, multilingualism)

Since May 2004, Mr Jan FIGEL, Commissioner-Designate for Slovakia, has shared the portfolio 'Enterprise and Information Society' with Commissioner Erkki Liikanen. Having been retained as a candidate for the new Commission, he has now been offered the portfolio 'culture, education, training and multilingualism'. During his hearing at the European Parliament on Monday evening, Mr Figel did not seek to hide the fact that this new portfolio had not been his first choice. Nevertheless he said, he would look on it as a challenge: the measures needed in the field of education were vital to achieve the Lisbon goals and to promote economic growth.

Mr Figel also felt that culture had a key role to play in the European integration process. The Commissioner-designate quoted the words of Jean Monnet, who towards the end of his life had said that, if he could begin European unification again, he would start with culture. Mr Figel believed that culture and education were vital aspects of European identity, citizenship and quality of life. *'European integration is more than just an economic or geographical challenge, it is also a question of values, civilisation and cultural heritage'*.

The Lisbon strategy

According to Mr Figel, *'the Lisbon strategy is more ambitious than all the efforts deployed to put in place the internal market'*. In reply to pessimistic questions from Members concerning the attainment of the Lisbon goals, which aimed to improve competitiveness and the quality of employment, he said that work needed to be speeded up at both Community and national level. The internal market needed to be completed and the remaining obstacles overcome, particularly those affecting the mutual recognition of vocational qualifications and diplomas. *'Mobility must be greatly improved, both between geographical regions and sectors of activity, in order to create a dynamic European labour market'*, he said. That was why priority had to be given to life-long learning. The European system for transferring and accumulating course credits valid for different higher education establishments should provide a model for a similar system in the field of vocational training.

Other efforts were also needed, of course. Whereas public investment in education and research in the Member States was close to the target of 3% of GDP, private investment was falling short, particularly compared to our American and Japanese competitors. *'The United States have both the knowledge and the capital, whereas in Europe we are desperately short of risk capital, for example, to promote research and innovation'* said Mr Figel. The Commission intended to give further encouragement to partnerships between the public and private sectors and to links between universities and industry. The Commissioner-designate was not opposed to the idea of private bursaries. Mr Brian CROWLEY (UEN, IE) drew attention to the fact that to date Erasmus students were almost exclusively from privileged backgrounds, since the amounts provided were inadequate to meet basic needs without financial help from parents. Mr Figel was pleased to reply that the Erasmus grants would be increased from 150 to 250 euros per month to encourage take-up by students from all social backgrounds.

With reference to Mr Figel's figures on EU spending on education, Ottaviano DEL TURCO (PES, IT), chair of the Employment Committee, said it was *"worth noting what is going on in India and China, not only in Japan and the United States"*. Other Members pointed to the importance of co-operation between private and public enterprises, to allow more young people to participate in Community programmes. *"We have to encourage public and private partnerships"* as well as ensuring better access to Community programmes for people in the less developed parts of Europe, emphasised Mr Figel.

Other questions on equal opportunities and social cohesion were asked by MEPs including Tomás ZATLOUKAL (EPP-ED, CZ), who spoke about disabled people and about gifted children, and Ivo BELET (EPP-ED, BE), who referred to the low school attendance rates of

Roma children. Replying, Mr Figel said that the EU's goal was to cut school failure rates in the Member States by half.

Funding

Members of the Culture and Education Committee were critical of the fact that only 1% of the EU budget was earmarked for culture. Mr Figel said he backed the proposal to increase the total Union budget to 1.24% of GNP, as proposed by the Prodi Commission, under which funding for education and culture would triple. He went on to say that the open co-ordination method, while not binding, could be an effective way of achieving progress in education. In answer to MEPs who were unhappy about Parliament's lack of involvement in this procedure, the Commissioner-designate said that Parliament could influence things through its budgetary powers. He also urged MEPs to contribute, through the co-decision procedure, to the adoption and implementation of the new generation of programmes from 2007.

Doris PACK (EPP-ED, DE) voiced concern about the education programme Tempus Plus for the Balkans. She also asked whether the EU would one day set up a programme for the mobility of teachers. Mr Figel promised that the Commission would ensure that co-operation with the Balkans continued. He also underlined the importance of teachers as opinion formers and disseminators of knowledge and pointed out that part of the new Erasmus Mundus programme focused on teacher mobility.

2007 - European Year of Intercultural Dialogue?

Michael CRAMER (Greens/EFA, DE) asked the candidate Commissioner if the Iron Curtain had really disappeared and if Europe did not have a tendency to forget its own history. In the same vein, Ottaviano DEL TURCO (PES, IT), chair of the Employment Committee, alluded to the rise of anti-Semitic acts in the EU and stressed the pedagogical role the Commission should play to prevent public opinion identifying Islam with terrorism. Mr Figel acknowledged that intercultural dialogue had acquired growing importance since 11 September 2001, as was shown by the public debate on immigration, tolerance and mutual understanding. Earlier, in his opening statement, Mr Figel had announced that he would propose that 2007 be declared "European Year for Intercultural Dialogue".

Cultural diversity

Christa PRETS (PES, DE), Marielle DE SARNETZ (ALDE/ADLE, FR) and others wanted to know what role the Commission, and possibly Parliament, were going to play in UNESCO's work on an international convention on cultural diversity. Mr Figel told MEPs that the Commission, which supports this project, has put forward a proposal to the Council stating that it wishes to represent the EU at these talks, particularly on trade-related issues. He also promised that the Commission, which represents the Union at the WTO, would do whatever was needed to stem liberalisation in the fields of culture and education.

Pál SCHMITT (EPP-ED, HU) was concerned about preserving Europe's cultural diversity and Michael CRAMER (Greens/EFA, DE) asked about measures being taken in this area. "*Minority languages are part of the European culture*" stressed the Commissioner-designate. Although we cannot find a complete solution to the problem, the institutions need more financial support to promote minority languages. We have to wait for the outcome of the current feasibility study on a European Agency for Linguistic Diversity and Language Learning before deciding what action to take.

Simplification of legislation

According to Mr Figel the open method of co-ordination is increasingly important as it enables Member States to develop their policies gradually. He welcomed Parliament's initiatives and looked forward to working on specific proposals, saying *"simplification of legislation could help promote excellence - both for gifted and disabled people - and not in a discriminatory way"*.

Some MEPs voiced disappointment at the slow, complicated procedures of Community programmes. Marielle DE SARNEZ (ALDE/ADLE, FR) wanted action taken to accelerate progress in this field. The Commissioner-designate promised that after 1 November he would speed up implementation of the reforms. The new programmes aim to increase the number of citizens benefiting from mobility for learning purposes, the target being for one student in 20 in the Union to take part in Comenius. Mr Figel said he expected 3 million students to participate in the Erasmus programme by 2011, while the Leonardo da Vinci programme would involve 150,000 training placements, and 25,000 adults would benefit from the Grundtvig programme by 2013.

Several MEPs asked for clarification of Mr Figel's concept of *"better regulation"*. According to Mr. Figel, better regulation substantially means *"smarter regulation"*. It might be lesser in terms of content, but it would be better prepared, more thorough and based on a longer but simplified consultation procedure.

Legal framework for sport

Sports issues will only have legal bases after the ratification of the Constitutional treaty, which is expected by 2006. Christa PRETS (PES, AT) asked Mr Figel how he intended to act in the transition period. *"Sport is part of culture"*, he said, explaining that it had an important role to play in education, both its physical and moral aspects. More attention needed to be devoted to this issue, which was important for EU citizens. Sport, he said, was a way to create involvement and get people to take part in the European project. Further steps were envisaged after the assessment of European Year of Education through Sport (EYES 2004).

Youth information

Emmanouil MAVROMMATIS (EPP-ED, EL), deputy chair of the Culture Committee, wanted there to be specific information campaigns for young people about Europe, saying approximately 50% of young people would like more information from public authorities. *"Youth is our richness and our future"* replied Mr Figel. *"More active dialogue with young people in our enlarged Europe is crucial."*

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