

Hearing of Vladimir Spidla (employment, social affairs, equal opportunities)

On Monday afternoon, Vladimir SPIDLA took part in the first of a series of 24 hearings to be held at the European Parliament during the next two weeks, marking the beginning of the procedure for the approval of the new European Commission. Mr Spidla is the Commissioner-designate from the Czech Republic. He will be responsible for social policy, employment and equal opportunities. Two parliamentary committees took part in this first hearing: the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, under the chairmanship of Ottaviano DEL TURCO (PES, IT), and the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, under the chairmanship of Anna ZABORSKA (EPP-ED, SK).

Mr Spidla began by emphasising his sincere commitment to the idea of an open Europe, stressing its economic, scientific and cultural potential. He believed that the enlarged Europe had sufficient potential to achieve the Lisbon goals. On the question of competitiveness, one of the key elements of the Lisbon process, Mr Spidla firmly stressed that *"the European social model is an essential part of our competitiveness. Anyone who believes that abandoning this model will make us champions of competitiveness is mistaken. In fact, the opposite is true."* One of his main objectives will therefore be to promote an effective balance between economic development, employment and social security.

The Commissioner-designate also intended to broaden the social dialogue: *"I rely upon the social partners, upon their experience based on the real world of labour and enterprise, upon their goodwill and ability to look for common solutions"*. He was also convinced that the open method of coordination was a vital tool for bolstering the efforts of the Member States. As for the legal instruments for implementing European social policies, Mr Spidla stated *"Personally, I think that all we need is a set of well-defined and well-respected rules - rather than a lot of rules which no one observes."*

'Keeping jobs in Europe'

Mr Spidla summed up the guiding principle behind all the measures he would be taking as a member of the new Commission with the words *"keeping jobs in Europe"*. *"We should avoid the mass transfer of enterprises out of Europe"*, said the Commissioner-designate with reference to the relocation and restructuring of companies. He also stressed the urgent need to forge closer links between employment strategy and the European Social Fund, amend the directive on working time and combat social exclusion, particularly among young people. On the question of the wide variety of social security systems in the Member States, Mr Spidla believed that the systems needed to be coordinated rather than standardised.

Ria OOMEN-RUIJTEN (EPP-ED, NL), Stephen HUGHES (PES, UK) and other Members asked the Commissioner-designate to outline the specific measures he intended to take to create more and better quality jobs and to promote social inclusion. In reply, Mr Spidla stressed the close link between increasing and enhancing the quality of employment on the one hand and education and life-long training, on the

other. It needed to be understood how the EQUAL programme, for example, could be used for this purpose.

To a question on the fight against poverty by Dimitrios PAPANIMOU (GUE/NGL, EL), the Commissioner-designate suggested *"that a debate be launched on the social minimum income"*. He also felt that a flexible social policy was needed with close scrutiny of its effects. Mr Papanimou also wanted to know whether the Commissioner-designate believed that the Bolkestein Directive could offer protection for workers. Mr Spidla replied that further consideration of the directive was needed in order to reach *"more acceptable and more mature conclusions."*

Jean LAMBERT (Greens/EFA, UK) stressed the importance of cooperation between Commission departments to enable *"the social sector to make a powerful impact"*. In reply, Mr Spidla pointed out that he had already held discussions with Günter Verheugen, who would be responsible for enterprise and industry in the new Commission, and with Joaquin Almunia, responsible for economic and monetary matters, to examine the scope for closer cooperation. Mr Spidla would also be chairing the Commission's working party on equal opportunities.

Early adoption of the directive on working time

Alejandro CERCAS (PES, ES) expressed disappointment at the Commission's proposal to amend the working time directive. He felt that the Commission had been unwilling to take on board the opinion of the majority of the European Parliament and that its proposal failed to comply with the European social model. He asked for Mr Spidla's help in ensuring that greater weight was given to Parliament's opinion during the first reading of the amended directive. Mr Spidla signalled his readiness to seek *"a compromise acceptable to a broader majority than at present"* and promised to take *"a flexible stance"* on the issue.

Elizabeth LYNNE (ALDE/ADLE, UK), referring to Article 22 of the directive, asked whether each employee of a company in which a trade union existed would be required to join in order to benefit from collective negotiations on the "opt-out". Mr Spidla said that he would check up on this point, as he did not yet have *"a very detailed legal overview of the text"*, although he did not believe that it needed to be interpreted so strictly. He also wanted to see the directive adopted during the Luxembourg presidency (in the first half of 2005), as *"the United Kingdom presidency will follow and I do not think it would be a good idea for this proposal to be delayed for six months"*.

Mr Spidla also promised Members that he would try to break the deadlock in the negotiations within the Council on the directive on the posting of workers. He was relying on a firm commitment from the Dutch presidency, which would submit its proposals on 4 November. He also acknowledged that, although the directive on European works committees had made good progress, it was far from perfect and could be improved.

In reply to persistent questioning from Mrs Lynne, the Commissioner-designate said that he supported the idea of a new directive to combat discrimination on the grounds of disability, in accordance with Article 13 of the Treaty.

Mr Spidla also addressed the question of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which he saw as *"sources of employment and innovation"*. Members welcomed his willingness to assess the effects of existing European laws on SMEs and to ease the legislative framework, which was over-restrictive.

With reference to the transitional periods required for the free movement of workers from the new Member States, Mr Spidla would *"do his utmost to ensure that the Member States found the will not to extend these periods"*. He personally was in favour of free movement as soon as possible.

Equal opportunities: a fundamental value

The second part of the hearing dealt with equal opportunities, which the Commissioner-designate said was one of the fundamental values of the Union. *"For me it is perfectly clear. If we do not ensure equal opportunities we will be the losers in an increasingly globalised world as we cannot afford to overlook the potential of half of humanity"*. He added *"a great deal of progress has already been made in this area in Europe but problems remain, such as trafficking in women and unequal pay"*.

Angelika NIEBLER (EPP-ED, DE) raised the issue of Turkey, one week before the Commission publishes its opinion on the opening of EU membership negotiations with this country. *"In eastern Turkey, one out of two women marries against her will and the level of illiteracy among women is high despite compulsory schooling. Would this affect your position for or against Turkish membership?"*, she asked. In reply Mr Spidla argued that significant progress had already been made in Turkey on this front but he added *"equal opportunities must be one of our criteria for assessment"*.

Ms Niebler was not satisfied with this reply and persisted, asking *"Have the Copenhagen criteria been met or not?"* Mr Spidla answered *"Everyone must of course judge according to their own conscience but if we are talking about evaluating Turkey you should address your question to Commissioner Verheugen"*. Mr Spidla would not express a personal view and said *"Until now I have not looked into the question of women and equal opportunities in Turkey"*.

However, the prospective Commissioner was willing to go further on the need to set up a European Gender Institute. The aim of such a body would be to collate, analyse and publish information on sex discrimination. An institute of this kind was necessary, in Mr Spidla's view, because *"it is difficult for us to evaluate the consequences of our policies aimed at promoting equality. I would like this institute to be set up in one of the new Member States and it must be given an adequate budget and staff"*.

The question of designating 2006 as European Year against Violence was raised by Marie CARLSHAMRE (ALDE, SE), who proposed that it be made a year for preventing violence by men against women. Mr Spidla agreed with the idea but not the definition. *"It would be better to use the term 'against domestic violence' because, even if cases of violence against men are very rare, they do happen. There is not enough discussion of domestic violence and it is time to make society more aware, so that it condemns this form of violence"*. Criminal penalties against such acts were a matter for national law but the Commission could analyse the situation country-by-country and encourage the spread of best practice.

Lastly, a topic which seemed to affect the Commissioner-designate particularly was human trafficking. *"Trafficking in human beings is a scandal and we must speak out about it. These people are victims who usually do not have the option of choosing another fate"*, he emphasised. To combat the problem, he suggested better coordination of police and judicial work at European level. His display of determination on this score brought warm congratulations from Nicole FONTAINE (EPP-ED, FR).

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Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

In the chair: Ottaviano Del Turco (PES, IT)

Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities

In the chair: Anna Záborská (EPP-ED, SK)

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