

## Hearing of Markos Kyprianou (health and consumer protection)

It was as *"a parliamentarian speaking to parliamentarians"* that the Commissioner-designate from Cyprus, Markos Kyprianou, addressed MEPs this Friday morning. In his opening speech, he highlighted his twelve-year experience as a national MP, claiming this was *"the best basis for exercising executive powers"*, especially at supranational level. He listed the principles that would guide him in his work if Parliament approves his nomination: absolute independence from any national, local, economic, partisan or political influence which might seek to impinge on EU policy; readiness to engage in complete, sincere and open cooperation with the European Parliament; dialogue with the public; and strict compliance with rules of sound administration, particularly as regards human and financial resources.

Mr Kyprianou then outlined his priorities for public health, food safety and consumer protection over the coming five years. First, he wants to make the European public - whether buyers of goods or services, food consumers or users of health services - to feel it can *"have confidence in the internal market"*. For this purpose he will focus on achieving *"practical results"* rather than attaining an *"ideal model"* or on *"the fruitless dialogue about full versus partial harmonisation"*. He also committed himself to working towards a *"genuine entry into force of the Community acquis in the Member States"*. Lastly he said he was ready, as a politician, to confront the dilemmas inherent in his portfolio: the tension between open, competitive markets on the one hand and strict regulation and controls on the other; the level of perception of health risks as *"excessive or logical"*, the balance to be struck when assessing the social benefits and the economic repercussions of any decisions taken.

The Commissioner-designate believed it would be *"ethically"* inappropriate to present a detailed action programme before the new Commission takes office. However, he told MEPs that his chief concerns in the field of health and food safety were: combating obesity, smoking and alcohol abuse, particularly by young people; the introduction of best practice as well as better cooperation between national health services; protection of patients' rights, including the right to information; high standards in the food chain, not only through legislation but also through better inspections in the Member States and systematic monitoring, including for imported food.

Turning to consumer protection, he said this was *"a special issue in the context of the last enlargement"* as well as one of the priorities of the Lisbon strategy. *"Consumers must have confidence in the European market"* and feel sure their rights are respected. One of Mr Kyprianou's aims will be to improve procedures and structures, particularly in the new Member States.

Mr Kyprianou's answers which were mainly cautious and diplomatic and occasionally evasive, nevertheless demonstrated his sound understanding of the issues. On several occasions, particularly on the subject of food safety controls, patient mobility and health services, he made it quite clear that he would gladly see the EU's powers expanded but said that for the present it was necessary to act as best he could within the existing legal framework.

## Patient mobility and access to healthcare

Cristina GUTIÉRREZ-CORTINES (EPP-ED, ES) referred to one Mr Kyprianou's answers on the European Health Charter. She said these provisions were not enough, given the major disparities between Member States as regards quality, prices and accessibility of care. The green paper analysing the situation and proposing solutions would be welcome, she said. Mr Kyprianou acknowledged that *"the EU has not made much progress on this front"* but he also pointed out that healthcare came under the authority of the Member States. Nevertheless, the idea of a green paper might be welcomed by the Member States. He promised to note this matter. Irena BELOHORSKÁ (NA, SK) said *"this problem must be resolved as quickly as possible"* since mobility of patients and health professionals was increasing. *"I see no solution for the moment"* - said Mr Kyprianou, pointing once again to the limited powers enjoyed by the EU. At best, one might encourage coordination between the Member States.

*"It is a good thing you are speaking as a politician because I am going to ask you a political question"* said Dorette CORBEY (PES, NL), who argued that access to healthcare and indeed a healthy life at all (including housing and good food) was still extremely unequal between *"the best off and the least well off"*. The Commissioner-designate stressed that differences also existed between the different countries depending on their prosperity levels. In his view, action by the Commission should focus on product safety: *"the least expensive products must not be the least safe or the least healthy"*, were his words.

## Obesity, smoking and alcohol abuse

Mr Kyprianou saw combating obesity, smoking and alcohol abuse as key policy priorities. Dealing with them was essential to give people better, healthier lives and this went hand in hand with efforts to prolong people's lives, as called for by Françoise GROSSETÊTE (EPP-ED, FR). In reply to a question by Cristina GUTIÉRREZ-CORTINES (EPP-ED, ES), Mr Kyprianou acknowledged the benefits of the Mediterranean diet but, he joked, *"I have been in Brussels too long to serve as an example of these benefits myself."*

Adamos ADAMOU (GUE/NGL, CY) welcomed the Commissioner-designate's determination to combat smoking but expressed reservations as to the Commission's ability to face up to the powerful tobacco industry. *"As Minister of Finance, I had to face up to the banks, an equally powerful sector, and I did not hesitate and I was successful. I will also take on the tobacco giants"*, promised Mr Kyprianou. He added *"there is no scourge worse than tobacco"* and said any efforts to encourage tobacco consumption must be thwarted. He mentioned the film industry, saying *"if they absolutely have to show smokers, then at least let young people not see it"* - an allusion to TV broadcasting hours. He also distinguished between alcohol and tobacco consumption in a reply to Mojca DRČAR MURKO (ALDE, SI), saying that smoking even one cigarette was harmful to health, whereas in the case of alcohol only abuse of the substance had serious consequences. He emphasised that measures should focus on the consumption of cigarettes and alcohol by minors.

## **REACH directive**

In reply to questions about chemical products in the context of the REACH legislative package, which were asked by Guido SACCONI (PES, IT) and Hiltrud BREYER (Greens/EFA, DE), Mr Kyprianou referred MEPs to his written answers to the questionnaire sent in prior to the hearing. He stressed that he had full confidence in this overhaul of current legislation and was investing a great deal of hope in it. Health was the priority here. Carl SCHLYTER (Greens/EFA, SE) wanted to know how Mr Kyprianou planned to defend this priority within the Commission, when it was the responsibility of another Commissioner and the stakes for the internal market and industry were very high. *"One of the notable features of the EU is precisely the division of responsibilities, not only in Parliament but also in the Commission"* retorted the Commissioner-designate. He believed there would be a problem if the dossier were badly coordinated but *"in the Barroso Commission that will not happen"*. Mr Kyprianou also promised to get to know better the dossiers relating to dangerous substances, particularly residual pesticides, a topic raised by Karl-Heinz FLORENZ (EPP-ED, DE).

## **Consumer information**

A series of questions was asked about access to information for patients and consumers. Hiltrud BREYER (Greens/EFA, DE) urged Mr Kyprianou to take the initiative and introduce a draft *"directive on consumer information"*. She also quizzed him about his plans for taking action against misleading advertising, especially when aimed at children, and better labelling for food products, above all to give information on food products containing GMOs. Dan JØRGENSEN (PES, DK) wanted to know what the nominee Commissioner expected to do about nutritional and health claims, including vitamin additives. To improve information Mr Kyprianou will count a great deal on cooperation with non-governmental organisations. As for the enrichment of food products with vitamins, he did not think this was *"bad in itself"*. The problem, he said, was where the mention of a good substance on the packaging diverted attention from the poor quality of the product itself.

## **Food safety**

Frédérique RIES (ALDE, BE) urged the Commissioner-designate to ensure that food safety issues were anticipated more in future rather than simply being reacted to. The question of prevention came up a number of times in a discussion on the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), which is moving to Parma, and the EU Food and Veterinary Office in Dublin. Horst SCHNELLHARDT (EPP-ED, DE) and Dagmar ROTH-BEHRENDT (PES, DE) voiced reservations about the ability of the two institutions to cooperate. They pointed out that Parliament had not supported the choice of Parma as EFSA's headquarters *"Let me look carefully at how they operate, let me have a little time"*, answered Mr Kyprianou and he stressed the differing, albeit complementary, roles of the two bodies. The question of the effectiveness of inspections was raised by Richard SEEBER (EPP-ED, AT). The nominee Commissioner replied that this again was a matter for national governments and that the Commission's role was to focus on good programming and redefining priorities after enlargement.

## Consumer protection and the internal market

The second part of Mr Kyprianou's hearing dealt with consumer protection in the internal market. Consumer confidence requires *"accurate information on the dangers but also the possibilities of the internal market"*, the Commissioner-designate pointed out in his introduction. Joachim WUERMEILING (EPP-ED, DE), however, said that consumers' interests sometimes suffered when services were harmonised. The well-known example of the directive on consumer credit, for which stricter protection measures are being advocated by Parliament, was cited by a number of MEPs. Mr Kyprianou sought to defuse this issue, saying *"although I must try to ensure the fullest harmonisation, I will see to it that consumer protection is always taken into account. However, to complete the internal market we must align national systems and harmonise them. Both consumers and business must benefit from this"*.

Mr Kyprianou was even more explicit in his reply to Evelyn GEBHARDT (PES, DE) to whom he said *"harmonised products and services must under no circumstances pose a danger to the consumer, whether financially, physically or in terms of health"*. Expressing a view which he said *"will no doubt offend the Council"* Mr Kyprianou said he favoured a harmonisation of standards based on *"the most radical rules in force in a Member State"*. This was his reply to Margrete AUKEN (Greens/EFA, DK) who was concerned that some very strict countries might suffer if the EU allowed less stringent standards. *"But we must be realistic"*, argued Mr Kyprianou, *"harmonisation can only be the result of a compromise between Member States."*

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Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety

Chair: Karl-Heinz FLORENZ (EPP-ED, DE)

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