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John Dalli, European Commissioner-designated, responsible for health gave a solid performance in front of MEP's

Mr. John Dalli, designated by the heads of State and Government for the position of European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, gave a solid and patient-oriented performance two days ago (14/01/10) when he appeared in front of the European Parliament in order to secure its approval of nomination.

"The underlying theme of my work will be Patients First, Consumers First", John Dalli, told MEPs during his three-hour hearing. He said his aim was that *"European Citizens live a longer and healthier life"* and that he wanted *"well-informed consumers who can take educated decisions on the goods and services they consume"*.

During the hearing in question, MEPs from the European Parliament's Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI); on Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO) and on Agriculture (AGRI), questioned Mr Dalli on issues such as patient rights, the pharmaceutical package, legislation on food derived from cloned animals, genetically modified organisms, the proposal on food information for consumers, protection of children and the question of collective redress.

Patients rights to be put first in the pharma package

Another thick dossier that attracted MEPs' interest was the so-called 'pharma package', composed of five Directives including information on prescribed medicines and the fight against falsified drugs. The Commissioner-designate called for the proposal to be unbundled, allowing for quick progress on the issues where consensus can easily be built and leaving the most divisive issues to be tackled separately.

This position did not engender much enthusiasm among MEPs, who felt it could be a way to water-down the most substantial parts of the package and urged the Commissioner to tread carefully in this area.



Maltese Commissioner-designate John Dalli (EPP)

Asked by Peter Liese (EPP, DE), whether he intended to bring changes or additions to the proposed Pharma package, Mr. Dalli said he intended to move forward quickly with the two non-controversial parts of the package (pharmacovigilance and falsified medical products) but that the third part, on information to patients, would have to be reassessed to "*bring more patient perspective in the proposal*".

Replying to a question by Marina Yannakoudakis (ECR, UK), on how to strike a balance between the needs of the patients and the industry, **he said that he wanted to put patients first, but that this did "not exclude a strong commitment that the pharma industry remains competitive"**.

Mr. Dalli agreed with Glenis Willmott (S&D, UK), that the health perspective needs to **be paramount but added that it would be possible eventually to achieve a "win-win situation"**. In order to put forward the patient's perspective the Commissioner-designated affirmed that he would rely on **MEPs and patients' organisations, which "should be properly supported"**. There was a need for new ideas for funding them, he added in a reply to Peter Liese.

Antonyia Parvanova (ALDE, BG), raised the issues of counterfeit medicines and on-line trade in medicines and consultations. On the first point, Mr Dalli said that counterfeits are "*not only a danger to consumers but also to innovation*". On the second, he declared "*I will work hard to make sure that the same controls which apply to the off-line world also apply to the on-line one*".

Patient mobility directive to be moved forward

One area into which he promised to pour his energies was patient mobility. Mr. Dalli agreed with Radvilė Morkunaitė-Mikulėninė (EPP, LI) that the issue of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare needs to move forward. He confirmed that he would focus his efforts on ensuring that an understanding is reached with regards to the Directive proposal on the 'application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare'. Mr. Dalli welcomed the renewed commitment by the Spanish EU Presidency to brokering an agreement in the Council on this issue. He also stated that he has already contacted the Spanish Health Minister to discuss possible ways forward.

He further obtained sympathy and applause when, asked if he was going to stand up to Member States' particular interests (this question surely refers to the reject of Directive proposal on patients' rights by a number of Members-States at the Council), he replied by saying that he was never afraid to introduce painful but much-needed reforms in his country, such as enforcement of taxation or liberalisation. "*Making enemies at times comes with the job,*" he said.

Information is the key to empowering consumers - the earlier the better

Mr Dalli would be tough on issues like alcohol, smoking and obesity, he said in reply to a question by Linda Mc Avon (S&D, UK), about his legacy after 5 years. The key would be informing citizens, not imposing legislation on them. He added that "*the earlier we get at children, the better it is*" and that "*proper budgets are needed*".

Asked by Evelyne Genhardt, former rapporteur of the controversial "Bolkestein"-Services Directive, whether he was going to be consistent in protecting consumers at the level of the sector service too, he declared that if confirmed he would be "*the guardian of consumers' interests in the college of commissioners*".

The Commissioner-designated gathered extra points when he stated that on all occasions he would consult and engage constructively with the Parliament: "*I'd rather spend time earlier in the legislative process talking about policies with you than spend time fighting on policies with you at a later stage.*"

Jo Leinen (Germany – S&D), Chairman of the European Parliament’s ENVI Committee praised Mr. Dalli’s convincing hearing: "I think he gave a good performance. He showed competence and commitment to this vast portfolio. He showed he is a very experienced politician as he didn't answer what he didn't want to answer, or couldn't answer, but he had a good mixture of quite straight answers. I think many members were satisfied while others will forgive him for now. Despite having very controversial topics to speak about, like cloning, patients' rights, nanotechnology and GMOs, his political experience came through as he avoided controversy. I think he presented himself in a very credible way. He talked the way we wanted him to, probably intentionally, but we now have it on record and he will be with us for five years. We will definitely remind him on the promises he made today".

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