

National

Commissioners-designate hearings

Dalli nervous, but prepared

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Brussels

John Dalli, Malta's European commissioner-designate, spent the day yesterday locked up in a small room in his temporary office in Brussels reviewing dozens of briefs before facing a three-hour grilling by MEPs today.

The briefs were prepared by Mr Dalli's close collaborators and he made sure to assimilate in detail all the intricacies of the dossier assigned to him by European Commission president José Manuel Barroso.

"I'm feeling like I'm sitting for an important exam in which I need to excel," Mr Dalli admitted.

"This is a very important exercise, which I am giving all my attention to. It is a serious examination performed by serious people and I am doing my utmost to

make sure I give a good performance in front of the European Parliament."

Admitting he was feeling a bit nervous less than 24 hours before his hearing, Mr Dalli said he was convinced he was "fully prepared".

"I've prepared very thoroughly for this day. I don't expect I will be in a position to give a magical solution to all the issues included in the EU's health and consumer policy portfolio but I feel very confident I can answer all the questions put to me by MEPs," he added.

If he sails through, Mr Dalli, who was nominated by the government in December for the prestigious post of European commissioner, will succeed Commissioner Joe Borg at the Berlymont, the Commission's headquarters in Brussels.

Before his nomination, Dr Borg had to face two hearings, one as temporary commissioner for

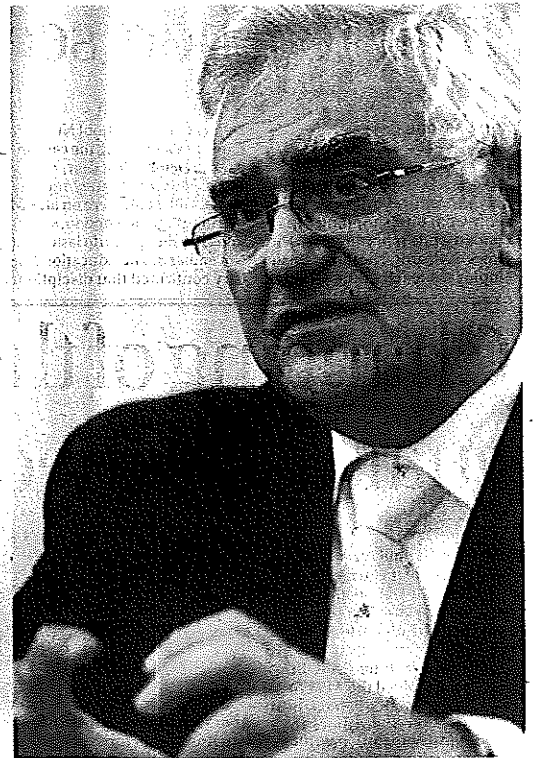
development and the other as commissioner for fisheries and maritime affairs.

He had performed badly in the first hearing and was overwhelmed with the questions put by MEPs. However, he left a good impression in the second hearing, proving he had learnt the lesson.

Sources close to the major political groups in the European Parliament said Mr Dalli was considered well prepared and his hearing was not expected to be a bumpy one.

MEPs from the EPP, the Socialist and the Liberal groups expressed confidence Mr Dalli would sail through without any hitches.

However, Mr Dalli is not letting any of these positive comments influence him: "I am not taking this lightly and will keep preparing myself to the best of my abilities until the last minute."



John Dalli: "I've prepared very thoroughly for this day." Photo: Jason Borg

Some financial declarations 'unconvincing'

MEPs will be pressing for more transparency during the ongoing hearings of European Commissioners-designate because they find some of their financial disclosures unconvincing.

Andrew Duff, the European Parliament's chief rapporteur on the hearings, expressed surprise about some of the declarations made by the 27 would-be commissioners in line with their code of conduct.

"I have to say some of them appear to be quite thin. It is extraordinary how so many of the new commissioners appear to be very poor and to seldom have

done anything in their careers," he said, without mentioning names.

Mr Duff said the financial probity of the commissioners-designate would be one of the issues under the spotlight of MEPs.

He said the EP would seek to ensure the nominees were "financially clean", adding that "a taint of corruption is bound to cause us to ask the Commission president to think twice" about the nominations.

"It is clear the commissioners-designate have been getting in-depth briefings over the Christmas period and are fired up to be as credible as they can."

Prior to the hearings, which started on Monday, the commissioners-designate presented a financial declaration listing all their activities during the past years, including their financial and real estate assets.

Malta's Commissioner-designate John Dalli, who faces the EP's three-hour grilling today, said he severed all business connections in Malta and in Libya, which included various directorships.

While saying he had no money invested in stocks and shares, Mr Dalli declared the possession of four properties, including his residence in Portomaso and a house in Tripoli. Mr Dalli, who has been in Brussels

all this week preparing for his hearing, will be facing MEPs from the environment, internal market and agriculture committees that are all related to the health and consumer affairs portfolio assigned to him by Commission president José Manuel Barroso.

Writing in the European Pharmaceutical Industry's magazine, PharmaExec, Julian Upton, the magazine's Brussels correspondent said Mr Dalli had already indicated a strong pro-industry line in his first official utterances.

He wrote: "As a member of the centre-right European People's Party, he can expect support from

the centre-right majority in the Parliament. But there was wide parliamentary backing for putting pharmaceuticals into the health commissioner's portfolio and the intention was not to make life easier for drug firms. Nor do patient groups and health activists that have long lobbied for this change expect to see the switch subverted by the new man in charge.

"If Dalli is perceived by too many anti-industry forces as a pro-industry Trojan horse at the very heart of EU health policy, he may not win the endorsement he needs from Parliament," the magazine warned.



European International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response Commissioner-designate Rumiana Jeleva of Bulgaria being grilled by the European Parliament Development Committee in Brussels on Tuesday. Photo: Yves Herman/Reuters

Barroso already facing the music

European Commission president José Manuel Barroso was under pressure yesterday over the future of his second EU Executive as two of his commissioners-designate failed to strike the right note with MEPs.

Although the European Parliament has not pronounced itself officially on the future of Bulgarian Rumiana Jeleva and Lithuanian Algirdas Semeta, it is doubtful whether it will be in a position to approve the whole Commission.

"It is going to be very difficult not to replace a least one of the two," a Parliament official said after a dismal performance by the two nominees in front of separate Parliament committees.

Ms Jeleva, a former MEP and now Bulgaria's Foreign Minister, is the most likely to go as she failed to convince MEPs her financial declaration did not conceal business connections she and her husband are allegedly involved in.

Facing a hostile hearing in front of the Development Committee, Ms

Jeleva's hearing almost broke down as allegations over her business contacts were fired, particularly from rival Bulgarian MEPs.

Visibly distracted, Ms Jeleva failed to reply to various questions regarding possible conflicts of interest and instead lambasted MEPs for having an agenda against her.

Following the hearing, Ms Jeleva's candidacy for the development and humanitarian aid portfolio did not get the green light from MEPs who asked for Mr Barroso's position in view of allegations about her false financial declaration.

Pressed for comments, a Commission spokesman refused to pass any judgment on the hearing saying only it was still "an ongoing process".

However, pressure is mounting on Mr Barroso to ask the Bulgarian government to replace Ms Jeleva.

Lithuania's commissioner-designate for the tax and anti-fraud portfolio, Mr Semeta, is also in trouble as he failed to impress MEPs with his

preparation for his new role. His replies on his vision to renew the EU's anti-fraud rules were considered evasive.

"The overwhelming impression was disappointment, which leads us to question his suitability to be nominated for this important Commission portfolio," Socialist MEP Hannes Swoboda, the group's vice president in charge of the commissioners' hearings, said.

According to EU rules, MEPs cannot botch any of the individual commissioners-designate but pressure can be piled on Mr Barroso to change portfolios or ask member states for another nomination to get the green light on the appointment of the whole Commission.

The plenary vote is expected to be taken in Brussels on January 26. However, behind-the-scenes negotiations between parliamentary groups, member states and Mr Barroso will dominate the agenda until then.