



Committee on Foreign Affairs
The Chair

ACCES RESERVE

300274 13.01.2010

Ref.: D(2010)1190

Jerzy Buzek
President
European Parliament

Dear President,

At its meeting of 11 January, the Committee on Foreign Affairs held its hearing of the Vice President designate of the Commission / High Representative, Ms Catherine Ashton.

In her **introductory statement** and during the Q&A session, Ms Ashton made a number of important statements to which I would like to draw your attention.

On the fundamental question of her **relationship with the Parliament** she showed a genuine desire to work closely with Parliament in elaborating a truly common EU foreign policy and bringing coherence in the EU's external action. This was in recognition of the fact that MEPs are "democratically elected politicians" whereas she is not. On the issue of **democratic accountability**, Ms Ashton stated that she was accountable to Parliament as Vice President of the Commission "bringing the added value of her role as High Representative for EU Foreign Policy". By this she confirmed our view that we should consider her functions of VP/HR as one.

On the scope and structure of the **European External Action Service**, Ms Ashton favoured a *sui generis* service (i.e. not anchored administratively in either EU institutions) but clearly stated that **this option would be without prejudice to Parliament's prerogatives both in establishing the budget for the service, in scrutinizing it, and in giving discharge to it**. Ms Ashton also recognised the need for common training for the staff working in the service but did not go as far as calling for an EU diplomatic academy in the near term. In describing its composition, Ms Ashton recalled that the service

- would bring into a coherent whole all aspects of the EU engagement worldwide, *be they political, economic, and military*,
- would gather the best and the brightest from the Commission, Council and Member States' administrations,
- and might, in future, *have recourse also to staff outside the above three categories*.

.../...

Finally the VP designate/HR gave a commitment to have meetings with Parliament also in the *preparatory stage of the proposal* and to come to the Parliament before submitting a decision on the EEAS to the Council in April.

With regard to her **role in relation to the other external policies Commissioners**, Ms Ashton stated that she would provide, with Parliament's support, strategic political guidance and ensure coherence in the delivery of EU assistance. Her fellow Commissioners would be in charge, within this strategic framework, of the implementation of their respective policies, including the management of the relevant funds and programmes. In this respect Ms Ashton emphasised that the EEAS would also cover the EU neighbourhood and include staff dealing with developing countries.

On **other substantive issues** raised during the debate, however, Ms Ashton remained relatively vague. Her interventions were more focused on the elements and issues which would need to be considered when elaborating an EU position rather than on expressing her view. This was also the case of the Union's Common Security and Defence Policy and where Ms Ashton clearly needs to acquire greater expertise.

Similarly, on human rights issues Ms Ashton showed willingness to engage but needs to make a clearer commitment to enhancing the profile of human rights issues in EU foreign policy.

There is no denying, however, that in comparison with her first address to the committee, on 2 December, Ms Ashton has shown better grasp of the issues within her extremely wide and challenging portfolio.

In the light of the above considerations and acting on a mandate by the coordinators of the political groups of my committee I would like to submit the following recommendations:

The majority view in the committee is that the VP designate/HR demonstrated sufficient aptitude to assume the high office she was designated for and has the potential to develop the required expertise and leadership. It should be pointed out, however, that the Green/EFA Group and the EFD Group dissent from the majority and feel that the candidate is lacking in leadership and vision and did not show sufficient grasp of her portfolio.

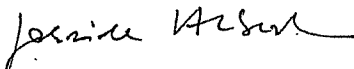
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The committee as a whole appreciates Ms Ashton's genuine will to work closely with the European Parliament and in this respect it would like to emphasise

- the VP/HR's intention to engage with Parliament in the definition of the strategic interests and objectives of the Union and to actively seek Parliament's views on matters of foreign policy;
- her availability to start immediately, in the preparatory phase of the proposal, a dialogue with Parliament on the future shape of the EEAS;
- her commitment that Parliament's budgetary prerogatives in the area of Common Foreign and Security Policy (including in establishing the budget of the EEAS, in scrutinizing it and in giving discharge to it) will be fully safeguarded.

Finally, the committee would like to draw your attention to Ms Ashton's reluctance to allow that **EUSRs and selected Heads of EU Delegation** be subject to a **parliamentary hearing** before their appointment. The committee regrets this and insists that Parliament be associated in the final steps of the appointment procedure, without prejudice to the prerogatives of the VP/HR, so as to give the necessary guarantees regarding the qualifications and merit of the staff appointed to such posts. However, Ms Ashton indicated that she was prepared to discuss this matter further with Parliament so as to ensure that appointments were based on merit and carried out through transparent procedures. I should therefore be grateful if this issue would be raised at the highest political level so as to find a formula acceptable to all sides.

Yours sincerely,



Gabriele Albertini