

'An honour, an opportunity and a challenge' from the Luxemburger Wort (18 July 1994)

Caption: On 18 July 1994, the daily newspaper Luxemburger Wort welcomes the appointment of Luxembourg Prime Minister Jacques Santer as President of the new European Commission and identifies the political challenges awaiting the new President.

Source: Luxemburger Wort. Für Wahrheit und Recht. 18.07.1994, n° 161; 147e année. Luxembourg: Imprimerie Saint-Paul. "Ehre, Chance und Herausforderung", p. 3.

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An honour, an opportunity and a challenge

To have been asked to head the ‘Executive’ of a Union comprising 350 million citizens, to have been called to what is virtually the highest office in Europe, is for Jacques Santer and for his country not only an unusually great honour and opportunity but also, and above all, an enormous challenge.

The task which the Luxembourger agreed on Friday to take on is made all the more difficult by the fact that his predecessor Jacques Delors, a man of considerable stature, has contributed decisively to taking Europe a substantial way further down the road. For Santer, therefore, his will not be an easy act to follow.

The surveillance to which the job is subject matches its importance. No-one in the EU stands so starkly in the limelight as the Commission President. The citizens, politicians, business leaders and not least of all the media of the twelve Member States, and indeed of the entire world, follow every step, every act and every utterance of the man charged with the European Union’s highest office.

It is now up to Jacques Santer to show that a politician’s stature is not necessarily determined by the size of a country, as was suggested in superficial commentary by foreign journalists even before the appointment was made.

What Luxembourgers are capable of achieving in the spirit and service of Europe is something which can be traced far back into European history. These achievements have since time untold always seemed particularly striking in relation to the dimensions of our land and the size of its population — a point which all but a few foreign journalists are unlikely to know, bearing in mind, as is known from experience, how little interest they have in small countries and peoples. This is why it is useful to point out that Luxembourg, by virtue of its history, its ability to foster political and cultural integration, its respect for treaty obligations, its citizens’ pro-European stance, its cosmopolitanism, openness and multilingualism, is arguably of all the countries of Europe the one most loyal to, and best equipped for, the European adventure.

Jacques Santer must now prove that, as a Luxembourger, he measures up to the high demands of his new appointment. He brings to the job all that Luxembourg has acquired by way of European background, and that in itself is no mean input. To which can be added his considerable personal experience in politics in general and European politics in particular, some very precise ideas about Europe and, last but not least, such personal qualities as skill in negotiation, conciliatory gifts and the ability to get things done.

But anyone who believes that Luxembourg’s relatively modest weight in relation to the nations of Europe necessarily implies a Commission President capable of being manipulated may well be barking up the wrong tree where Santer is concerned. The latter has never made any secret of his strong European convictions and ideas. And in the event of him being asked to betray his convictions, it is fair to suppose, as far as his personal commitment is concerned, that he would opt for a make-or-break stance.

It cannot be ruled out, all the same, that in Europe’s great capitals some credence may have been given to the idea that a compromise candidate had been found in the shape of Santer, one who could easily be manipulated. Why otherwise would London have gone along with a Santer candidacy when it had rejected that of Dehaene so resolutely? When it comes down to it, there is absolutely no air between Santer’s conception of the future of Europe and that of the Belgian Prime Minister. But London may have got things wrong on this occasion just as it did with Santer’s predecessor. At that time Margaret Thatcher vetoed Claude Cheysson’s candidacy — as John Major has done with Jean-Luc Dehaene — with the result that Jacques Delors, who as French Finance Minister was not exactly Europe’s best-known personality, finally became Commission President as the candidate of ‘second choice’, and was soon showing the British where they had gone wrong.

In Paris and Bonn too there may have been something of a belief that a Commission President from a country carrying relatively little weight would be least likely to detract from the manifest Franco-German predominance in Europe.

Be that as it may, there is precious little room in the Commission President’s job for the sort of middle-of-

the-road performer that many had perhaps hoped for and expected. Either the President is defeated by the tough demands on him or he grows with them. References to pale, mediocre candidates of the past are misplaced, for the role and standing of the Commission President changed fundamentally in the Delors era, acquiring considerable prominence both within Europe and beyond. Since Delors, Commission President is an office for which mediocrity is no longer an option.

What is needed on the other hand is some genuinely European insight. This ought to work to the advantage of the representative of a small country which has always had to negotiate a path between the major political blocks in Europe, whether in the Franco-German power game or in the field of tension separating UK-insular and continental Europe.

As long as the original European conception of democracy and fairness among partners ensures he is able to do so, Jacques Santer has every prospect of becoming a President whose stature will be measured not by the modest dimensions of a country but rather by the magnitude of the tasks with which the Commission must deal.

That he should be given the chance to do so is something in Europe we have a right to expect — even on the part of the brasher sections of the media.

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