

'An unfair assessment' from Die Zeit

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‘An unfair assessment’

EU Commissioner Karel Van Miert on ethics, abuses — and Mrs Cresson.

Wolfgang Proissl; Christian Wernicke

DIE ZEIT: The experts’ report on the conduct of the European Commission says: ‘It is becoming difficult to find anyone who feels even remotely responsible.’ Do you feel that you are an irresponsible Commissioner?

KAREL VAN MIERT: That assessment is entirely unacceptable. Look at my work, talk to my officials. Anyone can see for themselves the quality of the work that we do here every day and how aware we are of our responsibility.

ZEIT: So why is the Commission resigning?

VAN MIERT: When the experts began their investigation, the Commission gave an undertaking that it would draw the necessary conclusions from their report.

ZEIT: Do you think that the conclusions that have been drawn are excessive, given the criticisms set out in the report?

VAN MIERT: The investigations into individual Commissioners showed that there had been occasional irregularities. But contrary to what has repeatedly been claimed in the last few months, the investigation also showed that there was not one single instance of fraud or personal gain. My colleague Manuel Marin, for example, whose name has been dragged through the mud in recent months, can come out of this investigation with his head held high, apart from a few minor administrative errors.

ZEIT: Yet the experts say that the Commissioners showed no sense of responsibility.

VAN MIERT: This blanket assessment is simply unfair. The report does not even mention the fact that we have launched administrative reforms which even independent observers say will make the Commission more transparent and efficient. And, just last Sunday, we decided to expand the anti-fraud unit and make it completely independent. In my own field — competition, mergers and aid for businesses — I myself have issued compulsory ground rules for my staff, banning them from share-dealing, for example.

ZEIT: Why are you so sure that your particular department is functioning properly?

VAN MIERT: Of course mistakes are made in every big administration, including this one. But the end-product is good. It annoys me that the experts wrote their report without ever talking to me or my staff. On what have the experts actually based their assessment of us?

ZEIT: Why have you yourself agreed to step down?

VAN MIERT: It is all to do with the principle of collective responsibility that applies among the Commissioners. The principle was introduced to make sure that individual Commissioners could not be put under pressure by special interest groups. It was supposed to ensure that we could work independently and for the common good. By and large, it has worked very well, but now the principle of collective responsibility has proved our undoing.

ZEIT: Because the French Commissioner, Edith Cresson, whom the experts showed to be guilty of nepotism and irregularities, insisted on joint liability?

VAN MIERT: It is actually not possible to dismiss one single Commissioner, and, as we can clearly see now, this can be a serious weakness. To prevent such situations in future, we need a strict code of conduct by which all Commissioners have to abide. Anyone breaching the code would be thrown out by the Commission

President.

ZEIT: Yet you, too, might be accused of certain failings. Joint responsibility surely also means that you should have stopped your colleagues from committing abuses.

VAN MIERT: That's putting the cart before the horse. First the experts had to establish whether such abuses had actually been committed.

ZEIT: Was it politically astute for the Commission President, Jacques Santer, to say that the Commission would abide by the findings of the report before it even knew what it said?

VAN MIERT: The experts were originally supposed to investigate each individual case separately, and we would naturally have had to draw the necessary conclusions from its findings in each instance. Nobody suspected that the experts would turn the general conclusions of their report into a sweeping criticism of the Commission as a whole. Once they chose to depict us all as irresponsible people, we had no choice but to resign.

ZEIT: How did resignation *en bloc* come to be the only option?

VAN MIERT: The abuses, which nobody is denying occurred, were the trigger. In addition, the European Parliament does not yet have the powers of a proper parliament such as you would find in the Member States. It therefore tries to pit its strength against us, the EU executive body, and does not always act very responsibly. This is quite normal and is part of the development of the European institutions, which are all still in their infancy. But in this particular case, a momentum developed that was so destructive that, in the end, there was no stopping it.

ZEIT: Have the general findings prevented talk about the real problem, dealing with the black sheep, Mrs Cresson?

VAN MIERT: Of course. The vast majority of my colleagues were convinced that the focus should have been on Mrs Cresson instead of everyone's resignation. This was clear from the informal contacts that we Commissioners had with each other before the report was published. Had it not been for the report's findings, most Commissioners would definitely have pressed for Mrs Cresson to resign.

ZEIT: Even after your resignation, you will still be carrying on with day-to-day business. Can you still sit at the same table as Mrs Cresson, who is largely to blame for the Commission's demise?

VAN MIERT: There is no change as far as I am concerned. In accordance with my mandate, I shall sit down with her at the Commission table — but nowhere else.

ZEIT: Is Mr Santer's weak leadership partly to blame for the crisis?

VAN MIERT: The current situation is unprecedented. It is easy to say, with hindsight, that Mr Santer should have done this or that. It is just cheap criticism.

ZEIT: Was it not actually the case that people wanted Mr Santer to be weak? Surely that was why the governments — including Germany and France — chose him as a candidate in 1995.

VAN MIERT: After Jacques Delors, who was a very imposing Commission President, none of the governments wanted another such strong President. But the image of Mr Santer as a very weak man is wrong. Governments that thought that they only had to telephone him to get their own way soon learnt better. Mr Santer is a man of integrity who has always shielded the Commission from pressure from the Member States.

ZEIT: Should Federal Chancellor Schröder, currently President-in-Office of the Council, have done more to

support the Commission?

VAN MIERT: At the moment, all the EU institutions are shaky, the whole situation is precarious. This is obviously the case here in the Commission, but we have been weak for months. And there is even a crisis looming at the European Parliament, in the large Socialist and Christian-Democratic groups. Both are divided, there is no leadership, and it is currently almost impossible to reach any binding agreements or compromises.

ZEIT: The German Presidency hardly seems to be providing much stability.

VAN MIERT: This is not just a problem for Germany; other countries have found the same in the past. The Member States are increasingly just pursuing their own agendas and thinking about their own interests. Every man for himself — and this also applies to the European Council and the Heads of Government. There is no European spirit. Nobody is thinking about protecting and promoting the common interests of all Europeans any more. At the end of the day, everyone would save themselves first.

ZEIT: It sounds as if you would like to go back to the era of the great Europeans like Mitterrand, González or Kohl.

VAN MIERT: There's nothing new about that ...

ZEIT: ... In 1997, Kohl blocked a number of improvements to the EU Treaty in Amsterdam.

VAN MIERT: That's true, unfortunately. And, as long as that continues, the EU will remain fragile. I am very worried about it, I must admit. In the end, Europe has only ever worked in practice when, first of all, the Commission has worked, and, secondly, when the Heads of Government have been ambitious and courageous enough to push on towards integration at European summits. Also, the key figures, like Kohl and Mitterrand in earlier times, have to have a good understanding and trust each other. Then, and only then, does it all work.

ZEIT: And now?

VAN MIERT: At the moment, it's not working; at the moment, there is none of that. And if each government carries on thinking only of its national interests, little — too little — will change.

ZEIT: What does this mean for the Summit in Berlin next week, when the EU is going to have to agree on important reforms in its Agenda 2000?

VAN MIERT: It is now largely in the hands of the German Presidency. The Commission will do what it can — we are all still in office.

ZEIT: Many MEPs say that this crisis will make Europe more democratic.