

'Moment of truth for Prodi' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (3 May 1999)

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Moment of truth for Prodi

by **Andreas Oldag, Brussels**

Romano Prodi, the Commission President designate, will this week come in for his first real trial of strength. The former Italian Premier has to come through a vote in the European Parliament in Strasbourg. The new head of the EU Executive will have to explain what it is he intends to do better than Jacques Santer, his predecessor who failed so miserably.

Under the Amsterdam amendments to the EU Treaty, which come into force on 1 May, not only the Commission President but also the European Parliament have an opportunity to redress the continuing democratic deficit in the European Union. The 626 MEPs will for the first time be asked to elect the head of the Brussels Executive in a separate voting procedure. At the same time the new Commission President has the right to take part in the selection of his team of Commissioners. That rather puts an end to the hush-hushery of the past, when the Member States designated the 20 EU Commissioners behind closed doors. The EU is now in for a long haul as it seeks to clear out the residue of 40 years of bureaucratic control. Whether the opportunity offered by the Amsterdam Treaty is in fact grasped remains to be seen.

Prodi is taking over the EU reins in a critical period. The resignation of the Santer Commission marked a turning point for the Community in its institutional configuration. For the force behind the departure of the EU leadership was not so much the harsh judgment formulated by the Five Wise Men as the tenacious probing by the European Parliament. With protective fire from the European Court of Auditors, the MEPs uncovered more and more cases of nepotism, mismanagement and downright sloppiness. Santer's fatal error was to underestimate the dogged determination of a Parliament set on breaking free of the Commission and all-powerful Council of Ministers.

The challenge that lies ahead for Prodi is tough indeed. It will not be enough to celebrate a new start symbolically through the election of new Commissioners. As guardian of European law, it is incumbent on the Commission to bring structural changes to the EU bureaucracy. Admittedly most of the 17 000 or so EU officials are hard-working and conscientious. But the privileges enjoyed by this European caste — above-average pay and generous social insurance — have not been enough to prevent serious failings in parts of the administrative machine. There has been a sharp increase in nepotism. Meanwhile, young, motivated applicants now stand virtually no chance of getting a job with the EU via the normal recruitment process. Above all, there is a lack of effective financial control. The EU budget amounts in total to some 170 billion Marks. Of this, almost 90 % goes on subsidies, in the form of the agricultural policy or again the programme of support for the Community's economically weaker regions, which swallows up billions every year. And while it is true that the Member States are directly accountable for the bulk of these funds, this does not exonerate the Commission from its own serious shortcomings.

To take an example: ambitious programmes to support the Balkan states or the countries of the Mediterranean rim are being developed without the necessary staff in Brussels to oversee the process. And with the end of the Kosovo conflict, this particular dilemma is set to become more acute still. It is already clear that the EU will need for many years to come to provide generous reconstruction aid to countries severely damaged by the war. The Commission will act as the central distribution point. Yet without a massive extension of its financial control capability, the Commission has no chance of meeting the demands made of it.

Whether Prodi succeeds will depend on the extent to which he is able to put together a high-powered management team. The new Commission is to begin work at the latest after the summer break. In choosing his team of commissioners, the Italian professor of economics, who took his country into the monetary union in the face of considerable internal resistance, must above all prevail against the pressing demands of individual Member States.

Sadly however, the governments are once again playing the usual game of Euro-politics, with national agendas and party-political advantage taking precedence over all else. France has publicly set its sights on

the Competitiveness Commission. With the departure of the successful Belgian Commissioner, Karel Van Miert, Paris is counting on a relaxation of Brussels control over company mergers and state aids. France's economic decision-makers never could see eye to eye with Van Miert. Meanwhile the Federal Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, is shackled by the coalition agreement which guarantees the Greens a right of proposal as regards the choice of the second German EU Commissioner. The junior government partner is now piling the pressure on to impose their man or woman.

This leaves Prodi faced with a severe test of strength. For the President designate is insisting, with good reason, that the second commissioner should where possible come from a large opposition party. Only if it is politically balanced will the Commission gain in authority.