Procedures and practices regarding commissioner hearings, lessons to be taken from the 2014 process

2015/2040(INI) - 08/09/2015 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 517 votes to 168 with 23 abstentions a resolution on procedures and practices regarding Commissioner hearings, lessons to be taken from the 2014 process.

Hearings of Commissioners-designate, first used in 1994, are now a well-established practice and are indispensable in enabling Parliament to make an informed judgement on the Commission when it holds its vote of confidence allowing the Commission to take office. The hearing process gives Parliament and EU citizens the opportunity to discover and evaluate the candidates personalities, qualifications, preparedness and priorities as well as their knowledge of their designated portfolio. The practice increases the democratic legitimacy of the European Union institutions and brings those institutions closer to European citizens.

Whilst having demonstrated its effectiveness, the hearing process can always be improved, particularly by means of more flexible and dynamic exchanges between the Commissioner and members of the committee responsible for the hearing.

Members suggested that it would be useful to set a deadline by which all Member States have to put forward their candidates, so as to leave adequate time for the Commission President elect to allocate the portfolios taking into account the work experience and background of the candidate.

With the aim of attaining Parliaments gender quality objectives, Members considered that each Member State should henceforth put forward at least two candidates male and female on a footing of equality for consideration by the Commission President-elect.

Checks on declarations of the financial interests of Commissioners designate by the Committee on Legal Affairs should be improved by including family interests covering family members living with them in the same household since the current scope was too limited. Parliament felt that confirmation by the Committee on Legal Affairs of the absence of any conflict of interests, based on a substantive analysis of the declarations of financial interests, constituted an essential precondition for the holding of the hearing by the committee responsible. It invited the Commission to revise its rules on this as soon as possible. The Committee on Legal Affairs should issue guidelines in the form of a recommendation or initiative report, with a view to facilitating reform of the procedures relating to Commissioners declarations of interests.

Members made the following suggestions regarding the hearings:

- when a vice-president of the Commission has responsibilities which are primarily horizontal, the hearing could exceptionally be carried out in a different format such as a meeting of the Conference of Presidents or a meeting of the Conference of Committee Chairs;
- the written questionnaire sent ahead of each hearing should allow for 7 questions instead of 5, but that there should not be several sub-questions under each question;
- it would be better to have around 25 questions, but with each questioner allowed immediate follow-up, so as to enhance the effectiveness and inquisitorial nature of the hearings;
- the following guidelines should apply for the coordinators evaluation meeting after the hearings: (i) if the coordinators unanimously approve the candidate letter of approval; (ii) if the coordinators unanimously reject the candidate letter of rejection; (iii) if coordinators representing a clear majority approve the candidate letter stating that a large majority approve (minorities may request that it be mentioned that their group does not share the majority view);
- if there is no clear majority, or there is a majority (but not a consensus) against the candidate, and if the coordinators consider it necessary: (i) first request additional information through further written questions; (ii) if still dissatisfied request for a further 1.5-hour hearing, with the approval of the Conference of Presidents; (iii) if there is still no consensus or overwhelming majority among the coordinators vote in committee;
- a clear majority in this context should be coordinators who together represent at least two-thirds of the committee membership;

Furthermore, Members considered that:

- there should be a specific section of Parliaments website where the CVs of the Commissioners-designate and responses to written questions are made available, in advance of the public hearings, in all the official languages of the Union;
- there should be a specific and visible place on Parliaments website where the evaluations are placed within 24 hours;
- the rule should be changed to refer to 24 hours after the evaluation, given that some evaluations are completed only following further procedures