

PROFILE

Pascal Lamy

A very Christian Democrat

AS NEGOTIATORS limber up for the forthcoming round of world trade liberalisation talks, it seems appropriate that the EU has picked a marathon runner to represent it in Seattle and beyond.

Not only is new Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy as lean as a whipper, but one of the first things that colleagues comment on is the speed of his mind.

"Lamy would go into a meeting which has already been going on for three hours, listen for five minutes and then work out a solution which left everyone saying 'why didn't I think of that?'," says one French acquaintance.

Trade experts agree that Lamy's ability to master complex technical dossiers swiftly and find answers to seemingly intractable problems make him the perfect choice to champion the Union's cause in the impending World Trade Organisation negotiations.

European Commission staff who had dealings with him during his five-year spell as number two at ailing French bank Crédit Lyonnais also remark on these qualities. They attribute the final restructuring deal which the Commission accepted as an example of a "piece of financial engineering" which Lamy's "brilliant" mind had devised. His contribution was crucial after relations between Competition Commissioner Karel van Miert and bank chief Jean Peyrelevade broke down.

Observers point to Lamy's performance in front of the European Parliament at his confirmation hearings last month as further evidence of his ability to pick up fiendishly difficult issues at the drop of a hat.

He even appears to have thrown off the stench of association with the failings of former Commission President Jacques Delors' regime identified by the committee of wisemen's report and attempts by some MEPs to find a hole in his intellectual armour. "I consider it an honour to have worked for Jacques Delors," he retorted when asked, like Saint Peter, to deny his master.

Despite Lamy's reputation as a workaholic and a hard taskmaster, officials in his team insist they are looking forward to working with the man once described as Delors' Exocet missile. "He is fast, demanding but cheerful and he recognises good work," says one, insisting that the widespread image of Lamy barking orders like a parade ground sergeant major is not matched by reality.

But few would describe him as a popular man. "He had a mind like a computer. You may admire a computer, but you do not love it," says one associate.

Lamy's pedigree is impeccable. Born to a wealthy Norman family two years after the end of the Second World War, he graduated second in his year from the École Normale d'Administration (ENA), one of the famous 'grandes écoles' which are only slowly loosening their grip on France's governing elites. It was during his time at ENA that Lamy met Delors.

The two were united by a passionate Catholicism – something unusual in men so firmly on the political left, where anti-clericalism is normally the order of the day.

Associates say Lamy's famed asceticism comes as much from his religious convictions as it does from a Socialistic rejection of the material trappings of this world. They also say that, like Delors, Lamy is more of a Christian Democrat than a traditional Socialist.

Hence his belief in the market's ability to deliver goods and services efficiently provided there are safeguards against the abuses and instability that unregulated economies can bring. As he said in an interview with French radio: "I belong to those who think that liberalisation is good for France."

Delors appointed Lamy as his advisor when he became minister of finance in François Mitterrand's administration in the early 1980s. He later moved on

to the office of Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy, but left in 1985 to join Delors in Brussels, where he served as the president's chief advisor for the next nine years.

Although Lamy antagonised other senior officials in the Commission during his long spell in the institution, he earned the respect of EU governments for his skillful handling of the closing stages of the Uruguay Round of trade talks. When Delors took the EU to the brink of a trade war with the US, it was Lamy who persuaded him not to sacrifice the entire deal for the sake of narrow national interests.

Like many senior figures in the dying days of the Delors era, Lamy began looking around for a suitable job

outside the Commission and was asked by the French government to put his expertise in finance and European affairs to use to help rescue the ailing state-owned bank Crédit Lyonnais.

Appearing before the European Parliament last month after being nominated to serve in Romano Prodi's new team as Trade Commissioner, Lamy argued for "controlled globalisation", which he described as a "win-win" process which could benefit everybody. But he added that liberalisation had to be "controlled, steered and managed according to concerns of EU citizens".

The Anglo-Saxon commentators who shrieked in outrage at the news that a French Socialist had been put in charge of the trade portfolio have failed to notice the changes which have taken place in French political life over the last 15 years.

Lamy's bid for the post of trade portfolio was launched directly from the office of French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who is attempting to steer a more liberal course in his own economic policies without provoking too much wailing from partners in his Socialist-Green-Communist coalition.

The new Commissioner's thinking on liberalisation is in line with Jospin's decision to introduce some bold reforms which antagonised the traditional French left, such as partially privatising some state-owned industries like Air France and cutting taxes to stimulate growth and job creation rather than easing social inequalities.

Lamy's ability to argue the case for a liberalisation with a human face will be in much demand during the next round, which will be negotiated under a more intense media spotlight and lobby group scrutiny than any previous trade talks.

Public sensitivity over food safety issues such as hormone-treated beef and genetically modified crops means Lamy will have to be seen to be standing his ground against US demands if an ambitious new round is to be swallowed by a sceptical public.

The Commissioner's negotiating hand will be strengthened by the fact that he is comfortable discussing strategic visions in Anglo-Saxon circles. Lamy surprised many observers during his parliamentary hearing with his perfect English and its intriguing trace of a hard-to-place regional accent.

But despite his familiarity with the views of those on the other side of the Atlantic – he is close to Robert Zoellick, who is advising George Bush Junior in his bid to become US president – it is clear from the statements Lamy has made so far that he will be a staunch defender of the Union's policies in sensitive areas such

as food safety, growth hormones and biotechnology.

As he explained when outlining the EU's position on consumer protection to the Parliament: "We have a different understanding to the US. Our view is if it cannot be proved safe, refrain. But as the hormone issue shows, there is a price to be paid for ambiguity."

Lamy's comments on the future of Union farm policy also promise to fuel an interesting debate in Seattle and beyond. He told MEPs that the link between farmers' payments and the amount of food they produced had to be cut – making him more of a radical than Farm Commissioner Franz Fischler. In fact, Lamy is closer to the line espoused by the large farm-produce exporting nations, which argue that Union subsidies distort world trade by enabling EU producers to dump their produce on the global market.

If the world's aggressive farm policy liberalisers draw blood in the next round and the EU has to give ground on agricultural support, no one will be better placed than Lamy to explain to the French farm unions why change is necessary and even in their interest in the long-run.



1947:	Born, Levallois-Perret
1955:	Finishes second in his year at Ecole Nationale d'Administration after graduating in higher commercial studies and political science
1975:	Entered French civil service in the inspectorate general of finances
1979:	Joined French treasury
1981:	Advisor to Jacques Delors, minister for economics and finance
1983:	Deputy director general in the private office of Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy
1985:	Chief advisor to Jacques Delors, president of the European Commission
1994:	Appointed second-in-command at Crédit Lyonnais
1999:	Appointed Trade Commissioner in new Prodi Commission