

Lamy expounds the EU's 'law of complexity'

The trade commissioner tells Peter Norman that Brussels institutions need a serious overhaul to cope with new members

Pascal Lamy, the European Union's trade commissioner, is unique among the 20 Commissioners running the EU's embattled and demoralised executive.

He alone was a senior figure during the Commission's glory days under the presidency of Jacques Delors, building up a formidable insider's knowledge of the European Union and its institutions.

But only now, nearly a year after returning to Brussels, has France's senior commissioner decided to join the increasingly intense debate among European policy makers over the future of the EU and its institutions.

In an interview, Mr Lamy urged "a serious revamping of EU institutions" to correct a system that "is now too big and too complex".

Revamping is urgent because of the EU's plans to add up to 13 new members in the years ahead. Coming back to the Commission after the EU expanded to include Austria, Sweden and Finland, taught Mr Lamy, 53, that "complexity is an exponential function and not a proportional function of the number of members of the EU".

"This is one of the EU's laws of physics," he says. "Adding three countries made a hell of a lot of difference in terms of complexity, the difficulty of taking decisions, obscurity, lack of visibility. And this is true for the Commission, the Council of Ministers and the parliament."

The EU's current, much greater, enlargement plans mean reform must go beyond the limited ambitions of the present intergovernmental conference (IGC) to make the decision making processes of the EU institutions ready for enlargement.



Pascal Lamy: urging revamp of a system that is 'too big and too complex'

"It is not just a question of decision making. It is also a question of the relevant areas of focus for the EU institutions, and the Commission, which in my view, must still be the engine of the system."

The task, Mr Lamy admits, will be made no easier by the changed fortunes of the Commission during his five years of absence helping to restructure France's loss-making Credit Lyonnais bank.

"The European parliament sacked the Commission. That's a big difference... The Commission's rating has been downgraded by two or three marks, which in the world I have come from would be something like triple A to Double B plus or A minus, which is a huge difference."

The EU's economic recovery is "the only really optimistic element" in Mr Lamy's vision of the years ahead. He notes a correla-

tion over the past 50 years between the impetus towards EU integration and the strength of economic growth.

"We are now in a period where growth seems available for the years to come which is the best news we have ever had."

So if that is the position, what is the Commission going to do about it?

Mr Lamy is offering no blueprints at present. The Commission's job will be to

produce its ideas about the EU's future early next year when the "white paper or governance" promised by Romano Prodi, the Commission president, is due.

"We have to wait for the result of the IGC. The Commission cannot take these things lightly. It has to put on the table ideas which are coherent, substantial, dense and cohesive."

The governance white paper will be crucial to the future standing of the Commission among the EU's institutions. "It is obvious we don't start from the same position of where we were before. But this gap can easily be bridged by the quality of what we put on the table," he says.

Mr Lamy says it is important that the Commission recovers from its downgraded status for the sake of the EU as a whole. "The member states cannot act in the EU or move the thing forward without the Commission and without a strong Commission."

A simple secretariat would be unable to cope with the challenges of running a union of between 300m and 400m people. "You need this institution, which is politically motivated, which has a sense of coherence, which is accountable before the European council and the parliament, to run the thing, to put the proposals on the table," he insists.

The Prodi Commission, Mr Lamy says, must fulfil three "basic missions" in its five-year term. It must see that at least one applicant country joins the EU. It must orchestrate wide ranging reforms of the EU institutions. It must also reform itself.

Will this be possible? "I don't know," Mr Lamy replies.

"But I've always been in challenging positions. I don't need to be optimistic or pessimistic. I've always started in places and positions where things were not right and usually tried to put them right. It's worked until now and I'm here and dedicated to playing my part in doing that."