

New trade commissioner seen as 'intellectual paratrooper'

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But some MEPs are threatening to make trouble for Pascal Lamy at his confirmation hearings, writes Guy de Jonquière

One of last week's appointments to the new European Commission has aroused more surprise, fascination or suspicion than the award of the international trade portfolio to Pascal Lamy of France.

To economic liberals, and many of the European Union's trading partners, putting a Frenchman in charge of trade policy is a troubling portent, given France's reputation as champion of protectionist EU policies, above all in agriculture.

That the 52-year-old Mr Lamy is also a committed socialist, who served eight years as chief of staff to Jacques Delors, the interventionist-minded former Commission president, has triggered even louder alarms.

However, officials in Brussels and other EU capitals who know and have worked with Mr Lamy insist fears that he will seek to turn the clock back by erecting "fortress Europe" barriers, or blindly follow dictates from Paris, are greatly overdone.

For one thing, they say, he is too intelligent to be a

knee-jerk protectionist. Even enemies - of whom he made a number during his previous Brussels stint - admit Mr Lamy combines a brilliant intellect with a talent for strategic planning and an impressive, sometimes ruthless, ability to get his own way. Although Mr Lamy is by background a classic example of France's administrative elite, with a rigorously logical mind, admirers insist it is not a closed one.

A fluent English speaker, he is said to be cosmopolitan in outlook and receptive to new ideas. "He is definitely on the Atlanticist wing of the Socialist party. He's not one of those Frenchmen whose hackles rise whenever the US is mentioned," says one EU diplomat.

Mr Lamy's office says he is saving his views on trade policy for his European parliament confirmation hearings. But his past conduct does not suggest his approach will be doctrinaire or necessarily mirror that of Paris.

EU trade negotiators say he never took France's position when it threatened the



Lamy: 'combines brilliant intellect with talent for strategic planning'

Uruguay Round of world trade talks in the early 1990s. He also played a key role in the 1990s promoting a single European market in the face of strong French government reservations.

Indeed, some observers in Brussels think Mr Lamy may prove more effective than Sir Leon Brittan, the outgoing trade commissioner, at pursuing an activist trade agenda.

Mr Lamy's drive for freer trade has repeatedly faced rearguard opposition in Paris, where he is derided as a dangerous "ultra-liberal". Mr Lamy could be more successful in persuading France to make difficult concessions in a new trade round.

Senior US trade officials, few of whom know him well, remain to be convinced. "But at least Lamy's connections in Paris means he should be able to deliver on any deals we do with the EU," said one.

More controversial may be Mr Lamy's operating style. While working for Mr Delors, his stop-at-nothing

methods struck fear into many colleagues. "Pascal is tough. He does whatever the job requires, and he doesn't take prisoners," says one observer.

His reputation as a street-fighter is reinforced by his physical appearance. His close-cropped, bullet-headed and muscular physique - toned by marathon running - led him to be dubbed an "intellectual paratrooper".

Mr Lamy's tactics were highly effective. But they alienated many, including Sir Leon, who vetoed Mr Lamy's appointment as head of the Commission's external trade directorate four years ago. Some officials in Brussels think Mr Lamy's methods may lead to an early confrontation with Chris

Patten, the British commissioner who is supposed to oversee all EU external relations, including trade.

But a more immediate concern for France's nominees commissioner are allegations that, by riding roughshod over the Commission bureaucracy and relying on his own network of trusted placemen to get things done, he paved the way for corruption by weakening internal rules and disciplines.

Some members of the European parliament are threatening to make trouble for Mr Lamy's appointment by pressing these charges at his confirmation hearings. "His Brussels past may well come back to haunt him," says a senior Commission official.