

8/3/99 FRANCE: PROFILE-6- TRADE CHIEF LAMY, THE ADAPTABLE FRENCH SOCIALIST.
By Yali N'Diaye

PARIS (MktNews) - Pascal Lamy, the EU Trade Commissioner designated to succeed the UK's Sir Leon Brittan, is working hard to cast off preconceptions that he can be no other but a product of the French protectionist tradition.

"I belong to those who think that liberalisation is good for France," Lamy said recently on French television.

But with his first big test only four months away - the World Trade Organisation ministerial conference in Seattle to launch a Millenium trade round - the proof of his (and the Commission's) liberalising intentions will be observed in practice rather than in pronouncements.

Agriculture and services trade provide the two focal points for the Seattle round. France represents some of the most deeply conservative constituencies among the former in the EU, as its success in blocking any substantive farm reform in the Agenda 2000 future EU financing negotiations in Berlin a couple of months back made clear.

Lamy will face the political fight of his life if he tries to unstitch the Agenda 2000 deal on farm subsidies (which lasts up to 2006) in order to facilitate liberalisation in this and other areas at Seattle. Other sectors, such as France's protected audio-visual market, will provide additional (if less daunting) challenges.

The man who headed the private staff of Jacques Delors when the French Socialist drove forward his integrationist agenda as Commission president for a decade from the mid-1980s could be Romano Prodi's highest gamble in terms of staff selection. Or, on a more Machiavellian interpretation, his easiest sacrifice should the Seattle round spill over into real protectionist dangers with the US.

Lamy has highlighted that jobs growth and reform of the EU institutions must be at the top of Brussels' priorities. At the international level, the current number two at the much-troubled and recently-privatised French bank Credit Lyonnais, also pipes the same tune as his soon-to-be colleagues when he says the main priorities are EU enlargement and a common foreign and security policy.

None of these fall within his field, which could mean that he hopes the Seattle round will rumble along without attracting too much attention. If this is his assessment, it is likely to be a mistaken one.

Prodi - having accepted the French government's nomination of Lamy (he could have refused under new rights granted by the Amsterdam Treaty) - is backing his man. He stresses his role as Delors's Chef du Cabinet from 1985 to 1994 was an official position.

"He has not been a commissioner. He was Chef du Cabinet," Prodi told the European Parliament (EP) when unveiling his team a few weeks ago. "The fact that he went to Credit Lyonnais raises no difficulties. If there is a capable person to head difficult international negotiations, it is him."

Lamy, close to the leftist government of Lionel Jospin, is nonetheless expected to come in for a rough ride from a newly-empowered EP when it holds its confirmation sessions for commissioners early next month. The heat is likely to be all the greater after the EP shifted right at the last election in June.

There are those who hold Lamy partly responsible for management mistakes in the Commission's period under Delors, errors which only fully surfaced when the independent experts' report published earlier this year, alleging a culture of corruption and cronyism in the executive, prompted the Commission of Jacques Santer to resign en masse. Lamy is nonetheless trying to making light of the political opposition he is likely to face. Such challenges were "normal in a democracy," he has said.

He started his career in in the French public service in 1975, aged 28, in the Inspectorate-General of Finances. From 1979, he moved to the French Treasury where he took up various positions.

In May 1981, Lamy became technical advisor, then deputy director (June 1982) in the office of Jacques Delors, then France's Socialist finance minister. From April 1983 to July 1984, Lamy worked as deputy head in Socialist Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy's private office before rejoining Delors at the Commission.

Lamy is a graduate of the well-known Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales in Paris - like current French Finance Minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn - and the Institute of Political Sciences. This was followed by a postgraduate degree in advanced legal studies and a certificate in general literature. Lamy is also a product of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration which produces most of France's top politicians and civil servants.

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