

Hearing of Rocco Buttiglione (justice, freedom and security)

Rocco BUTTIGLIONE, the Commissioner-designate for Italy, who will take on the portfolios for freedom, security and justice, is the only candidate who has to undergo two hearings at Parliament. The first was held today Tuesday by the Civil Liberties Committee and the other takes place tomorrow before the Legal Affairs Committee.

Fundamental rights, asylum and immigration policies and fight against terrorism were the key issues at Tuesday's hearing. In the fight against terrorism and the need for more security *"we must strike the right balance between privacy and security"*, said Mr Buttiglione.

Mr Buttiglione also clarified his views on immigration, saying that he *"never proposed to set up concentration camps in North Africa"* to facilitate the expulsion of illegal immigrants from the Member States. However, he said cooperation against illegal immigration should be strengthened and the best way to stop illegal immigration was to organise legal immigration.

Mr Buttiglione stressed the need for the Commission to work with the Parliament. He added that working with the EP was a *"top priority"* for him.

Asylum and immigration

The Commissioner-designate confirmed he favoured the establishment of asylum camps in Northern Africa: *"I did not propose concentration camps, but centres for humanitarian relief. The island of Lampedusa has only 500 inhabitants and received 1700 asylum seekers. We are faced with a humanitarian crisis. I scarcely see an alternative"*. To make the establishment of camps in Libya possible, Mr Buttiglione said that pressure had to be put on Libya to sign the Geneva Convention.

Answering questions by Giusto CATANIA (GUE/NGL, IT) and Mario BORGHEZIO (IND/DEM, IT), who both said the Italian police and carabinieri had violated the rights of asylum seekers on several occasions, Mr Buttiglione said *"the behaviour of the carabinieri and the police has been quite exemplary and full of humanity. If the information I have is mistaken, I will be the first to condemn the Italian government"*.

Mr Buttiglione explained that the idea of establishing asylum camps or centres was *"widely accepted by the Council. Also, the Commission does not condemn considering demands for asylum outside of the EU."* Mr Buttiglione stressed, however, that the processing of asylum applications in camps outside the European Union, should be in addition to the processing of applications within the Member States: *"Those who are already on the territory of the EU, or present themselves at a border of a Member State, must have the right to have their application processed in the country concerned"*.

Frank VANHECKE (NA, BE) asked whether the candidate Commissioner was in favour of drawing up a list of safe third countries to which asylum seekers could be sent back without their applications being considered. *"Provided the countries on the list are really safe, such a list could be used"*, answered Mr Buttiglione.

Barbara KUDRYCKA (EPP-ED, PL) asked what the candidate Commissioner planned to do to integrate the ten new Member States into the Schengen area. Italy had had to wait seven years to be incorporated into Schengen. How could this period be shortened for the new Member States? Mr Buttiglione replied *"the better the new Member States protect their external borders, the more ready the Schengen countries will be to incorporate them in the Schengen area"*.

Fundamental rights

Asked by Kathalijne BUITENWEG (Greens/EFA, NL) and Michael CASHMAN (PES, UK) about discrimination against homosexuals, Mr Buttiglione referred to Immanuel Kant, saying *"there is a clear distinction between morality and law."* He went on to say that he *"may think homosexuality is a sin"* but he fully endorses the final text of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and *"is willing to defend it"*. Answering a question by Bogdan PEK (IND/DEM, PL) on the nature of marriage, Mr Buttiglione said his view of the marriage was *"well known"* and was the *"traditional one"*. He said that a *"woman has the right to have children and have the protection of a man"* but that this is a philosophical question.

Asked by Alexander PICKART ALVARO (ALDE, DE) about the influence of the US and the Vatican on his decisions, Mr Buttiglione said he was *"a friend of the US but not an American"* and that the EU and the US should work together *"as equal partners with joint responsibility"*. In relation to the Vatican he said he believed a person could be a *"good Catholic and a good European at the same time"*, giving Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Helmut Kohl as examples.

Answering questions by Kinga GÁL (EPP-ED, HU) and Tatjana ŽDANOKA (Greens/EFA, LV) on the rights of minorities, Mr Buttiglione said the *"defence of minority rights is the cornerstone of the EU"* and that efforts to guarantee these rights should be strengthened. In reply to Livia JÁRÓKA (EPP-ED, HU), Mr Buttiglione said *"we all have a particular debt to Roma people who were persecuted by the Nazis"*. He insisted that all the instruments available will be used to guarantee minority rights within the EU.

In reply to Lilli GRUBER (PES, IT), who raised the issue of media pluralism in Italy, Mr Buttiglione said *"there are genuine problems"* and that he had *"to monitor the situation closely"*. The Commission must work in cooperation with the Member States on this matter.

To a question by Sarah LUDFORD (ALDE, UK) on air passenger data, Mr Buttiglione said there was a need to strike a balance between freedom and security. He believed that *"we can reach an agreement"* with the US and that it is *"in our interest"*.

Turkey

Frank VANHECKE (NA, BE) asked Mr Buttiglione about Turkey. The candidate Commissioner said the EU had already undertaken to consider Turkish membership, and that this had had a positive effect on the country. He stressed that the Copenhagen criteria must be respected, adding that the budget policy was incompatible with Turkish accession. He also stressed *"we must preserve good relations with Turkey."*

Judicial cooperation and the fight against organised crime

Mr Buttiglione said he was confident that within a couple of weeks the last Member State that had to do so, Italy, would have adopted the European arrest warrant. Commenting on Europol, Mr Buttiglione said this body should be strengthened but at the same time he expressed some doubts: *"Europol is going through a crisis. Member States do not always provide it with the necessary information. I do not know if Europol is up to its tasks. First it should be doing what it is supposed to do, then we can start thinking of further tasks"*.

Inger SEGELSTRÖM (PES, SE) urged the Commissioner-designate to come forward with a new drugs strategy. *"Do you agree that the prevention of drug use decreases the demand for drugs?"* she asked. *"And will you aim EU action plans toward prevention, including the preventing of growing and selling, in bars, of marijuana?"* Mr Buttiglione replied that it was true

that prevention was very important, but so were the rehabilitation of drug addicts and measures to combat the drug trade. *"Prevention is essential", Buttiglione said, "but it is also difficult. It requires cooperation of schools and media. Recovery of drug addicts is also important, we must not think that drug addicts are lost".*

Maria CARLSHAMRE (ALDE, SE) asked what Mr Buttiglione intended to do to fight the trafficking of women. *"Hundreds of thousands of women are sold to the European sex industry", she said and added "Italy gives the right example by providing the victims of human trafficking with residence permits. Will you follow this example?"* Mr Buttiglione answered he wanted *"to continue Commissioner Vitorino's line of action. These women should be protected. This can be done by providing them with residence permits if they are willing to work together with the authorities to arrest their traffickers. Another possibility is to help them reintegrate in their home country".*

Mr Buttiglione's second hearing, before the Legal Affairs Committee, takes place tomorrow Wednesday from 3.15pm to 4.45pm.

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Chair: Jean-Louis BOURLANGES (ALDE, FR)

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