Reforming the Commission: action plan, aspects concerning the Committee on budgets. White Paper

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The committee adopted the report by Catherine GUY-QUINT (PES, F) on the aspects of the White Paper falling within its remit. The report warned that the reform must not consist of mere cosmetic changes to procedures but must instead result in an in-depth reorganisation of structures and methods enabling the Commission to fully assume its responsibilities. Decentralisation and delegation of authority were certainly essential, but the power of decision and supervision must be guaranteed both inside and outside the Commission. The human and financial resources made available to the Commission for informing and communicating with citizens were provided by the EU, and must be used to deliver a common message which reflected its political priorities. Information policy should therefore be pursued on an interinstitutional basis. The reform could also be used as an opportunity to achieve more efficient programme implementation, by ensuring that funds were properly used and by fixing realistic objectives for external programmes. The specific issues reviewed by the report included: (1) activity-based budgeting (ABB) - while welcoming every effort to improve transparency, the committee nevertheless warned of the risks of confusion and rigidity which might arise from a "one-size-fits-all" approach. However, it was prepared to consider ABB in parallel to the current nomenclature and as part of a future, wider system of defining priorities and performances. It pointed out that total replacement of the current nomenclature by the ABB method would require the agreement of the budgetary authority and of the other institutions and also urged the Commission not to undermine, by setting its own priorities, the political priorities set out by Parliament and Council as the budgetary authority; (2) externalisation and commitology - the committee welcomed the Commission's decisions on externalisation, which were broadly in line with Parliament's proposals. It therefore approved the fact that any delegation of responsibilities to Community-based public implementing agencies and outsourcing to the private sector would be strictly limited to tasks without any public authority dimension. Responsability for the financial management of Community programmes lay solely with the Commission and supervision of the implementation of decentralised tasks must remain exclusively within its remit. The committee accordingly urged the Commission to stick to the timetable for dismantling the technical assistance offices (TAOs). An overhaul of the commitology procedure was also needed so that the Commission could resume control of implementation of the budget and thereby fulfil its executive role, as provided for in Article 274 of the EC Treaty; (3) human resources - while supporting the internal measures planned for the redeployment of staff and improvement of productivity, the committee expressed regret that no more than 4% of staff would be affected by redeployment and wanted the Commission to explain the criteria selected for abandoning or reducing the scale of certain activities. It also felt that new officials in all categories should be recruited in the basic grade. It broadly supported the early retirement scheme but warned that such measures should not be allowed to obscure the main priorities of the reform. It also wanted the Commission to clarify to what extent the planned staff increases, for which additional funding had been requested in the context of the reform, were in anticipation of additional staffing requirements as a result of enlargement and called for this issue to be included on the agenda for the next trialogue meeting; (4) audit and financial management - the committee stressed that the quality of ex-ante financial control must be guaranteed and, at the same time, appropriate independence for financial control devolved to the various Commission directorates-general must be ensured. It also repeated its request for changes to the Financial Regulation to be subject to codecision procedure and not just simple consultation of Parliament. The Commission was urged to take into account Parliament's repeated request that appropriations be suspended during a financial year, should implementation prove difficult or performance be poor, and that Parliament should be supplied with better information about implementingconditions.