

## WHAT THEY SAID...

## JOHN DALLI

"Making enemies comes with the job, so it is not something that is going to frighten me."

## MARIA DAMANAKI

"When I am talking about decentralisation I am not talking about re-nationalising the common fisheries policy."

## ANTONIO TAJANI

"I'm ready to take on board all suggestions from any MEPs – any ideas will enrich our array of proposals."

## MAROŠ ŠEFCOVIČ

### Inter-institutional relations and administration

Nationality: Slovakian  
Political affiliation: PES  
Previous job: European commissioner for education and culture  
Age: 43

Head of cabinet: Juraj Nociar

**M**aroš Šefčovič entered his parliamentary hearing an embattled man. He left the chamber to sustained applause, the reward for battling successfully on the treacherous fields of ethnic discrimination and parliamentary privilege.

From the start, Šefčovič gave an impassioned response to allegations that he once made an anti-Roma comment. The Slovak candidate set out his stall in his opening remarks, rejecting discrimination and advocating social inclusion; and he took up the challenge, posed by the opening question, to explain his alleged assertion that Roma "exploit the Slovak welfare state". Šefčovič said he had no recollection of such a statement. The comment consisted, he pointed out, of five words extracted from a sentence uttered five years ago of which there appears to be no full record. But, he said, if he did say that, "that quote is not representative of my views".

He should be judged, he said, on his record of good relations with the Roma community and of his efforts to raise the profile of Roma issues – a record attested to and appreciated by Slovak Roma groups in statements issued before the hearing.

"I think the support of the Roma community is the best proof," Šefčovič said, drawing loud applause.

"Thank you, that was a good start," said



Íñigo Méndez de Vigo, the MEP who asked the first question, and Šefčovič was then able to move on to the principal phase of the hearing, dominated by questions about institutional matters.

As a vice-president of the Commission, Šefčovič would have responsibility for inter-institutional relations and administration, and some MEPs tested their luck, asking whether he was prepared to go beyond the terms of the Lisbon treaty by, for example, acting on parliamentary resolutions calling for legislative initiatives. He said the treaty

needs to be respected, though he did not rule out changes if the EU enlarged itself again.

MEPs elicited the promise of a "special partnership" (one based on transparency and dialogue), but Šefčovič made clear that the treaty introduced a 'subsidiarity' check that, as he said, gives national parliaments the right to assess draft legislation.

Ordinary citizens, too, may have a role, as the treaty introduces an element of direct democracy, giving them the capacity to determine some EU priorities. Šefčovič promised to set out soon just how such

### Most entertaining question

"Do you think of yourself as a federalist or are you still in the closet?", the UK liberal Andrew Duff asked.

"I'm not in the closet," Šefčovič answered.

### The longest moment

"For God's sake, somebody find him a clock." Spanish centre-right MEP Íñigo Méndez de Vigo after Šefčovič had overrun his time.

### A meeting of minds

UK Conservative MEP Ashley Fox asked Šefčovič whether he favoured a treaty amendment to allow the European Parliament to choose where it is based. The Parliament currently meets in Brussels and Strasbourg. Šefčovič replied: "That's a good question." Fox said: "That's why I asked it."

### Cringe-inducing statement

"It would be my utmost pleasure to please the Parliament."

citizens' initiatives should operate.

Staffing was another topic, partly because of another Lisbon innovation, the European External Action Service – its staff regulations would fall under Šefčovič's remit. He also answered questions on staff rules in other institutions, indicating that he wants a lobbyist register compiled jointly by the Commission and the Parliament, a review of the commissioners' code of conduct, and an extension of the code to embrace senior officials in all EU institutions.

This was a hearing full of lurking dangers. Šefčovič avoided them, and the next day the Parliament translated its applause into an official stamp of approval.

Simon Taylor

### Performance at hearing

