

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Organizational Culture and Reform:
The Case of the European Commission under Jacques Santer

Michelle Cini

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European Forum

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This Working Paper has been written in the context of the 1999-2000 European Forum programme on “Between Europe and the Nation State: the Reshaping of Interests, Identities and Political Representation” directed by Professors Stefano Bartolini (EUI, SPS Department), Thomas Risse (EUI, RSC/SPS Joint Chair) and Bo Stråth (EUI, RSC/HEC Joint Chair).

The Forum reflects on the domestic impact of European integration, studying the extent to which *Europeanisation* shapes the adaptation patterns, power redistribution, and shifting loyalties at the national level. The categories of ‘interest’ and ‘identity’ are at the core of the programme and a particular emphasis is given to the formation of new social identities, the redefinition of corporate interests, and the domestic changes in the forms of political representation.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the reform efforts of former European Commission President, Jacques Santer. It does so from the perspective of the Commission's organizational culture. The paper begins with a framework which seeks to explain how, during periods of reform, discourses become embedded within organizations. A conceptual distinction which is made between the "institutionalization" and the "internalization" of a discourse helps to clarify this process. While the latter refers to the embedding of a discourse in new organizational structures and procedures, the latter implies the embedding of that discourse in the *culture* of an organization. From this starting-point, it is argued that the attempted reform of the European Commission after 1995 failed because the Commission President was unable to win support for his reforms within the ranks of the Commission, and was thus unable to change the culture of the organization.

INTRODUCTION

The European Commission is a remarkable testimony to organizational survival. Established in 1958 as the Commission of the European Economic Community,¹ it was originally set up to initiate and manage a narrow range of policies for a Community of only six member states. At the end of the 1990s, with the scope of European policy not far off that of a national executive, and with the Union now comprising fifteen (and soon to be more) member states, it is perhaps surprising to find that the Commission looks much as it did when it was first established.

In 1995, Jacques Santer, then Commission President, initiated a process which was intended to lead to the reform of the European Commission. One of the key objectives of this process was the “improvement” of the budgetary and administrative culture of the Commission.² Even at the time, this reform process was little publicised and since the resignation of the Santer Commission in March 1999 it has become little more than a footnote in the reform program of the 2000 Commission.

Driven by a desire to explore further this period in the Commission’s recent past, this paper views Jacques Santer’s efforts to reform the Commission through the conceptual lens of organizational culture and the administrative discourse which underpins it. The paper begins by looking at the relationship between discourse and organizational culture, before charting the emergence of a new dominant discourse amongst the EU’s institutions, one which emphasises “accountability” rather than “technocracy”. Before detailing Santer’s reform program, the paper looks briefly at the broader issues of institutional reform as it affects the Commission. The paper concludes by arguing that the “failure” of the Santer reforms stems from the former President’s inability to win support for the project from within the Commission. Resistance of this kind meant that while some of the procedural reforms initiated after 1995 were implemented, the organizational culture of the Commission remained very much as it always had been.

DISCOURSE, ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND REFORM

In this paper, organizational reform, or “planned change”,³ is subsumed within a framework which emphasizes ideational-cultural factors. While this does not imply adherence to a purely idealist understanding of reform, the paper does acknowledge, if only implicitly, the value of eclecticism in the study of the European institutions. (Peters, 1999, 2). When applied to the case of the

European Commission, the aim is one of supplementing rather than supplanting more conventional approaches to the study of the European Union

This first section takes the metaphor of “discourse” as its starting-point. Here, discourse is defined as a framework of meaning which makes activities and practices intelligible to individuals (Howarth, 1995, 119) and as “a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (Hajer, 1997, 44). Discourses are important as they form the often unacknowledged structure within which individuals and groups act. They constitute the unwritten rules of the game, inhibiting certain activities and practices whilst encouraging others.⁴ While it is far from clear how discourses change over time, they are deemed here to be “historically contingent and politically constructed” (Howarth, 1995, 121). As a result, when external circumstances alter, dominant discourses may be subject to instability and indeed disintegration. Discourses crumble when they lose their legitimacy. When this happens, finding it hard to make sense of the world around them, individuals are likely to face a crisis of identity (Howarth, 1995, 123). To escape such crises necessitates identification with a new dominant discourse, created through a process of “articulation”, a process which brings together elements of existing discourses in a new and more legitimate formation (Howarth, 1995, 119). Howarth (1995, 124) argues that there is an element of hegemony in the creation of new discourses, as it is “through the drawing of political frontiers and constructing antagonisms between ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ that discourses acquire their identity” (Howarth, 1995, 121).

In the public administration field, ideational approaches towards organizational reform are still relatively rare. This is despite the fact that the role of ideas in public policy-making is much in vogue and moreover that the embeddedness or the sedimented nature of ideas (or discourses) within institutions is now acknowledged, at least by those sympathetic to ideational approaches. But what might an ideational approach to reform look like? The paper claims that organization theory and more specifically the concept of organizational culture provide us with one possible answer to this question.

The argument in this paper rests on a conceptual distinction between the institutionalization and the internalization of a discourse. The launch-pad for this distinction is Dryzek’s I.T. metaphor.

‘Discourses may be best treated as institutional software. Institutional hardware exists in the form of rules, rights, operating procedures, customs, and principles. Given that this hardware generally exists at the conscious level of awareness, it is unsurprising that this is where institutional analysts and designers have concentrated their attention. The discourses which constitute institutional software are more often taken for granted [...]’ (Dryzek, 1996, 104).

But while Dryzek suggests that the dominant discourse *is* the institutional software, this paper keeps the two concepts separate so as to make a clear distinction between the discourse on the one hand, and its organizational embeddedness, on the other. This is because the embedding of a discourse within an organizational context can take a number of different forms. The distinction posited here between institutionalization and internalization serves to clarify this point.

Thus in this paper *institutionalization* is taken to be the embedding of a discourse within the structures and procedures of an organization. All reform projects involve a form of institutionalization (whether implicitly or explicitly) and this is what Dryzek is referring to above. *Internalization*, on the other hand, involves the embedding of a new discourse within the culture of an organization. Thus, when reform is driven by the emergence of a new discourse, it is more likely to be successful⁵ when that discourse is both institutionalized and internalized.

Hatch (1997) has explained how such a process of internalization might operate. Building on the work of Gagliardi (1986) and Schein (1992), she explores the dynamics of culture within organizations through the interaction of assumptions, values, symbols and artifacts.⁶ The circular relationship between these concepts may be explained in the following way: changing assumptions and values held by members of an organization affect outcomes as they shape the way in which organizational members see the world. These outcomes, as artifacts (events, texts etc.), become symbols interpreted by members of the organization often in unintended ways. These symbols in turn confirm or conflict with the assumptions and values of organizational members. If it is to be successful, planned change (or reform) must break into this circle in a way which alters the assumptions and values of individuals within the organization.

This is where agency comes in, and the agency of organizational leaders (or what organization theorists might call “change initiators”) in particular. By engaging in reform, leaders can intervene in this self-sustaining cultural dynamic. Indeed leaders and their actions have the potential to become symbols in their own right, symbols which can lead to changes in assumptions and values within an organization. Ultimately what leaders are (or should be)

seeking is a “fit” between the institutional reforms (or rather the new organizational design) and the culture of the organization. Hatch argues that there are two ways in which this might occur: either, reform is so shallow that it is simply compatible with the existing culture. This might seem a reasonable approach to reform in the absence of any change in the dominant discourse. Or else reform occurs through an open and inclusive dialogue with organizational members, in circumstances where the change initiator is aware of both the importance of organizational culture, and his or her symbolic role within the process of cultural change. It is in taking this second route to reform that a new discourse comes to be both institutionalized and internalized.

FROM TECHNOCRACY TO ACCOUNTABILITY: A NEW EU DISCOURSE

The premise upon which this paper rests is that the European Union’s dominant (administrative) discourse⁷ changed over the course of the 1990s. Thus this section begins with a brief review of the “old” discourse. This might conveniently be labeled the “technocracy discourse”, one which is closely associated with the so-called “Monnet Method” of European integration. The section then moves on to consider how the “old” discourse has been superseded.

The Technocracy Discourse and the Monnet Method

Technocracy provided the ideational foundation upon which the new post-war European institutions were constructed (Radaelli, 1999). To understand this as a discourse it is necessary to view it through the lens of those institutions, and in particular through that of the European Commission. The origins of the European Commission lie in the High Authority which was set up to oversee the regulation of the coal and steel sectors within the framework of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). The idea of a High Authority is generally attributed to Jean Monnet as author of the Schuman Declaration of May 1950,⁸ though Monnet’s autobiography suggests a more collective provenance, with others such as Pierre Uri and Etienne Hirsch involved (Monnet, 1978, 295 and 337). Nevertheless, Monnet clearly understood the importance of institutions and had a vision of the sort of institution which he believed would prove most relevant given his objectives (Fransen, 1999). However, in the intergovernmental conference which followed the Declaration, the clarity of design which so endeared the final draft of the Plan to Monnet was lost (Monnet, 1978, 295), as national representatives (and most notably Dirk Spierenberg, speaking for the Dutch team) sought to temper the highly rational, yet politically unfeasible, aspirations of the original drafters. This meant that the

“narrow technocratic view” of the High Authority’s relations with national governments was subsumed within a “political system” which provided for checks and balances on the Authority’s powers (Duchêne, 1994, 214).

The High Authority was in fact a hybrid body in the sense that its conception was drawn from a number of different sources, the most notable of which were the French *Administrations de Mission* and the International Authority of the Ruhr. The institution also drew on familiar characteristics of the French Administration, “the divisional organization, the system of *cabinets*, the *habilitations* (internal delegation of tasks), the *statut du personnel*, and the role of the General Secretariat” (Featherstone, 1994, 155). While Monnet did not favor hierarchical bureaucratic structures, preferring small, intimate and cohesive working environments, it was not long before the High Authority began to develop bureaucratic characteristics and an air of professionalism (Coombes, 1970). “Many of those features were carried over, albeit in modified form, to the EC Commission” (Featherstone, 1994, 156).

Featherstone (1994) provides a convincing account of the importance of the Monnet Method in shaping the institutional framework of the ECSC, and more specifically, the High Authority. His starting-point is the personality of Jean Monnet. Monnet was a businessman whose economic philosophy was shaped by his earlier career experiences and by “distinctive French conditions and inherited traditions” (1994, 152). As the first *Commissaire Général du Plan de Modernisation et d’Equipement*, he was responsible in France for the 1946 Monnet Plan which sought amongst other things to provide for the reconstruction of basic French industries along sectoral lines. Featherstone traces the Plan back to both the French interventionist tradition, and to (at that time) relatively new thinking on economic planning.

The planning approach was strongly technocratic. It privileged the role of independent experts, who were to be outside the grasp of narrow sectional vested interests. It sought, in effect, to take the politics out of what would inevitably be highly contentious (and political) decisions. There was in addition a strong corporatist strand in Monnet’s thinking, with the “social partners” and other interest representatives involved in the formulation of policy. This was not *dirigisme* as such, but it was a more fluid consensus-based form of policy-making, though one which, at the end of the day, would still necessitate strong leadership. It was such thinking, set in a supranational context, that would later be called the “Monnet Method”.

‘The method was neo-functionalism, a process built on technocracy and elitism. Subsequent progress in European integration would be seen to depend crucially on a process of elite capture: the ability of the EC Commission to engage key economic

elites and to help them recognize their self-interest in supporting greater unity' (Featherstone, 1994, 155).

This approach was also apparent when the European Economic Community was formed. During the negotiations to set up the new Community in 1955-56 institutional matters were of a low priority (Cini, 1996, 1). With policy taking precedence, it should come as no surprise to find that the institutional shape of the new EEC mirrored that of the ECSC even though there was some watering down of the institution's powers owing to the spirit of intergovernmental caution prevalent at the time. However, the discourse underpinning the new European Commission was that of the High Authority. This was a discourse which emphasized the importance of efficiency, expertise, elites and functional interest intermediation – one which had little to say on the subject of democratic accountability and political representation; one which we might call a “technocracy discourse”.

Towards a new EU administrative discourse

While it may be possible to identify subtle changes to the technocracy discourse in the 1980s, it was only in the early 1990s that the legitimacy of the discourse was truly undermined. By 1992 there was already an understanding within the Commission that a fundamental change in both elite and mass attitudes towards the European integration process and the EU institutions was taking place. This coincided, not incidentally, with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty and the ratification problems which ensued, not least the Danish rejection of that Treaty in a referendum in June 1992. As Featherstone states, “There has been a widespread backlash by political leaders and mass publics against how the EC is currently run and concern as to how it might develop in the future” (1994, 149). Increasingly, the EU looked distanced from the lives of ordinary people within the Union, though this came at a time when the Union was in fact more involved in those lives than ever before – a fact not unrelated to the discontent and disquiet felt amongst certain sections of the European public.

Recognition of growing concern over democratic, implementation and management deficits, about secrecy, fraud and mismanagement in the work of the European institutions and in the operation of its policies prompted a reaction on the part of the EU - from both national governments and European institutions (Metcalf, 1992; Laffan, 1997). The dominant discourse was discredited. Having lost its legitimacy a new legitimizing discourse was sought, one which would respond to the concerns of a broader range of EU constituents. The adoption of the subsidiarity principle in the Maastricht Treaty and its subsequent elaboration was part of this process, as was the avowed shift in

priorities away from policy initiation and policy-making towards implementation and evaluation; the introduction of more participatory strategies in the making and implementation of certain policies, most notably regional and environmental; and the assertion by the EU institutions that openness and transparency were to become the norm. This was a conscious and deliberate act on the part of a coalition of pro-European national and European elites who sought to “save” the Union at time when its very existence seemed threatened.

While there can be no assumption at this stage that the new discourse was institutionalized or internalized within the European institutions, the change was none the less a radical one: from a technocratic discourse which valued expertise and benign elitism, there was a shift to a more inclusive discourse which linked together principles of accountability and effectiveness. Understanding the accountability elements within the new discourse is important, for the concept of accountability is used here as shorthand for a wide range of ideas, of which parliamentary democracy is just one. The new discourse also encompasses a recognition of the importance of transparency in decision-making and probity in the allocation of the EU budget. It acknowledges the necessity of bridging the chasm between state and society through participatory strategies which implies the involvement, at the policy formulation stage, of those actors affected most by European legislation. Accountability also refers in this context to a preference for decisions taken wherever possible at the lowest level of government (the subsidiarity principle), thus favoring decentralization over central control. This emphasis on accountability is closely tied to concerns about effectiveness. This responds to the perceived managerial and administrative failure of the Commission (in particular) to deliver good governance. In challenging the assumption inherent in the old discourse that a technocratic approach to public administration and policy-making is the most appropriate way of achieving organizational effectiveness, it draws conclusions about the compatibility of accountability and effectiveness which are likely to impact considerably on the future reform of the EU generally, and on the reform of the Commission more specifically. For that reason we might call this new discourse the “accountability discourse”.

THE INSTITUTIONAL REFORM AGENDA

Although the main focus of this paper lies with the internal organizational reform of the European Commission, setting this in the framework of the broader EU reform agenda under discussion at the same time, helps to explain the context within which Commission reform was initiated.⁹ While both reform processes were shaped by the new accountability discourse, EU institutional

reform and internal Commission reform have largely been treated separately. Indeed there has been little evidence that the relationship between the two has been given much serious consideration. This is as true in the Amsterdam Treaty as for the treaty revisions preceding it.

The work of the Reflection Group set up in 1996 to prepare the ground for the intergovernmental conference, and subsequently the IGC itself, raised substantial expectations as to what the new treaty revisions would deliver on the subject of institutional reform. In the discussions that took place before the Amsterdam European Council it often seemed that there was no alternative to dealing once and for all with these questions, something that came though most strongly in the Commission's submission to the IGC (Commission, 1996b and 1997c).¹⁰ Indeed, the Reflection Group had been instructed to consider not only issues raised at Maastricht, but any other measure needed to facilitate the work of the institutions and to guarantee their effective operation in view of the imminent enlargement of the Union (Duff, 1997, 130). The Turin mandate (set out at the Turin European Council in March 1996) emphasized the importance of striving for greater efficiency, coherence and legitimacy through institutional reform. In so doing, it listed a number of institutional issues to be addressed, including "how the Commission can fulfill its functions with greater efficiency, having regard to its composition and representative capability" (Duff, 1997, 132).

While Duff comments that "The IGC expended much time and energy on the issue of the size of the Commission" (1997, 134), there was no agreement on reducing the number of Commissioners to one per member state as had earlier been proposed. The stumbling-block was that the size of the Commission had become inextricably linked to the reweighting of votes in the Council of Ministers (Duff, 1997, 132). Ironically, the size of the Commission had seemed one of the least contentious of institutional issues, though there were differences of opinion amongst the member states. Of the larger countries,

'the French, especially, took the technocratic view, and wished to reduce the size of the Commission [...] The Germans ...did seem prepared, as did the British, to sacrifice their second Commissioner. However, all three were concerned to be compensated for their reduction on the Commission by an increase in voting weights in the Council. The prospect of enlargement appeared to threaten a situation whereby a coalition of small and medium-sized member states could out-vote the large. [...] Spain suggested that the larger states [...] should always have one Commissioner, while the others would rotate (Duff, 1997, 132).

As for the smaller states, they

'appear to have combined to block the French option. Some, like the Irish, were determined to keep their own Commissioner as their way of buying into the Community system. Others, like Belgium, were prepared initially to be flexible but hardened their attitude once the extent of the German retreat on QMV became clear' (Duff, 1997, 132-3).

In the end this meant that there could be no agreement. In the "Protocol on the Institutions with the Prospect of Enlargement of the European Union" appended to the Amsterdam Treaty, Article 1 looked forward to the fact that "the Commission shall comprise one national of each of the Member States" by the time of the next round of enlargements, though only if the reweighting of votes was resolved by that stage.

What was agreed however was that the Commission President's role and status would be enhanced, both within the EU as a whole as well as within the Commission. The European Parliament's *de facto* powers of investiture vis-à-vis the President (in the form of hearings and votes) became *de jure* (Article 158(2)), thus helping to legitimize formally the presidential office. Moreover, the President-elect was to be given a greater role in the selection of members of the Commission, which meant that henceforth agreement "by common accord" would involve not only national governments but also the Commission President (Article 158(2)). Within the college of commissioners the status of the President was formally enhanced, to the extent that it was confirmed that "The Commission shall work under the political guidance of its President" (Article 163).

Otherwise, we find only a statement of intent on the part of the member states within the Treaty. In the "Declaration on the Organisation and Functioning of the Commission" there is acknowledgment of the importance of Commission reform, a process which was to involve a "reorganisation of tasks within the college" before the new Commission took up office in 2000. This was "to ensure an optimum division between conventional portfolios and specific tasks". The Declaration also reinforced the President's discretion in allocating jobs within the Commission, and for the first time included the possibility of a mid-term reshuffling of portfolios. It took note of the Commission's plans to reform its departments (and mentioned particularly the desirability of bringing external relations under the responsibility of a Vice President), but otherwise did little more than exhort the Commission (implicitly) to keep up the good work.

Institutional reform, as concerns the Commission, has thus been rather narrowly construed, although it has been concerned with both effectiveness and accountability, the concepts underpinning the EU's new discourse. Indeed this

was as true for the 2000 IGC as it was in 1996.¹¹ Enhancing the role of the President, streamlining the College and the portfolios available, and upgrading the functions of the Vice-Presidents all spoke directly to the effectiveness requirements of the new discourse; whereas tightening the relationship between Commission and Parliament served to contribute to the legitimization of the Commission's role by improving checks and balances upon it. Accountability is at the heart of these reforms and reform agendas. With the benefit of hindsight we might ultimately conclude that both have been important for establishing the context within which workable internal Commission reform might occur.

PLANNED CHANGE IN THE SANTER COMMISSION

It has to be said that Jacques Santer's Commission presidency began somewhat inauspiciously. He was certainly not the first choice for the post. Failure to reach agreement on the appointment of Jean-Luc Dehaene in 1994, necessitated the selection of a compromise candidate: Santer. This made the Commission President seem a rather weak choice from the very start, a perception reflected in the European Parliament's vote on his candidature in July 1994. While 260 MEPs voted for Santer, 238 voted against (with 23 abstentions) (Hix and Lord, 1996). This was hardly a legitimizing vote of confidence in the new Commission President. The reluctance of many parliamentarians to support Santer not only stemmed from his compromise status however. His program also seemed rather weak, especially when contrasted to that of his predecessor Jacques Delors. Santer was clearly not a man of vision, though it was generally accepted that the priority he gave from the very start to reforming the internal workings of the Commission was necessary and important, if unexciting.

Under Santer, Commission reform was tackled by way of a three-phase process. In Commission jargon these phases were SEM 2000, MAP 2000 and what has been termed "designing the Commission of tomorrow" or "DECODE"¹². From the first, the stated objective of these programs was to increase both the Commission's effectiveness and its accountability. Santer had come into office intent on changing the way in which the Commission managed both itself and the programs and funds for which it was responsible. This was something the Delors Commissions had failed to prioritize.

Emphasis was first placed on the transparency issue. The Commission committed itself to far-reaching pre-legislative debates, including the publication of White and Green Papers which would allow individuals and organized interests a greater opportunity to comment on and influence decision-making. Clarification and simplification also implied a more aggressive policy

on fraud, as such irregularities are easier to conceal when procedures are opaque. This was tied more generally to the issue of managerial effectiveness. Indeed, variations on the theme of “Less action, more efficiency” came to sum up the principal organizational strategy of the Santer presidency. The approach was confirmed in the annual Work Program of the Commission and was witnessed by *The Economist* newspaper when it noted that “Mr. Santer believes in the maxim ‘less but better’” (*The Economist*, 13/5/95).¹³ The following sections look at how Santer sought to translate these concerns into action and the constraints he faced when trying to implement his program of reforms.

The SEM 2000 and MAP 2000 Programs¹⁴

The SEM 2000 Program (Sound and Efficient Financial Management) began in 1995 (Commission, 1998), overseen by Commissioners Erki Liikanen and Anita Gradin.¹⁵ Its objective was to improve the rigor of financial regulation and evaluation in Commission programs and policy, in reaction to ever-growing criticism of the Commission’s internal financial and management procedures by the European Court of Auditors and the European Parliament.¹⁶ SEM 2000 was a three phase program. In the first and second phases (beginning in June and November 1995, respectively) changes were to be made within the Commission with the aim of raising cost awareness and establishing a clearly defined relationship between policies and their costs, that is, “to make the real cost of political decisions clearer” (Commission, 1998a, point 1051). At the same time efforts were to be made to identify explicitly where responsibility for financial decisions would lie. There were four main areas of reform: the definition and costing of objectives; the organization of financial structures and the improvement of management systems; the measurement of the success and effectiveness of Community policies by enhancing internal control; and the introduction internal audit, evaluation and anti-fraud measures (Commission, 1996a, point 976).

At the third stage of the SEM program, which began in 1996, relations between the Commission and the member states became the focus of attention. Personal representatives were appointed by Finance and Budget Ministers to form the Personal Representatives Group (PRG). This was jointly chaired by the two responsible commissioners, who met six times in 1996, ultimately producing a report which was submitted first to the Council of Ministers and then to the Dublin European Council. The Report contained recommendations on measures responding to the criticisms of the Court of Auditors: on the recovery of own resources; on the implementation of the budget; and on the evaluation of programs, with particular attention paid to rules on the eligibility of expenditure under the Structural Funds (Commission, 1996, point 976). It

was approved by the Dublin European Council, with member states agreeing to examine progress on the basis of future Commission reports.

In all, the SEM program was intended to introduce to the Commission a new financial management culture (Laffan, 1997a, 430) which would allow for the transfer of responsibility to managers within the services without threat to the consistency of standards operating within the Commission. This was to involve an element of decentralization. It was to the level of the Directorate-General that responsibility was to be transferred. The budget Commissioner was already strengthened as since the start of Santer's Presidency all documents with implications for expenditure had to go to him before being seen by the College (other than where authorized by the President) (Laffan, 1997a, 430). Through the SEM Program DGs would get new top-level posts with responsibility for financial resource management, to act as a financial counterweight to the policy development and executive functions of the DG. Procedures, such as regular meetings, internal audits, and facility to appoint financial specialists and provide training were also introduced. In addition, new evaluation mechanisms and procedures on the basis of annual plans, were to be put in place so as to contribute further to the effective handling of resources. Most of these measures were implemented by mid-1998.¹⁷

The second element in the Santer Commission's plans for internal reform came in the form of MAP 2000 (Modernization of Administration and Personnel Policy).¹⁸ MAP's objective, to modernize personnel management and the Commission's administration was "centered on the decentralization and devolution of powers, the simplification of procedures and the identification and application of new approaches in the administration and management of human resources" (Commission, 1998a). Established as an extension to the SEM Program, it was set up in 1997 and begun early in 1998. MAP followed through the implications of financial management reform for personnel policy. Once again, decentralization was an important theme, one which was intended to empower managers within the Commission, enabling them to take responsibility for their own resource management systems.

Three kinds of reform were envisaged under this part of the program (Commission, 1997a). As noted above, decentralization was crucial to its objectives. Competences were thus to be transferred from the central administration to individual DGs within the Commission, allowing them responsibility for their own operating costs budgets. Second, the "modernization" of the administration was proposed. This involved the streamlining of internal procedures with the aim of reducing the number of stages in the decision-making process; the integration of environment-friendly

considerations into the work of the administration; and the adoption and better use of new technology. Finally, the “modernization” of personnel policy, the third aspect of MAP reform, was perhaps the most contentious of all. Although little progress was made in this area, the initial objective had been to reform the Statute of Service, the EU’s staff regulations which covered such matters as employment rights, working conditions and salary and career structures.

Like SEM 2000, MAP was a three stage program (1998, 1999, and after 1999). Stage 1 was near to completion by the end of 1998, providing for twenty-five decentralization and simplification measures and the transfer of powers from DG IX (Personnel) to other directorates-general and departments, to enable them to manage their own resources (Commission, 1998a). The second stage of MAP began early in 1999 and was intended to further decentralize responsibility for resource management to managers within the DGs. Finally, at the third stage, there was to be a rationalization of Commission structures and the introduction of simplified working methods (Cram, 1999, 56).

The third element in Santer’s reform agenda was to involve a more comprehensive reform of the Commission, of which the reform of the Statute of Service was to have been a part. This was initiated in 1998 as the “Designing the Commission of Tomorrow” (DECODE), or the “Tomorrow’s Commission” initiative, arising directly out of the Commission’s own “Agenda 2000” Report. As Agenda 2000 made clear, “Managing a high level of integration will require a thorough re-evaluation of the Commission’s executive and management functions and a change in its administrative culture (Commission, 1997b). MAP 2000 was clearly to have been a major part of this process, but it was also to entail a thorough review of the Commission’s organization and operation, including a restructuring of the Commission’s departments by the year 2000. The DECODE report was the culmination of six months’ work by twelve teams of officials, and was intended to cover almost all aspects of the Commission’s internal activities (Commission, 1999b; *European Voice*, 12/11/98). This was in effect a screening process which, it was intended, would point the way to a comprehensive reform of the Commission by January 2000, eliminating “duplication, overlap and waste” (Peterson, 1999, 57).

Santer’s programs of administrative reform placed great weight on transforming the Commission to enable it to work better. This was recognized by Heads of Government when in the final declaration of the Cardiff European Council in June 1998, the Commission was praised for “its efforts to improve its efficiency and management” (Peterson, 1999, 57). From this perspective the reforms seemed to respond directly to the new discourse identified above. However, the implementation of Santer’s reform program ran up against two

serious problems: discontent within the Commission (and particularly within the Commission's staff unions); and the crisis of March 1999 which provoked the resignation of all twenty Commissioners.

Reform and Resistance within the Commission

While officials working within the Commission generally acknowledged that some reform was necessary, there was internal resistance to Santer's reform program from the very start. As Cram comments:

'While few were opposed to the SEM reforms *per se*, and indeed many aspects of the reforms were seen as an inevitable response to the pressures on public services everywhere, many were unhappy about the way in which the reforms were implemented within the Commission. [...] Many officials felt that time was not always saved since new layers of bureaucracy and internal controls emerged to meet the SEM 2000 demands. Meanwhile, the top-down introduction of the SEM 2000 programme and continued questions about the real commitment of those at the top to better resource management and to more transparent decision-making also had some negative effects on staff morale' (Cram, 1999, 55).

It was this impression that reforms were being imposed in an elitist fashion that proved most damaging to Santer's reform project. This did not stop with the SEM reforms. As Cram goes on to say:

'As with the SEM 2000 project, the MAP 2000 reforms were felt by many working on the ground in the Commission to be imposed from on high with insufficient staff involvement or consultation; [...] many Commission staff found the reform process to be poorly handled and somewhat disempowering' (Cram, 1999, 56).

Not surprisingly given staff concerns about the reform process, the Commission's staff unions quickly became involved. By April 1998, hostilities had broken out between the Commission's management and its unions. The specific grievance which became the focus of the dispute concerned the reform of the EU's staff regulations, the Statute of Service.¹⁹ The content of a secret brain-storming report which had been researched and written by a senior Commission official, had provoked an outcry on the part of the unions. The Report recommended radical changes to the staff regulations, and its appearance (accidentally) on the Commission's website, had the effect of provoking a one day strike/day of action (with a 90%+ turnout) on April 30. The outcry was not only over the substance of the Report, but also over the secretive manner in which it had been drafted (*European Voice*, 7/5/98; Cram, 1999, 56).

As much as it was a response to a specific set of proposals, the strike was a public expression of a more general discontent felt within the ranks of the

Commission. Georgakakis (1999) suggests that this reflected two cross-cutting cleavages that had been exacerbated by Santer's reform agenda. On the one hand, there was a breakdown in relations between the Commissioners (together with their personal offices) and the officials working within the Commission's services. The tensions were so severe that even the Commission's Director-Generals came out in support of the day of action. On the other hand, the managerialist-modernist nature of the reform agenda and the instruments used to implement it (external consultants, for example) is said to have pitted northerners within the Commission (supporting the reforms)²⁰ against the southerners (opposed to them). Georgakakis goes on to say that many interpreted the reform process as a challenge both to the Statute of Service and to the tradition of internal social dialogue within the Commission, both of which were important symbolically to Commission officials (1999, 7).

Seeking to make amends after the strike, the Commission President established a High-Level Working Group, comprising both management and union representation, which he asked former Secretary-General, David Williamson to head. The Working Group which began its work in May 1998 produced its report at the end of November after meeting twenty times over the five month period. It too advocated changes to the Staff Regulations, but in a manner that was rather less contentious than the earlier report. Williamson himself has suggested a reluctance to engage in a complete overhaul of procedures, which would, in his words, have provoked "an administrative earthquake" (Quoted in *European Voice*, 12/11/98).

At the start of the third phase of Commission reform, the DECODE project, there was some "effort made by Trojan [in charge of the project] to take the Commission staff with him" (Cram, 1999, 57). However, by that stage Commission employees had become rather skeptical of the motives behind reform. Consultation and a commitment to inclusiveness came rather too late in Santer's term of office for trust to be reestablished.

Too Little Too Late: the Resignation of the Santer Commission

Criticism of the Santer Commission from the European Parliament went back a long way (Macmullen, 1999, 704), as was suggested above. Yet the European Parliament's attempted censure the Commission in January 1999 over the mismanagement of the 1996 Budget and, indirectly, over its mishandling of the Van Buitenen case,²¹ sent an important message to the Commission President: that his reform agenda should be more clearly and publicly explained (European Parliament, 1999a) - and not just to those within the Commission.

Substantively there was little Santer could have done at this stage that was not already being done. In speeches and newspaper articles in January and February, he spelt out his plans for the Commission: to introduce codes of conduct for Commissioners and their officials; to reform the Commissioners' *cabinets*; to restructure the dossiers (portfolios) of the Commissioners, redefining the core tasks of the Commission in the process; to reorganize the Commission's departments; to deal with staff and other resource shortages; to complete the budgetary and staffing reforms; and to establish new rules for the investigation of fraud (*Financial Times*, 15/1/99 and 26/2/99). Many of these plans had already been flagged up in the Commission's Work Program at the end of the previous year so that we might conclude that these were more than just knee-jerk reactions to the events of early 1999. What changed was the engagement of the media in these issues. It is ironic that the dispute with the EP meant a great deal more press coverage of Santer's reform plans that had been the case before earlier in his presidency. Moreover, two codes of conduct were in fact published early in March: the first dealing with the conduct of the Commissioners and their financial interests; and the second with the relationship between the Commissioners and their departments (Commission, 1999), though formal agreement of the codes was delayed as a result of the events of mid-March.

Santer had been able to avert a vote of censure by the Parliament in January 1999 by agreeing to go along with an independent inquiry which was to investigate allegations of fraud, mismanagement and nepotism within the Commission.²² In the first instance this was to focus on the College of Commissioners, with a second report to be published on the Commissions services at a later stage. At the first stage of the investigation the Committee of Independent Experts²³ limited their focus to a number of cases which had been subject to as yet unproven allegations and rumors, most of which had taken place under the Delors regime. These concerned the Tourism Unit; the MED (Mediterranean) Programs; ECHO (humanitarian aid); the LEONARDO DA VINCI program (education); the operation of the Commission's Security Office; nuclear safety; and allegations of favoritism, particularly those concerning Commissioner Edith Cresson and her entourage. From these specific cases, the experts drew a number of far-reaching conclusions summarized in their report which was issued on 15 March 1999.

The conclusions of the Report were considered to be particularly damning even though no fraudulent activities by the Commissioners themselves were identified. A number of general and pervasive weaknesses in the management, organization and administrative culture of the Commission were highlighted. Eight general themes which called for reform were identifiable:

- a loss of control of Commissioners over their departments (DGs);
- a lack of openness and transparency in the Commission's internal decision-making procedures;
- a failure to think through the implications of policy before it is proposed;
- the existence of internal problems, such as "fiefdoms", which prevent the Commission coping with new tasks;
- procedural problems associated with auditing and the investigation of fraud;
- procedural problems associated with calls for and the award of contracts;
- a failure by the Commission to transmit all relevant information to the European Parliament, or indeed to the Commission President and other Commissioners;
- favoritism and nepotism in appointments to Commission posts.

The interpretation of the report by the Parliament and, more specifically, the intervention of Pauline Green, then leader of the Party of European Socialists (PES), during the Commission's late night meeting on the 15 March, provoked the resignation of the Commission. From that moment on the new history of the Santer Commission was written. Indeed, we might even have foreseen this development given Constantinesco's claim that as soon as Santer agreed to take seriously the conclusions of the Committee of Independent Experts, he placed himself under a moral obligation to resign (Constantinesco, 2000).

Nevertheless, at the press conference on 16 March, the day after the resignation, Santer claimed "the tone of the report's conclusions to be wholly unjustified"²⁴ (Santer, 1999b). This did nothing to improve public perceptions of the Commission. The image presented through the media was not only of a Commission riven with fraud, nepotism and corruption, but also of a Commission which had understood the problems, had done nothing to resolve them, and when confronted with evidence denied their extent or any responsibility for them. SEM 2000, MAP 2000 and the "Tomorrow's Commission" initiative were all ignored or forgotten in the rush to vilify Santer. As the Committee of Independent Experts had not considered whether these reforms had had any impact on the Commission, Santer quite understandably voiced his frustration at the way in which his term of office was being depicted.

‘[...] we had tried harder than any before us to improve the Commission’s working methods. When I arrived in office four years ago I set out immediately to modernise the administrative culture of the Commission. Many of those reforms are now taking root. I regret that in the turbulence of the last few weeks, there had not been more attention paid to the reforms we have already set in motion. But perhaps it is an inevitable fact of history that crises often strike not when things get worse but when they start getting better’ (Santer, 1999c).

His frustration was understandable given that he had come to the Commission Presidency with reform in mind, and in recognition that his predecessor Jacques Delors had done nothing to resolve the internal managerial problems plaguing the Commission (Cini, 1996).

The resignation of the acting Commissioners, and of Santer in particular, clearly helped Santer’s designated replacement, Romano Prodi, who was nominated by the EU’s leaders in Berlin early in June 1999. From the first, Prodi went out of his way to demonstrate his commitment to Commission reform. This was done not in a vague rhetorical manner, but took the form of concrete and substantive plans. Throughout the Spring of 1999, in speeches to the European Parliament, Prodi showed that he was thinking through the implications of reform, highlighting key problems and posing solutions. For Prodi, the reform agenda was set before his appointment to the post of Commission President. His apparently new initiatives were largely built on the “Tomorrow’s Commission” (DECODE) initiative, that is, on the reform process underway. However, the resignation crisis has meant that the stakes of Commission reform had been raised enormously. Parliamentary and media pressure on the new President had raised both popular expectations and the visibility of the issue.

DISCOURSE, CULTURE AND THE REFORM OF THE COMMISSION

How, then, might we understand the reform efforts of Jacques Santer? This paper began by identifying two ways in which discourses can become embedded within organizations, namely the processes of *institutionalization* and *internalization*. In the context of this paper, institutionalization refers to the embedding of a discourse within the structures and procedures of an organization, while internalization implies the embedding of that discourse within the organization’s culture. It is suggested here that when reform is driven by a new discourse, it is more likely to be successful when that discourse is both institutionalized and internalized. Moreover, in order to ensure that a discourse becomes internalized, actors (or change initiators) must intervene in the cultural

dynamic (that is, the circular relationship between assumptions, values, symbols and artifacts) which pervade all organizations.

It was also suggested at the start of this paper that some reforms are shallow. These reforms do not imply any change in organizational culture, though there is an assumption that reforms will only be successful if they fit with the existing culture of the organization. By contrast, a deeper reform process which seeks to change the culture of an organization will only be successful if undertaken in an open and inclusive way, implying dialogue with organizational members in circumstances where the change initiator is aware of the importance of culture and plays a symbolically important role in the process of cultural change.

The planned reform of the European Commission under Jacques Santer was informed by a new discourse, one which placed emphasis on both improved effectiveness and accountability within the EU's administration, and one which was largely drawn from the administrative discourses of the northern European member states. But the Santer reforms were not just about reforming structures and procedures; they were also about changing the culture of the Commission. His objective was not simply to provide a fit between the Commission's existing organizational culture and the reforms proposed, but to change the culture of the organization. Indeed, Jacques Santer and Erki Liikanen, the Commissioner responsible for reform, frequently referred to the importance of changing the administrative or financial culture of the institution. Yet, it was never really clear how this cultural change was to happen. There seemed an assumption that by changing organizational structures and procedures, there would be a knock-on effect on organizational culture. This, it seems, was rather a large assumption to make.

We can point to two factors that were important in deciding Santer's fate in this respect: first, the rather top-down and elitist reform strategy used; and second, the fact that the "change initiator", that is, Santer had been discredited even before he formally took office. In the case of the first, the manner in which the reform program was undertaken served to alienate Commission officials who became suspicious of the Commission President's and the College's motives. Issues of reform became closely associated with those of fraud and corruption, with discussions about the latter shrouded in secrecy. There was little attempt by the College to engage in dialogue about reform with the Commission's services and unions. Reform was something to be imposed on staff in a top-down fashion: at least this was how the process was perceived to operate. It is ironic that a process which was designed at least in part as a response to a new discourse, one which emphasized not only effectiveness and

accountability, but also transparency and participation, should itself be implemented using tools more reminiscent of the “Monnet Method”. While Santer’s reform agenda focused on *desired ends* then, the means to those ends, that is, the *reform process* itself became a barrier to its implementation.

Second, though clearly related to the first point, Santer’s personal role as a “change initiator” within the reform process was discredited, perhaps from the very start of his presidency. Labeled from the first as a compromise president, his weak mandate from the European Parliament and his rather vague and unexciting program failed to make him popular with Commission officials. Under these circumstances, he was unable to become a positive symbol of a new reformed Commission.

CONCLUSION

Informed by theories of organization and more specifically by the literature on organizational culture, this paper began with a hypothesis about when organizational reform driven by a new discourse is likely to be successful. It was expected that this was more likely to happen when the new discourse became embedded both in structural/procedural reforms (here called institutionalization) and also within the culture of the organization (called internalization). Thus, after identifying the existence of a new discourse within the European institutions, the paper explored the embedding of this new discourse within the reform process initiated by Jacques Santer in 1995. An overview of Santer’s reform program suggested that the reasons for Santer’s failure to initiate fully-fledged reform within the Commission can be attributed to his failure to win support for his reform agenda within the Commission itself. This failure is attributed both to Santer’s lack of credibility as a change initiator and to the rather elitist way in which he oversaw the *process* of reform.

Michelle Cini
JMF-European Forum
RSC-EUI

NOTES

¹ The European Coal and Steel Community's High Authority is judged here to be the forerunner of the EEC Commission.

² For example, early in his term, Santer stated: "Nous devons améliorer la culture budgétaire et administrative de la Commission" (Santer, 1995)

³ Planned change is where an agent deliberately introduces change within an organization (Hatch, 1997, 352).

⁴ In discourse studies, "discourse" tends to be defined more narrowly than in this paper - as a "communication event" for example. Van Dijk (1997, 4) is rather critical of those who adopt a broader definition of discourse as, say, a set of ideas or an ideology, claiming that this only serves to confuse.

⁵ Here, a successful reform is one which meets stated objectives.

⁶ "Assumptions", "values", and "symbols" are defined by Schein (1992) and explained by Hatch (1997). Note that the term "artifacts" includes events, texts, oral statements and physical objects.

⁷ There are inevitably multiple discourses at work here. Thus this paper simplifies in order to focus on one particular aspect of the work of the EU, its administration by the Commission.

⁸ Jean Monnet would later become the first President of the ECSC's High Authority.

⁹ Note that Cram (1999, 45) makes a distinction between the Executive Commission (the Commissioners and their staff), and the Administrative Commission (the services/DGs of the Commission). While the reform of the Executive Commission cuts across that which is intergovernmentally and internally decided, reform of the Administrative Commission tends to be decided almost exclusively within the organization itself.

¹⁰ Cram notes that the Commission has itself been an active contributor to the intergovernmental reform process (1999, 51).

¹¹ At the time of writing, at the end February 2000 Intergovernmental Conference was just getting underway. Whilst at this point the main business of the IGC had not dramatically altered from that mentioned in this paper, there was scope for other institutional reform issues to be dealt with within the framework of the Conference.

¹² DECODE stands for 'Dessiner la Commission de Demain'.

¹³ This was also sloganised as "doing less but better" and in Com (98) 345 final of 27 May 1998, "Legislate less to act better" (Commission, 1998b).

¹⁴ See also Cram (1999, 53-58) and Laffan (1997b, 176-216).

¹⁵ See Commission initiative for sound and efficient management (SEM 2000), (Commission, 1996, point 976).

¹⁶ Laffan (1997a, 430) records how the outgoing budget commissioner left behind him a personal memorandum, the Schmidhuber testimonial, which "pointed to weaknesses in the internal management of the budget by the Commission [and] its weak capacity for self-regulation".

¹⁷ More recently, note the Commission's intention to strengthen its anti-fraud service by transforming the current department (UCLAF) into a Task Force responsible directly to the Secretariat-General. The objective here is to enhance the independence of the anti-fraud team and allow for the investigation of irregularities both within and without the Commission.

¹⁸ General guidelines were agreed on 30 April 1997. Cram (1999, 55) states that this was spearheaded by Commissioner Liikanen and Secretary-General Trojan.

¹⁹ Cram (1999, 58) states that Santer was more or less forced into reforming the Statute of Service by national governments in what was a case of "reform or be reformed".

²⁰ Remember that the two Commissioners in charge of the reforms were Erki Liikkanen, the Finnish Commissioner and Anita Gradin, the Swedish Commissioner.

²¹ Paul van Buitenen, an assistant internal auditor in the Commission leaked a report alleging mismanagement and fraud within the Commission to a Green Member of the European Parliament. He was subsequently suspended on half-pay for breaching staff regulations on the release of confidential documents. He now works for one of the Commission staff unions.

²² Santer stated categorically to the European Parliament: “Je le dis clairement: les recommandations du Comité des Sages seront suivies d’effets” (European Parliament, 1999a).

²³ The Committee comprised five independent experts, who were given six weeks to report on irregularities in the Commission at the level of the Commissioners. It had until September 1999 to address problems identified within the Commission’s services. (European Parliament, 1999b).

²⁴ The English language press declared that Santer had claimed himself “whiter than white”. Peterson (1999b) notes that this was a mistranslation of the French word “blanchi” which is more appropriately translated as exonerated. But even with the more accurate translation this does not reflect well on Santer, even if he was talking quite specifically about his own personal affairs at the time.

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