

National

'Vella's EC portfolio is a feather in cap for Malta'

Kurt Sansone

Hunting may have overshadowed other green issues in the choice of Karmenu Vella to take on the environment portfolio in Brussels but not everyone shares the concern with the same intensity.

"The portfolio is definitely not just about hunting and it would be deflecting from the bigger environmental issues at a European level if the discussion is reduced to

"Protecting the environment and maintaining our competitiveness have to go hand-in-hand"

hunting, important as this issue may be," said Roderick Pace, director of the Institute for European Studies.

Mr Vella was handed a big portfolio as European Commissioner-designate that also comprises fisheries and maritime affairs, in a move which caught many by surprise.

In many ways the inclusion of environment in Mr Vella's portfolio defied the preconception that small countries lapped up the spoils after the big countries took



European Commissioner-designate Karmenu Vella. Photo: Jason Borg

what they wanted, Prof. Pace said when contacted for an initial reaction to the commission rolled out by President-elect Jean-Claude Juncker this week.

"The portfolio Mr Vella has been given is significant and I would say a feather in Malta's cap because it could also be recognition that Malta is not a problem-

atic country, despite our internal failings," he said.

Trying to interpret Mr Juncker's decision may not be straightforward, especially with his controversial choices of putting a Briton in charge of regulating financial services and a Frenchman in charge of economic policy. But Prof. Pace believes that with

southern Europe in economic shambles, Mr Juncker's idea of linking job creation and growth with the green (environmental) and blue (maritime) economies could be one way of regenerating the region.

"Having a former minister from the region driving it could give the idea impetus," he said.

Within this context Mr Vella's business background could dovetail perfectly with Mr Juncker's vision of subjecting the environment to economic growth and job creation.

"Protecting the environment and maintaining our competitiveness have to go hand-in-hand - both are about a sustainable future," Mr Juncker said in his mission statement.

But it is this notion that has people such as Carmel Cacopardo, *Alternativa Demokratika* deputy chairman, worried.

He believes the environment portfolio will be weakened as a result of grouping it with fisheries and maritime affairs. However, a far bigger concern is that Mr Vella will be reporting to the vice president responsible for the cluster on economic development.

"This means the environment will be subjected to economic considerations and I concur with what the World Wildlife Fund said, that Juncker lost an opportunity to create a cluster on sustainable development," Mr Cacopardo said.

He noted that if Mr Juncker's objective was deregulation,

something environmentalists opposed, Mr Vella was unlikely to offer any resistance given his business background.

But Mr Cacopardo also questioned Mr Vella's suitability for the post given his links to business and lack of political exposure to environmental issues.

"Mr Vella held high-profile business directorships until the recent past and, even if unwittingly, he may still be representing the interests of business," he added.

Mr Cacopardo and Prof. Pace did agree on one thing: that Mr Vella's grilling at the hands of MEPs would not be easy.

The green lobby in Brussels has already started ruffling its feathers and in a letter to Mr Juncker yesterday, 10 groups criticised his choice of Mr Vella.

The groups that operate on a European level, including Birdlife, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, fear that Mr Vella's appointment is the first step in weakening environmental legislation in Europe.

Prof. Pace said the environment was "a touchy subject", in which the European Commission had increasingly widened its remit over the years.

"It is a challenging portfolio and what perturbs me most is that the intensity of the grilling which Mr Vella will face at the hands of MEPs will be proportionate to the responsibilities he has been asked to shoulder," Prof. Pace said.

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