

PROFILES

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Many in the European Parliament have for weeks been impatiently waiting for the hearings of the European commissioners-designate to end and for normal business to resume. One MEP, though, has been rushing around ever since this Parliament was formed in July: Bernd Lange, the German socialist who now heads the Parliament's trade – INTA – committee.

Lange's energy and political skills are already being stretched by the challenge of steering through the Parliament three huge trade deals with the United States, Canada and Japan. Already, he has had to master the rules of procedure to ensure that Ukraine and two African trading blocs can immediately gain the benefits of still unratified trade deals with EU.

When Lange enters a room now, he sometimes gives the impression of someone who has just had to run for a bus – or, more fittingly, as an expert driver whose skills are being unexpectedly tested. Lange's private passion is cars (particularly vintage marques) – a passion that he keeps modest: a picture of a 1939 Hanomag in his office is small and unframed – and he grew up surrounded by cars and motorbikes, as the son of owners of a garage and petrol station in Varel in Lower Saxony, north-west Germany. His parents expected him to take over the family business; he chose, instead, to go to university to study political science and religion.

For 11 years after university, he taught both politics and religion in a Gymnasium in the Lower Saxon town of Burgdorf, raising a daughter and a foster son with his wife, a fellow teacher whom he married while at university. By the time he arrived at university, Lange's own political preference had already been established. His choice was not shaped by his parents, who were apolitical (though his maternal grandfather had taken part in the revolution that overthrew Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1918).

Nor, unlike many in his generation, was Lange led to the left by Willy Brandt, the Social Democrats' leader from 1964 to 1987, or by the generational battles of the era. Lange dates his political engagement to his efforts, aged 17, to set up a youth centre. Despite the immediate, local origin of his politics, his perspective on politics soon became very international. He said that while at Göttingen University he realised that "politics on a national scale would no longer suffice to shape the economy". At Göttingen, he joined the trade-union movement, establishing contacts with students not just in western Europe but also in communist Hungary, and when Lange finally left teaching for politics, in 1994, he headed not to the Bundestag in Bonn but to the European Parliament.

From a distance, Lange's international outlook and his interest in business and trade – above all, "fair trade" – seems unsurprising for a person who values religion and who was brought up near the great trading centres of the North Sea. Lange does not frame his intellectual development in such terms. Rather, he says that he was spurred by curiosity about the binding forces of society and by a desire to improve living conditions and to provide stable jobs, while his enthusiasm for motoring fuelled an interest in trade.

The soft-spoken Lange is a moderate, not an ideologue, and is open, while keeping his own counsel. He also knows the world of business from both sides. As an MEP for Lower Saxony, a state that is home to Volkswagen, he has been an important contact for German industry; while, in an interlude in his European Parliament

career in 2004-09, he worked for the German Confederation of Trade Unions in Hanover. Voters caused that interlude, but, in retrospect, Lange appreciates his time in Hanover for providing him with a "change of perspective".

The change has turned Germany, a leading beneficiary of past trade deals, into the crucible for the transatlantic trade and investment partnership (TTIP) with the United States. TTIP is being portrayed, in effect, as rolling back a European lifestyle developed over decades of consensus-forming and political battles. In such a situation, it may prove crucial to have someone like Lange – a calm, non-ideological, technically knowledgeable German socialist open to business – leading the trade committee.

Like Germany as a whole, Lange tries to marry the interests of employers and the employed, of industry and trade unions. Lange will need to be a consensus-builder in his new job – and much more so than his predecessors. In the past, the EU's trade negotiators could expect support: business liked the prospect of easier trade, while trade unions saw trade deals both as job creators and as a means of raising labour standards abroad. The EU, however, is now striking deals with advanced economies in which the principal gains come from simplifying life for business, not just from lower tariffs.

The intensity of the debate means that he is certain to be attacked from all sides, but he may escape personalised attacks. Though he has been a member of INTA for just five of his 15 years in Parliament, his knowledge – and that of his staff – is widely respected. Martin Schulz, the president of the European Parliament, who is the same age as Lange – 58 – and joined the Parliament on the same day as his fellow socialist German, describes Lange as a “man of conciliation” distinguished by personal kindness. He is liked by others, and known for his disregard for hierarchy.

Lange is also a man of convictions, some of which coincide with the current mood in the European Parliament. Though a proponent of TTIP, he personally opposes, for example, the inclusion in the deal of a means of adjudicating in disputes between governments and foreign investors. The issue has become heavy ballast politically; he would like to see it cut out of the trade deal. That might also make it easier to do what he believes is necessary – to re-launch TTIP with greater transparency.

Another, more general conviction is Lange's preference for “fair trade rather than free trade”. It is a phrase that reflects a general concern about labour standards, opposition to unfair trade by other countries and a view that the responsibility of European companies should not end at Europe's borders. Lange's phrase is likely to be amplified with detail when, in November, the Parliament receives draft legislation on ‘conflict minerals’ and – specifically – how to prevent trade aiding conflict in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

Like many other dossiers, this is one where detail can be devilishly tricky, in its practical consequences and political effect. It is no wonder that Lange, a lover of water sports, likes to seek moments of peace at Varel on the North Sea coast, for walks in a landscape familiar since his childhood. But, given the intensity of the debate about TTIP in Germany, Lange may find it difficult to escape trade issues even there. For the next five years, Lange will be one of the quietest and most important men in the eye of a transatlantic storm.

1955: Born in Oldenburg, Lower Saxony

1974: Joins Social Democratic Party

1980: Gains a master's in theology

1981: Passes exam to become a teacher

1983-94: Teaches religion and political science

1994-2004: Member of the European Parliament

1994-97: Member of the Parliament's research, technological development and energy committee

1997-99: Vice-chairman of the Parliament's research, technological development and energy committee

1999-2004: Member of the Parliament's committee on environment, public health and consumer policy

2005-09: Head of the department for economics, environment and Europe in the Lower Saxony office of the DGB, the German Confederation of Trade Unions

2009-: Member of the European Parliament

2009-14: Member of the Parliament's trade committee

2012-14: Spokesman of the S&D group on international trade

2014-: Chairman of the European Parliament's trade committee