

CONSENSUS BUILDER

Dominique Ristori – director-general for energy
By Ian Mundell, European Voice, 06.03.2014

The European Commission's annual forum on the place of fossil fuels in European Union policy was relaunched last month as the Berlin Energy Forum, with a wider remit to talk about energy and climate policy and a more inclusive guest list. Chairing the meeting was Dominique Ristori, recently appointed as director-general for energy, who himself is undergoing something of a relaunch.

While Ristori has worked on energy policy within the Commission for much of the past two decades, the tendency to divide this area into silos means he is an unknown quantity in some major sectors of the industry. Talk to people in renewable energy, for example, and you get blank looks, scratched heads and a sincere wish that he will not leave it too long before dropping by.

Those who know Ristori suggest that they will not have too long to wait. Colleagues and adversaries alike talk of someone who is committed to dialogue and a dedicated consensus-builder. Their one reservation is whether he will be able to work in the same way now that he is at the top of the tree as he did on its lower branches.

Born in Corsica, Ristori studied law and international affairs in Nice before moving on to the Institute of Political Studies in Paris, where he continued to work on European issues. He graduated in 1975, and spent the next two years as an officer in the French navy.

His career in the EU civil service was launched in 1978 when he joined the Commission as an administrator in the personnel department, in Luxembourg. In 1986 he was promoted to become assistant to the director-general. By one of life's little ironies, he is now some sort of model for Commission personnel policy in that he is married to Irene Souka, the Commission's director-general for human resources. So, unofficially at least, he still holds the title of assistant to the director-general. Together they are the Commission's first Franco-Greek director-general duo. Back then, Souka was in another department and he left it himself in 1990 to join the enterprise department as a head of division, responsible for transnational co-operation between small and medium-sized enterprises.

So far, so low profile. Ristori's decisive career change came in 1996, when he moved to the Commission's directorate-general for energy. In charge of European energy policy, he played an important role in the preparation and adoption of the two first directives liberalising the gas and electricity markets. Colleagues of the time recall he was well-informed from the outset. "My impression was that, for the majority of the day and at the weekend, he worked," says Ana Aguado, who had an office near Ristori.

This workaholic air still lingers. Although he cites rugby, opera and literature as hobbies, Ristori's biography shows little sign of someone pursuing activities outside work. His approach to work also left an impression on Aguado. His door was usually open and he would draw in anyone passing to ask what they were working on. Another passer-by would then be invited in and included in the conversation, and then another, regardless of their position in the hierarchy. "He tried to make everyone aware of what others were doing, making links, to incentivise us and to tell us that what we were doing was important," she recalls. "It made us feel like we belonged to the group."

In 2000 Ristori was appointed director in charge of general affairs and resources in the now combined directorate-general for energy and transport. This sprawling brief took in subjects from enlargement to co-ordination of energy and transport research, from the internal market to passengers' rights. Promotion to deputy director-general in 2006 brought a severe narrowing of focus, and for the next four years he concentrated his efforts on nuclear energy policy.

While this drew him closer to the nuclear industry, he impressed its critics as being open to debate and willing to be swayed by a well-argued case. "As such he stood out in a sector characterised by fiercely held positions," says one.

In 2007 Ristori oversaw the creation of the European Nuclear Energy Forum, which was intended to start a broad discussion among stakeholders on the opportunities and risks of nuclear energy. Green groups later walked out, citing a lack of openness to their participation, but the industry shouldered the blame rather than Ristori. Meanwhile, work continued on the nuclear safety directive, adopted in 2009.

After nearly 15 years dealing with energy policy, Ristori took a step sideways. At the end of 2010, he became director-general of the Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), which is charged with providing scientific expertise to support EU policy development. While usually a job for a scientist, Ristori's energy background gave him experience in one of the the centre's main areas of activity. He was, and is again, one of the most important customers for the centre's advice.

During his three years at the JRC, Ristori is credited with aligning its work more closely with the EU's growth and jobs agenda, in particular sponsoring events bringing together the scientific community, industry and government stakeholders. He also signed new co-operation agreements with academic groups and the College of Europe.

Ristori's return to the energy department is seen as a natural step, and possibly one he hoped for all along. He has also, for the moment, taken over his old nuclear energy portfolio until a new deputy can be appointed. So far, he is making a good impression. "He strikes us as having a very balanced approach," says Brian Ricketts, secretary-general of coal industry body Euracoal, who saw Ristori in action in Berlin. "We felt that he wants to take a more realistic view on the future of energy in Europe, not an idealistic view. I think he used the words 'less ideology', and he is absolutely right."

Ana Aguado, now CEO of lobby group Friends of the Supergrid, says: “He's a convinced European and he believes in a European energy policy, but he knows that there is still a lot to do. You can see that he is enjoying the position he has, and I think he was looking forward to it.”

1952: Born in Corsica, France

1973: Law degree and certificate in international studies, University of Nice

1975: Graduate of the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris

1975-77: Officer, French Navy

1978-90: Directorate-general for personnel and administration, European Commission

1990-96: Head of division, directorate-general for enterprise, in charge of transnational co-operation between SMEs

1996-99: Director for European energy policy, department for energy

2000-06: Resources director, department of transport and energy

2006-10: Deputy director-general for energy

2010-13: Director-general, Joint Research Centre

2014-: Director-general for energy