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European Parliament adopts new measures to control conflicts of interest in the European Commission



It's almost as if the European Commission is trying its hardest to shoot itself in the foot. The list of ethical scandals just keeps growing: Cañete, de Gucht, Kroes, Barroso, Oettinger. All of them have merited their own hashtags as public outrage continues to grow in proportion to the Commission's foot-dragging on ethics and transparency. Despite repeated calls for a complete overhaul of its ethics system, President Juncker so far has only promised to increase the cooling off period for ex-Commission Presidents from 18 months to 3 years (proposing only 2 years for all other Commissioners). This step forward is both welcome and completely insufficient. So today, in a show of democratic force, the European Parliament adopted a report by Greens/EFA MEP Pascal Durand which will change the way in which Commissioner's conflicts of interest are assessed by the Parliament. The objective was to overcome the ridiculous situations faced in the case of Climate Commissioner Miguel Arias Cañete, both before he was appointed and after he became climate Commissioner. When Cañete was still just a candidate for Climate Commissioner, there were huge questions about his independence because he owned shares in the oil sector. The resulting scandal led him to sell his shares, but it was reported in the media that he passed them on to his brother in law. Since the Parliament had no powers to summon documentary proof, elected Members had only his word to go on, and he was eventually given the green light. But the story doesn't end there: once in office, Cañete's wife was named in the Panama Papers. And there were literally no mechanisms in place for the Parliament to hold him to account or to review his potential conflicts of interest. So a random "procedure" was made up on the spot and Cañete was invited to a small, secret meeting with select MEPs (we reported on the whole saga here and here). There again, he was somehow let off the hook by his party colleagues and their allies.

So what will change now?

The European Parliament is calling on the Commission to introduce the following ethical reforms:

- Oblige Commissioners to declare ALL financial interests, assets and liabilities and not only those that the Commissioners themselves decide “might create a conflict of interest”;
- Extend the cooling off period to at least three years for all Commissioners so they can’t become lobbyists just after leaving their post;
- Reform the “Ad Hoc Ethical Committee” into a real ethics authority composed of independent experts;
- Introduce binding procedures and sanctions when Commissioners fail to declare a potential conflict of interest or infringe any of their ethical requirements;
- Begin annual reporting on the functioning of the ethics system in the Commission.

As for the oversight of the EU Parliament itself, we will now introduce the following changes into the way the accountability system works:

1. The legal affairs committee will have the power to request documentary evidence and/ or invite the Commission candidate for an interview if it deems that the declaration of interests contains incomplete or contradictory information.
2. It the legal affairs committee is not satisfied that there is no conflict of interests, the procedure for appointing the Commissioner-designate will be suspended and they will not be able to continue to the next stage of their nomination process until their potential conflicts of interest are cleared.
3. If, once a Commissioner is appointed, there is a change in their financial interests or in their role in the Commission, the legal affairs committee will examine the potential conflicts of interest and propose recommendations such as renouncing the financial interests or changing the Commissioner’s responsibilities. If the Parliament’s recommendations are not followed, the Parliament could then call on the Commission President to withdraw confidence in the Commissioner in question.

The future looks brighter after this report, but nothing can absolve the Commission from the need to take a good, hard look at itself and put in place some serious mechanisms that control conflicts of interest and ensure that EU diplomats are working to defend the common good. And the Parliament should make sure it keeps its own house in order too. Click here to read more about that transparency battle: http://www.greens-efa.eu/green-plan-for-transparency-and-integrity-in-the-european-parliament-16082.html

WATCH THIS VIDEO

JOIN THE CAMPAIGN!

1. Use the Commissioner hashtag of your choice: #Oettingate #Barrosogate #Kroes #Cañete
2. Add the picture below or a link to the video above
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