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Europe needs independent oversight to prevent another Dieselgate

Dieselgate inquiry

On Tuesday, the European Parliament will deliver its final verdict on Dieselgate. After a scandal that implicated most major car manufacturers, national governments, and the European Commission, strong words will not be enough. We need big changes to make sure that it won't happen again and consumers are protected. The European Parliament's Dieselgate inquiry came forward with clear recommendations on how to fix the broken system. So why are conservative MEPs teaming up with industry lobbyists to block them?

It's worth remembering how wide-reaching the Dieselgate scandal was. When Volkswagen was caught cheating in laboratory tests on the emissions levels of their cars, it soon turned out to be just the tip of the iceberg. With a steady succession of major manufacturers involved, the Greens in the European Parliament demanded an inquiry. But it wasn't just the car firms that had big questions to answer. We needed to know why neither the European Commission nor the national governments had been able (or willing) to stop them. With emissions contributing towards the early deaths of thousands of people a year in Europe, and cutting pollution key to meeting our climate targets, this was a scandal with consumer, public health, and environmental implications. That's why it's so important the EU gets the response right.

The final report of the inquiry committee makes for sobering reading. There is clear evidence that both national authorities and the European Commission knew what was happening, but looked the other way. With many member states zealously protective of their domestic car industry, they didn't want to take any action that could harm it, even if that meant tacit acceptance of law breaking.

To make sure that there is genuinely impartial oversight, the inquiry has called for the establishment of an independent EU market surveillance agency. This would monitor emissions in real driving conditions and publish findings, making sure any breaches of the rules are brought into the open. They wouldn't be in charge of fines or punishments - that power would remain with the European Commission - but having an independent and transparent agency would make sure that problems are spotted and force EU governments and the Commission to take swift and decisive action. With both the Commission and individual EU governments having proven themselves to be unable to monitor the industry effectively or impartially, surely the case for independent oversight is a bit of a no-brainer?

Unfortunately, not everyone seems to think so. Opponents of the agency include conservative MEPs and industry lobbyists, and they are keen to preserve the status quo. To stop it, they are trying to frame the agency as EU overreach. How could a problem of conflict of interest of poor enforcement be solved by

“more” Europe, they ask. Why should we invest in yet another EU body to solve this problem - surely the EU already has the powers it needs to act?

Such questions completely and deliberately miss the point. No one wants heaps more bureaucracy. We just want to make sure that the existing powers are made independent and transparent. This would not even require new facilities. The EU’s existing Joint Research Centre labs would be more than up to the job. All that is required is independent management to make sure that politics and market surveillance are kept separate. This little change can make a huge difference.

Oversight isn’t the only issue on which some MEPs are soft pedalling. To date, there has been no meaningful attempt to provide compensation for the people who bought cars advertised with falsified emission ratings. Why aren’t European governments standing up for their citizens?

The irony is that consumer and environmental protection have been two of the EU’s strongest points. At its best, the EU has delivered concrete policies, which have protected consumers from being ripped off and ensured their rights when standards fall short. On the environment, the EU has also been a champion. When the EU ratified the Paris climate agreement, it made a promise to the world that it would play its part in reducing emissions.

With the EU under attack from all sides, now would be a good time to remind Europeans once more that it can protect them and the environment. Only a Europe that stands up for consumers and prioritises the environment and the health of citizens over short-term national interests, can restore trust in our European project.

We’ll be pushing hard to ensure this happens. This is the first big legislative test for the European Parliament since the scandal broke. Dieselgate was the result of so many failings; MEPs must not make another one now.

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