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Members of the European Parliament failing to improve their own ethics system

A blog post from our Transparency and Democracy campaign



Today, members of the European Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee have voted to amend their "Rules of Procedure", which govern the way the EU's only directly elected institution works and which lay down ethics rules for MEPs in a legally binding Code of Conduct for avoiding conflicts of interest. The Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament has managed to secure some improvements to enhance integrity and transparency, but were blocked from achieving progressive reforms in a number of areas. This blog post explains what has been achieved so far, and what remains to be fixed when it comes to ethics in the Parliament. **For more details, download the briefing at the bottom of this page.**

Improvements to the current system adopted in Committee

- **Fixing ethics in the EU Commission:** One of the biggest achievements is the strengthening of the European Parliament's powers of scrutiny over potential conflicts of interest of EU Commissioners during their time in office. The case of Climate Commissioner Cañete, who was named in various media reports related to corruption and whose wife's name was also found in the Panama Papers, showed how weak (or non-existent) the current scrutiny process is. This has been clarified thanks to a report drafted by Greens/EFA MEP Pascal Durand, which contained a number of recommendations for improvement that have now been incorporated into the revised Rules of Procedure.

- **Removing Parliament access rights for uncooperative lobbyists:** During the inquiry committees set up to investigate tax evasion, some companies that were invited to appear before the European Parliament refused to show up, and then requested separate face-to-face meetings with MEPs. This new proposal will strip them of their access badges to the EU Parliament if they fail to cooperate with a committee of inquiry without "sufficient justification".

- **Increasing transparency of side incomes:** MEPs who earn additional money on the side have to declare it in various bandwidths, but until now, anyone earning more than 10,000€ a month did not have to specify how much more they were earning. Now, they will have to indicate the amount to the nearest 10,000€ so there will be more transparency on who the "big earners" are.

- **Improving democratic powers of inquiry:** Currently, proposals to start committees of inquiry must pass through a bureaucratic body called the Conference of Presidents before they are voted on by the full Parliament. This gives the larger groups a de facto power to veto these proposals before they are even voted on democratically. This has now been reversed in the new Rules of Procedure.

- **Shedding more light on cross-party intergroups:** European Parliament intergroups meet regularly to discuss specific topics (like sports policy, the ceramic industry or transparency). They are composed of members from various different parties and have been used by lobby groups to gather support for their issues. We have managed to increase the transparency of intergroups' funding, which they will now be obliged to report on annually.

Issues that still need to be further improved

- **The Ethical Advisory Committee is not being reformed:** We have called for a number of improvements to be made to the Parliament's Advisory Committee that deals with ethics issues: we wanted it to be composed of independent members, to be able to initiate its own investigations, and to have meaningful powers to ensure that sanctions are imposed on MEPs that don't comply with the ethics rules. But our efforts to reform the whole system have so far been rejected by the larger groups: they only wanted to change the current wording slightly so that the EP President "shall" (instead of "may") instruct the ethics committee to look into a case. And, because of their resistance, it is still only the EP President that has the power to impose sanctions, with no transparency or other mechanisms in place in case the President has not followed the advice of the Advisory committee.

- **Second jobs are not being adequately dealt with:** MEPs are currently free to engage in various different roles in the private sector, which raises questions about potential conflicts of interest, particularly when MEPs - who are elected to defend the general interest - are also engaged in lobbying activities that lead them to act on behalf of private interests. Other political groups, notably the centre-right EPP, claimed that restrictions on their outside employment would be a "violation" of their fundamental rights, but despite this it was possible to secure a ban on paid professional lobbying directly linked to the Union decision-making process. However, this means that providing advice to others on how to lobby is still allowed.

- **Revolving doors are not being tackled:** We have been calling for a cooling off period to be

placed on former MEPs who move into the private sector to work for industries they were previously tasked with regulating. Due to the blockage by other groups, who claim that MEPs should have “the right to work”; the only change that was made was that ex-MEPs should now inform the European Parliament of their new jobs if they plan to work as lobbyists.

- **There is no proposal to move forward on the legislative footprint:** The centre-right EPP and the liberal group ALDE are adamantly opposed to the idea of being transparent about the interest groups that they meet with; and so they blocked any attempt at making it mandatory to produce a list of lobbyists that had a role in their decision-making process. For this reason, we still only have a voluntary legislative footprint.

What next?

Key topics related to lobbying transparency were not dealt with as there will soon be a new transparency register which should also include parts of the Council of the European Union (in addition to the Parliament and Commission). Negotiations on the new register between the three main institutions are due to begin soon, so it was decided that changes relating to lobby transparency should be discussed then. As for the new rules of procedure, the vote in plenary to adopt the final rules will take place in mid-December. There will be a chance there for political groups to table further amendments to the rules of procedure, though all changes have to be adopted by an absolute majority. The Greens/EFA group will try to work with others to secure progressive changes, but for this we need your support! MEPs need to know that citizens care about how transparent and ethical the European Parliament is; otherwise they won’t vote to improve the current system and we will just end up with “business as usual”.

- Click here to see a detailed briefing of the gains and losses so far on ethics and transparency in the European Parliament

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[Quote from Terry Reintke]

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