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“Politics as Usual” does not suffice: We need an ethical Commission we can trust

Ethics and Integrity

Ursula Von der Leyen, the new Commission President, is working to put together a new Commission. Many of the candidates to become European Commissioners have been the subject of political scandals, investigations for corruption or questionings about potential conflicts of interest.

While the existence of political scandals is unfortunately nothing new, there is now one key difference. The European Parliament has a new power: the ability to prevent a candidate Commissioner from taking up their post if they fail to convince Members of the legal affairs committee (JURI) that they are free from perceived conflicts of interest.

This is the first time ever that this new procedure is being implemented, putting new MEPs to the test in what promises to be a defining moment for how seriously ethics, integrity and independence is to be taken in the next political mandate.

This new procedure was adopted thanks to the Greens/EFA campaign for changes to the relevant rules that would prevent another “#StopCanete” campaign from ever needing to be launched again. (A quick recap: in 2014, Miguel Arias Cañete, the candidate Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy, held shares in oil sector companies. Despite the furore caused by the evident clash between those business interests and the climate interests he was tasked with representing, he was still appointed as Commissioner after public pressure reportedly led him to sell his shares, despite his family’s close ties to the companies.)

This is why, in the last term, we drafted a European Parliament report on Commissioner’s conflicts of interest, managed to push the European Commission to somewhat improve their ethics rules, and changed

the Commissioner's nomination process so that they cannot be appointed if JURI finds that their declarations of interest are not complete, are unclear, or show a clear risk of a conflict of interest arising that could negatively affect their work.

We cannot disappoint the people across Europe who turned up to vote at the last elections by letting 'politics as usual' reign in Brussels. If we want a Commission that can deliver real change for people and the planet, we need to be able to trust that they are acting in the public interest, free from political pressure and independently of any private economic interests.

This is why our MEPs in the Legal Affairs Committee (JURI) will be insisting that all candidates sell their shares in companies with economic interests that are tied to European Union decision-making. And we will push so that the MEPs in JURI fully use the Parliament's new powers to block candidates that have failed to demonstrate the highest levels of independence, ethics and integrity.

But whatever happens in JURI, the need for an independent ethics body is clear. Although this new conflicts of interest test is a step in the right direction, the process remains highly political. JURI committee members will only agree to block a candidate Commissioner if there is a majority among the biggest groups.

If the three biggest groups decide to band together to wave through most of the candidates in JURI, there will still be another round of hearings before the competent Parliament committees (between 30th September and 8th October). We will be there, asking the uncomfortable questions. In the end, the new European Commission can only be appointed if the European Parliament votes in favour of Von der Leyen's whole new set-up - so this story is far from over yet.

To find out more about our work on Transparency, Democracy, Ethics and Integrity, visit: https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/priority/group/transparency/

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