

EU must take 'far tougher' action to halt 'revolving door phenomenon'

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News

The commission and parliament must ensure that 'new rules' are put in place to stop 'conflicts of interest', says Vicky Cann.



While discussing the EU's revolving door phenomenon, the European ombudsman recently said in a speech to MEPs in March of this year that 2014 is "a year of major changeover in the EU". Her interest in this issue was sparked by a major complaint submitted by Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) and other NGOs, which details strong concerns about the way in which the European commission interprets conflicts of interest and applies the existing revolving doors rules.

This is an important area of public policy which can determine the level of public trust with which the commission is held. Yet several recent revolving door examples involving commission staff raise eyebrows about how such cases are handled.

Until September 2013, João Pacheco was deputy director-general at DG agriculture and he played a

leading role in the EU's common agricultural policy, with a total of over 20 years of experience within the EU institutions. Yet in October 2013 he joined Allen F. Johnson & Associates (AFJ), a US-based consultancy with a Brussels office, as director of European markets. He also set up his own consultancy which brags of "a unique set of knowledge, experience and contacts, to provide consulting for agribusiness firms and associations".

The commission says it has been looking into Pacheco, recently telling EUobserver, "This procedure is still on-going and we are therefore unable to provide any further comments at this point in time". But CEO first raised this case over six months ago and we have now submitted a fresh complaint to the ombudsman's office regarding this case.

Peter Faross was acting deputy director-general at DG energy until his retirement in September 2013. The commission has authorised Faross to become secretary-general of the Union Européenne de l'Artisanat et des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises (UEAPME), the small and medium business lobby group, on the understanding that for 12 months he would not undertake any lobbying on energy matters vis-à-vis his former colleagues.

But in CEO's view, this is not enough to prevent the risk of conflicts of interest from arising. For such a senior and experienced official, the commission should have gone further and implemented a cooling-off period or ban on Faross accepting this kind of lobby job for three years.

Meanwhile, Per Hellström is a former head of mergers in the environment and energy industries at DG competition, and prior to that, he was head of DG competition's anti-trust unit dealing with information industries, internet and consumer electronics. Now, he is on sabbatical from the commission and working as senior director for government and regulatory affairs, competition law and policy for Europe for Apple.

"New parliamentary rules should be put in place to ensure that MEPs do not use their previous experience, contacts and insider know-how to benefit private interests"

The commission approved Per Hellström's request to go on sabbatical with Apple, provided he doesn't lobby DG competition colleagues. Yet Hellström's job at Apple makes him responsible for government and regulatory affairs, competition law and policy in Europe, a job which surely is intimately linked to lobbying and advocacy work. Indirect lobbying is not covered by the inadequate restrictions on Hellström.

But other EU institutions are not immune to serious concerns about the revolving door either.

In May, Corien Wortmann-Kool MEP, who did not stand for re-election to the European parliament, joined the supervisory board of the major Dutch insurance company Aegon. Wortmann-Kool was a member of the European parliament's economic and monetary affairs committee. Aegon made no secret of the fact that her nomination to the board was because of her parliamentary experience, and several recent dossiers, such as Solvency II, were worked on by the economic and monetary affairs committee and have been of great interest to insurance companies like Aegon. In CEO's view, new parliamentary rules should be put in place to ensure that MEPs do not use their previous experience, contacts and insider know-how to benefit private interests.

These cases and more on CEO's RevolvingDoorWatch database illustrate why the commission, parliament and all EU institutions need to take far tougher action to block the revolving door between the EU institutions and the lobby industry.

About the author

Vicky Cann is a campaigner at Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO)

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