

Watchdogs of the European system

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Watchdogs of the European system

Henry Kissinger, as U.S. Secretary of State, is famously said to have asked: “If I want to call Europe, who do I call?” Until recently, the scientific community thought it had an answer to this question: the chief scientific adviser (CSA) to the president of the European Commission (EC). Two weeks ago, that changed.

For 3 years, Anne Glover, a Scottish microbiologist, served as the CSA, a high-profile ambassador for European science and a champion of scientific evidence in the machinery of Brussels policymaking. She worked tirelessly to build a network of science advisers or equivalents across the 28 member states of the European Union (EU). All of this came to an abrupt halt in November 2014, when the handover to a new EC under President Jean-Claude Juncker saw the CSA role vanish overnight. This provoked dismay from scientific organizations, who condemned it as a backward move, out of step with the onward march of evidence-informed policy making.

Viewed from the Berlaymont, the EC’s headquarters, the decision was more finely balanced. Although the model of a presidential or prime ministerial science advisor is firmly established in countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, and New Zealand, it sits more awkwardly with the political cultures of Germany, France, and other EU countries, which tend to rely on committees and other distributed sources of expertise. Brussels also has a distinct political culture, and, as Anne Glover admits, an individual with few resources was ill equipped to intervene effectively in the delicate balance of its decision-making.

President Juncker insisted that he was still committed to scientific advice and asked Carlos Moedas, the Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, to lead a review of how it could be better organized. Two weeks ago, the findings were unveiled. As expected, the CSA remains dead and buried and will be replaced by a seven-strong “high-level group” of experts, who will be appointed be-

fore the end of the year. These experts, described by a senior official as “watchdogs of the system,”* will be fully independent but supported by a team of around 25 staff from the EC’s research directorate. Further resources of “up to €6 million” will be offered to Europe’s national academies to enable them to play a greater role in the provision of advice.† Good working links will also be developed to the EC’s in-house science service, the Joint Research Centre.

On paper, this is an elegant solution to a tricky design brief. Involving the academies is a particularly smart move, as it will allow the high-level group to draw on a far deeper pool of expertise. The group will also reach out to universities across Europe and to global networks of expertise, such as the recently formed International Network for Government Science Advice.

However, parts of the new mechanism still need to be fine-tuned. Anne Glover drew fire from some quarters for speaking out in support of genetically modified crops. Will the new group be similarly independent and free to engage in controver-

sial debates, or will it only be able to answer questions posed to it by the EC? Another unknown is how the group will be selected. The EC says that scientific excellence is the main criterion, but as with all EU bodies, it will have to nod to the diversity of member states. The group is also meant to combine insights from several disciplines, which suggests at least one social scientist and one engineer joining natural scientists in the mix. And of course, connecting science to policy is a serious craft in itself, so a Nobel Prize may be less of a trump card than a few years of experience in a policy role.

A search committee for the seven advisers will start work any day now. After a turbulent few months, the EC has an opportunity to put in place a genuinely world-class, interdisciplinary, and independent advisory system. Europe’s scientists, its policy-makers—and above all, its 500 million citizens—deserve nothing less.

– James Wilsdon



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James Wilsdon (@jameswilsdon) is a professor of science and democracy at the Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK. E-mail: J.Wilsdon@sussex.ac.uk

*<http://sciencebusiness.net/news/77034/%E2%80%98Watchdogs-of-the-system%E2%80%98-the-EU%E2%80%99s-new-scientific-advisory-panel-explained>. †<http://news.sciencemag.org/europe/2015/05/breaking-european-commission-create-new-high-level-science-advice-panel>.