

“I strongly support NGOs’ call for more transparency”

By François Paquay

Interview with Anne Glover, former chief scientific adviser and current Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow at the Robert Bosch Academy



Anne Glover

Anne Glover has been the first – and possibly the last – chief scientific adviser (CSA) to the president of the European Commission. From 2012 to 2014, she advised José Manuel Barroso on all aspects of science, technology and innovation. Her post ceased to exist when Jean-Claude Juncker took office in November 2014 and the Commission is currently still pondering over its new approach to scientific advice.

The way the new executive put an end to your mission has been described as rather brutal. You have said that neither Juncker nor his office have replied to your e-mails. Do you feel this treatment was inconsiderate?

No, I don't. My post was always a temporary one, I always agreed to this and I was always intending to leave. I wrote to President Juncker in September to brief him on my role, to explain what had worked and what had not and to offer my suggestions for scientific advice during his presidency. I also told him I would not be seeking reconfirmation in the role, before any discussion had happened. But I am surprised. Why would he not want to know about the role from the person who had held it? That seemed unusual to me.

Jean-Claude Juncker has asked Research Commissioner Carlos Moedas to reflect and present options on how to better institutionalise independent scientific advice to the Commission. I understand that Moedas has reached out to you...

Yes, indeed. Before I left, I made sure he

received the same briefing that I had sent to President Juncker. I am in Berlin at the moment and Commissioner Moedas e-mailed me to ask if we could have a telephone discussion about the role of CSA. I was happy to do that.

During this discussion, did you have the impression he was in favour of maintaining the post of CSA?

When we spoke, he was not at the stage where he was going to commit himself one way or the other. He has not shared any of his thinking with me on that. One thing we did agree on was that having scientific advice that is independent was valuable.

If you had to single out one recommendation on how to improve scientific advice at Commission level, what would it be?

The biggest difficulty I had was that I felt very separate from all the Commission procedures, for example concerning impact assessment. For scientific advice to be really effective, it would be important to integrate it properly into the existing procedures. The best way to have strong, robust and easily defensible policy is to ensure that it is based on the best possible evidence. The role of a science adviser is to make sure this evidence is available. Evidence is somehow used as a scapegoat. People will say they won't put forward legislation because they don't have enough evidence. Often, there actually is enough evidence, but a political decision is made for economic, political or ethical reasons. This is legitimate, but there needs to be transparency and honesty about that.

The new Commission seems very committed to strengthening its better regulation agenda, part of which is to ensure that legislation is based on sound scientific evidence. Do you feel there is a genuine intention to enhance EU policy making?

I would hope so, but I have no basis on which to judge that. I see very clear statements that the Commission wishes to enhance this better regulation agenda. Of course, if they want to base their policy on evidence – particularly as EU policies tend to be very technical – they are very reliant on science and technology to be able to underpin those policies. If there is a real appe-

tite for this, clearly, getting independent scientific advice is going to be important. NGOs have considered that the post of CSA in itself was “fundamentally problematic” because “it concentrates too much influence in one person”. You have stated yourself that if the post were to be re-established, it should “be allowed to be much more transparent”. Why?

First, let me say that I fundamentally disagree with what the NGOs were saying. They knew perfectly well that I had very little power. But they did raise a very interesting point. I would have much preferred that the formal advice I provided to President Barroso could have been made public, if I could have written down what my advice was, what facts and information I was taking into consideration and who I spoke to. Because I can understand very well that people are suspicious or nervous about advice they think has been provided. How can you trust people if you don't know what they are doing? Although I may have disagreed with NGOs on many other issues, I do strongly support their call for more transparency. With transparency comes the possibility to trust people. You might not always agree, but trust is a good place to start any dialogue. However, there will always be times when the president picks up his phone or calls you into his office, asking you to talk him through something. If what the president asks for is made public, it could easily be misinterpreted or misconstrued. There will always be instances where there are private conversations. And I don't know how that can be made transparent. As a courtesy, the president should be able to seek the advice of an adviser without having to itemise them and explaining why he is asking those questions. ■

Moedas has yet to decide

The Commission told *Europolitics* that Commissioner Carlos Moedas has not made a decision yet on the future of scientific advice within the Commission. He has listened to many opinions, an official explained, but there is currently no favourite option and no exact time frame.