

#EESCplenary: ‘We need a coalition of forces for change’; says European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly



At the September plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, took stock of the ground covered during her term and gave her insight into the challenges facing the European public administration and how they should be addressed, while the EESC president, Luca Jahier, stressed the need for people-oriented EU institutions.

The European Ombudsman, **Emily O'Reilly**, underlined that when EU institutions faced a sensitive issue, cooperation among them was vital in order to bring about change. *When there is a difficult and sensitive issue, it's always collaboration and a coalition of forces of all actors involved, from the institutions to the Member States, that helps to change it," she said. "It is only when it reaches a certain level of pressure that we can see change, because the issue then comes higher on the agenda of the institutions,* she added.

Citizens' trust in government and in the public sector has declined, despite the fact that institutions have become more open and transparent and the quality of service has improved in the last two decades. *This shows the demand for more people-centred governance as we move from governing for people to governing with people, putting in place the kind of 'participatory decision-making' to which the 2030 Agenda aspires,* the EESC president, **Luca Jahier**, pointed out.

The 2030 Agenda plays a key role for the EESC, as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cannot be achieved without determined and sustained efforts on the part of public institutions. *The quality of the institutions, good governance and sound administration are key determining factors for the EU and a precondition for the economic and social transformation towards sustainable development,* continued **Mr Jahier**. *Public authorities must be able to adjust to dynamic and often disruptive changes in the economy and society.*

Mr Jahier highlighted the fact that the Committee was an EU institution geared towards European citizens, and praised the role and work of the European Ombudsman in this respect. *We must bear in mind that the EESC is made up of 350 members who are in constant contact with the people on the ground,* he observed. *We need people-centred governance and we believe that the European Ombudsman has a crucial role to play in helping the EU institutions to adapt to this change. You have adopted a number of measures in this direction, and all the institutions are grateful to you for your work. The Committee strictly follows your recommendations and will continue to do so in the future,* he added.

Ms O'Reilly emphasised the common values between the two EU institutions, arguing that the work carried out collectively supported and amplified the voice of European citizens. *We help each other and we learn from each other. You are the bridge between the civil society groups that you represent on the ground all over Europe and the political level of the EU in Brussels. The European Ombudsman is a bridge between the citizens and the EU administration and my challenge is to make it meaningful*, she continued.

Individual complaints represent the vast majority of inquiries, approximately 98%, received by the European Ombudsman's office. In order to provide the most effective service for citizens, own-initiative measures are also possible, for example looking into broader issues of suspected maladministration. Transparency is essential: *The EU institutions already have high standards of transparency, often higher than national or regional administrations, but sometimes they don't always appreciate how difficult it can be for citizens to understand how they work, how decisions are made and how citizens can get involved in influencing that decision-making*, she stressed.

Ms O'Reilly mentioned Euroscepticism, saying that it increased when people did not know how decisions were made, why they were made and who had made them. *Real debate about the EU can take place only when people have facts and insight. Otherwise we are left with unchallenged caricatures that feed into certain populist narratives*, she said.

The investigation that most reflected these concerns looked into legislative transparency in the Council. Following the inquiry, the Ombudsman recommended putting an end to the Council's practice of automatically marking documents as "not for public view" and starting to systemically record the positions of national governments on legislation, so that the citizens' right to know these positions was made real. *If this were done, if citizens knew the positions their own governments were taking on legislation that affects them*, she said, *it would make it more difficult for some national ministers to blame 'Brussels' for laws that they have in fact agreed to, or to take credit for popular EU laws they might even have voted against*.