



"Raising awareness about the right to complain - the next steps for the European Ombudsman"

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Summary of the Main Ideas Put Forward at the Public Workshop to Mark the 10th Anniversary of the European Ombudsman Institution Brussels, 6 December 2005

On 6 December 2005, the European Ombudsman, P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, held a public workshop to mark the tenth anniversary of the institution. Around sixty representatives of NGOs, interest groups, regional and local representations in Brussels, and EU institutions attended the workshop, which was moderated by former President of the European Parliament, Pat Cox.

This paper aims to summarise the main ideas that were put forward at the workshop, in line with the four themes that were discussed.

How can the European Ombudsman raise awareness about his work?

The European Ombudsman has two immediate challenges in terms of raising awareness: many people do not know what an Ombudsman is; many people do not know what the EU does. Any information material produced by the Ombudsman must address these two issues in a clear and straightforward way.

The Ombudsman must improve his internet presence. He should:

- Explain in simple terms what he can and cannot do;
- Describe how a complaint can be made;
- Provide short, straightforward examples of complaints he can deal with;
- Ensure that as many other websites as possible link to his;
- Make sure that he is clearly visible on the Europa site;
- Request national ombudsman offices to include a section on their sites about the European Ombudsman.

The European Ombudsman cannot help everybody. He must target potential complainants better by, for example, reaching out to citizens advice centres, national and local politicians, and organisations based in Brussels.

EU institutions should systematically inform people they are in contact with about their right to complain. Contracts, for example, should always include this information.

The Ombudsman could raise his public profile by pursuing initiatives that go beyond responding to complaints. Such campaigns would help to attract media attention, capture the public imagination and be meaningful for citizens. Examples of potential issues include



transparency, discrimination, late payment...

What can the Ombudsman do to encourage you to make use of your right to complain?

It is not difficult to lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman. Not everyone is aware of this.

The Ombudsman needs to get the message across that complaining is very straightforward.

And his services are available to provide information about the process.

Some choose not to complain because they feel the process takes too long. But, relatively speaking, the Ombudsman offers a fast service, one that is free and flexible (with a broader review criterion than legality).

Some potential complainants - especially those who rely on Community funding - fear negative repercussions from the institutions. The possibility of lodging collective complaints was discussed and the Ombudsman confirmed that this is possible. Anonymity, on the other hand, can be problematic. The complainant must be identified to the institution concerned. It is not necessary for the complainant to be the person affected by the alleged maladministration but, in practice, it may be difficult for the institution to give a meaningful answer if it does not know which file to look at. The Ombudsman has made clear that any attempt to disadvantage or threaten to disadvantage a person for exercising the right to complain to the Ombudsman would itself be maladministration. Institutions should therefore take the necessary steps to ensure that their officials are aware of this and act accordingly.

Sometimes the very mention of lodging a complaint to the Ombudsman ensures that the administration acts promptly to resolve the problem.

How can your organisation help the Ombudsman build on the achievements of the past decade?

Ombudsman offices are complaint-driven. It is only on the basis of complaints that he can effect change in the administration. Problems will persist and everyone will encounter the same difficulties unless they are brought to the Ombudsman's attention. So use your right to complain!

Complaints help the institutions by drawing attention to problem areas. All parties can learn from their mistakes. The idea should be promoted that the Ombudsman is part of the team that is trying to improve the administration. In this way, complaints will come to be seen as something positive and not something to be feared.

Public officials should be recognised for their hard work and encouraged to take responsibility. The administration should trust them. Promoting a service culture should become part of their annual evaluation. The Ombudsman's office should play a part in training EU officials.

It is vital that the institutions give appropriate follow-up to the Ombudsman's decisions, whether they consist of friendly solutions, critical remarks or special reports.

How can the Ombudsman contribute to the Union's "period of reflection"?

The Ombudsman is a key part of the structure for building trust between citizens and the institutions.



If NGOs, interest groups, companies are discontent with the institutions' procedures (too slow, bureaucratic, overly complex), they will disengage. The Ombudsman must continue to draw the institutions' attention to problems so that they can improve their performance. He can help promote a constructive dialogue between the two sides.

Further information about the workshop, including the programme and the Ombudsman's introductory remarks, can be found at:

<http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/10anniversary/en/default.htm>