

Speech by the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, at the Conference of the European Network of Ombudsmen

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I would like to begin by extending a very warm welcome to all of you, Ombudsmen, EU officials, civil society members and others, and to thank you for attending our network seminar. Some of you live and work here others have travelled long distances and my colleagues and I are very grateful for your presence here today.

Brussels, as you know is still recovering from the terrorist attacks in March in which 32 innocent people were killed and more than 300 wounded. Events such as these are therefore particularly important for this city and in coming together to discuss matters fundamental to respect for human life, we are also honouring and remembering the dead and the wounded and their families. And today we also mourn the deaths of the men and women in Orlando and hope for the recovery of the wounded and the comfort of all the bereaved families.

Terrorist attacks here and in other parts of Europe added to the British referendum on EU membership next week, to the migration and economic crises that have sparked political turbulence across much of the EU, to rule of law concerns in parts of Europe, and to growing Euroscepticism, remind us of the fragility of what we have taken for granted – peace, fundamental freedoms, respect for human rights, prosperity, the value of mutual co-operation, even the continued future of the EU in its current state.

The UK referendum campaign has narrowed the debate to the language of mathematics and fortune telling. Remarkable calculations – sometimes down to the last pound and penny - are made about future incomes and house prices by one side while figures produced with equal and puzzling certainty by the other side claim to predict the number of future migrants, foreign jobseekers , prison spaces or any indicator that provokes an emotional response in the voter.

The debate rarely speaks to or about the Europe of values, democracy, the rule of law, equality. For many citizens they are intangible qualities, difficult at times to be felt as they go about their daily lives, and therefore more rarely articulated by Brexit campaigners or by others as the slide rule is increasingly applied across the plus and minuses of Union membership and not just in the UK.

But as Ombudsmen, we are precisely in that unspoken space, we are the actual embodiment of



those European values. We are a European value. The very creation of our institution in our home countries and here amid the EU institutions, was the expression of a political and civic will to create an institution to support the values that underpin the protection of the dignity of every human being. We stand between the big state and the small citizen and in that space we seek to narrow the power gap between the two.

As Ombudsmen we have much in common, we come together here as a community, but at home we operate within our own particular universe, with distinct and different cultures, histories, politics and values. The challenge for all of us is to continue to work within those cultures when values shift, when they may not always conform to those imposed by treaties and conventions or even by domestic laws. And at these times, our work becomes even more challenging as value norms are disrupted by economic and political change.

It is easy to be an Ombudsman when times are good, when the economy is healthy, when governments are stable, when wars do not displace and create untold numbers of the dispossessed, when politicians do not seek to exploit the fear or hatred of the other for their own ends. At those times, we work with ease, in an environment that fully accepts our role and our recommendations. We can congratulate ourselves on our effectiveness and authority but only because everybody has agreed to play the game. In bad times, the rules of the game can change, and recommendations that once slipped through may now be ignored, refused, or challenged.

So it is against that backdrop that we have put together our programme for this seminar and decided to hold it in the centre of EU decision making. We want to bring together the Ombudsmen of Europe, civil society, and the people who work in the institutions and agencies of the EU to explore issues that are critical to our mutual work at this time.

EU officials are at times cynically dismissed as faceless bureaucrats, as indeed are many hardworking public servants generally. I hope that this seminar will expose you to the actual work the EU institutions and agencies particularly in these difficult times. I also want to acknowledge the work of the many civil society groups who work in Brussels and who bring important and sometimes challenging perspectives both to the work of the Ombudsman and of the institutions.

We will have three distinct sessions, Migration, the Rule of Law, and Lobbying Transparency. The first two issues are familiar, the third perhaps not so much. The migration crisis has affected all of us as Ombudsmen with some colleagues deeply involved on a hands on day to day basis, while others, involved less directly with migrants, are still dealing nonetheless with subtle shifts in the political culture when it comes to more general issues of human rights.

The Rule of Law issue has emerged most acutely in Brussels in recent months in what is essentially a stand off between the EU Commission and the Polish Government over changes made by the latter to the Constitutional Court and whether this amounts to a breach of the principles of EU law. How this plays out of course will have implications beyond the borders of Poland and the general issue is a very vital concern for all Ombudsmen.



The purpose of the lobbying transparency session is to explain it and show the involvement of some Ombudsmen in this aspect of governance, but also to raise awareness of how this issue can be viewed through a human rights prism and why therefore it is something that perhaps we all need to take a greater interest in.

Lobbying is a legitimate occupation, lawmakers need to understand the effects that proposed laws may have on individuals, society, on business or other interests. But if law making in a democracy is supposed to be done openly, then it follows that citizens should be aware of who is influencing the laws that ultimately will affect their lives. Again, it is the work of many civil society groups that has served to highlight the importance of this issue for every EU citizen.

Laws that impact on our health, on our environment, on the safety of medicines, on agriculture, on the regulation of financial services or the internet, or data protection - big issues for many Ombudsmen - are also laws that impact on commercial profit margins and while it is legitimate for business to attempt to influence law making in their favour, such influencing must be as visible as possible to the citizen.

But I want this seminar also to focus on what continues to be good in our European society. Over the last few months and years, as the migration crisis devastated so many lives and families and caused political and social turmoil in so many of our countries, we have all witnessed nonetheless wonderful acts of kindness, of humanity, of common decency as individual citizens, villages, towns, NGOs, administrators and politicians held to our common European values and extended help and comfort to the stranger in need.

The challenge for us as Ombudsmen is to help to align that deep seated grace and humanity with the actions of our respective administrations, so that our real value as Ombudsmen can be to continue to remind and assist our Governments of the values that it remains their duty to uphold.