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European Commission follows Ombudsman's advice to replace the head of Ad Hoc Ethical Committee

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For more information:
www.ombudsman.europa.eu

Twitter:
[@EUombudsman](https://twitter.com/EUombudsman)

Contact:
Gundi Gadesmann,
Deputy Head of the
Communication Unit

T. +32 2 284 26 09

gundi.gadesmann@ombudsman.europa.eu

The European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, has welcomed the Commission's decision to appoint a new head of its Ad Hoc Ethical Committee. This follows a complaint from three NGOs about an alleged conflict of interests concerning its previous head. The Committee gives advice on ethical issues, such as Commissioners taking up new jobs in the private sector after leaving the Commission.

Emily O'Reilly stated: "The credibility of the Commission's Ad hoc Ethical Committee was at stake. I am glad that the Commission has followed my advice to replace the head. It was difficult to argue that the client-related activities of the previous head did not constitute a potential conflict of interest. It is important that the European public's suspicions can now be dispelled."

Committee looks into Commissioners taking up new jobs in private sector

The Ad Hoc Ethical Committee consists of three persons and advises the Commission, for example, if a former Commissioner wishes to accept a job in the private sector that might undermine the integrity of the Commission.

In February 2013, three NGOs complained to the Ombudsman about the re-appointment of a retired high-ranking Commission official as head of the Ad Hoc Committee. The former official currently works for a major law firm, advising several clients, including a tobacco company. The NGOs alleged a conflict of interests, as he represents private interests in his contacts with the Commission and does not therefore meet the necessary requirements of independence.

At first, the Commission rejected the complainants' arguments and stressed that the complainants did not give any proof of a concrete conflict of interest.

In the Ombudsman's view, the mere possibility that the former head of the Committee might have been influenced by private interests was unacceptable. The Commission finally followed her advice and appointed a new chair, thus ensuring that public concern about the Committee's credibility and integrity could be allayed.