

Is The EU Becoming More Open?

BY PHILIP HUNT

Communication deficits. Falling voter turnout. A perception of institutional corruption. These are some of the key concerns facing the European Union today. What is being done about them? Is the EU polis becoming more open? Unfortunately, the prognosis is not good.

Yet reform has been attempted before. In 2000 the European Commission proposed a new approach to management based on the principles of responsibility, accountability, efficiency and transparency. But the actions of EU officials suggest that the prevailing EU organisational culture remains that of secrecy and preservation of power. The motto still seems to be that if you unearth fraud or incompetence, then cover it up.

Whistleblowing a risky business

The treatment of internal whistleblowers shows the policy only too clearly. Paul van Buitenen, now an MEP, went public in 1998 on fraud and mismanagement within the EU institutions, an action that led to the fall of the Santer Commission in 1999. Six years later, he is seeking to join the Parliament's budgetary control committee in order to pres-

sure the Commission into completing its internal investigation.

Another whistleblower, former Commission chief accountant Marta

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- Aidan White, Secretary general of the IFJ

Andreasen, was suspended mid-2002 after revealing that the Commission's accounting system was wide open to fraud. She had first complained about inadequate accounting methods soon after taking up her post at the beginning of that year.

Andreasen's reward for bringing these problems to the attention of the Court of Auditors and the European Parliament was suspension from her job and the launch of disciplinary proceedings against her.

After a lengthy series of legal and internal battles, the Commission has finally announced that her future will be decided by the disciplinary board headed by former Court of First Instance President José Luis da Cruz Vilaça. A judgement is not expected before the end of this year.

Dougal Watt, former auditor at

the Court of Auditors, managed to escape the usual “illness” label after going public, but was instead sacked. He had joined the Court in 1995, but

after increasing dissatisfaction with evidence of internal malpractice and management failure to act, he sent in April 2002 a report alleging fraud and nepotism in the Court to 500 MEPs.

Compromise, or go sick

Watt believes that the common approach in such cases is that if a whistleblower goes quietly, he can then fall “ill” and retire with an income.

In his case, for sticking to his principles he is now without a job, and at present working in Luxembourg researching the firms that supply EU institutions.

Julius Muis, Dordt Schmitd-Brown, Robert McCoy and others, the list goes on. For those courageous enough to question management

practices and test their institution's openness to public censure, the future holds harassment, character assassination and indefinite sick leave.

When outsiders question internal EU practices, the reaction is very similar. German journalist Hans-Martin Tillack, Brussels correspondent for the German news magazine Stern, had his home and office raided by Belgian police early this year, after OLAF, the EU anti-fraud agency with a brief to focus on internal mismanagement, passed its suspicions of bribery to the Belgian authorities.

More scrutiny needed

So what of the future? “Lack of transparency within the European institutions raises very serious questions about how openness needs to be extended,” says Aidan White, General Secretary of the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists. “Organisations like the Court of Auditors are crucial to the EU, yet what accountability exists for them is out of the public gaze.

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Transparency or a hall of mirrors?