

Strasbourg round-up: Equality between women and men in the European Union - 2012 report: theparliament.com

By Renate Sommer, Michael Cashman and Cornelis de Jong
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Renate Sommer is parliament's EPP group shadow rapporteur on Public access to documents 2011-2013

Transparency is an essential element of a lively democracy and all of us want the public to be informed about the legislative process as far as possible. But the recent annual report on public access to documents by Sophie in't Veld goes in the wrong direction. It is nearly identical to the failed "Cashman report" on the revision of the respective directive which is pending since 2008 because of the rapporteurs' unrealistic postulations. And it was Cashman who banned in't Veld from even discussing her report with the EPP.

The necessary public access to documents should not be mixed up with an access to the whole legislative procedure. It is a fact that the legislative decision-making process is very complex, with many preparatory, confidential and secret documents. Publishing every single document relating to this process would create a flood of documents which would make it rather impossible for our citizens to find the relevant information. Moreover, it would tremendously hinder our legislative work. This includes informal trilogues between the commission, parliament and council, which are defining for the formation of EU legislation. In order to avoid outside influence on the legislative process at this stage trilogues should not be public and documents relating to them should not be disclosed.

According to the in't Veld report internal administration documents should also be disclosed. I do not see any justification for this. Protection of private data is a core principle. And nowadays an appropriate balance between transparency and data protection is needed more than ever.

Michael Cashman is parliament's S&D group shadow rapporteur on Public access to documents 2011-2013

The whole principle of openness and taking decisions as closely to the citizens as possible emanates from the Amsterdam treaty in 1997. We put this into practice with regulation (EC) No 1049/2001 that I drafted for the European parliament. We needed to see that openness and transparency did not prevent democracy from flourishing, but actually improved it.

It had flaws though and the annual report we adopted this week again shows this.

We did try to revise this regulation and improve the rights to access to documents.

The European commission made a proposal in April 2008 to revise the original regulation leaning towards "less transparency" rather than "more transparency" and this was purely unacceptable.

More than six years have passed and we are in a deadlock. The treaty of Lisbon says that we need to further enhance democracy. And so we also need to enhance access to documents. That is what I, and the European parliament as a whole, are trying to ensure. The rights that we have built upon can not be diminished. But the European commission and the European council, with the help of some elements of the European People's Party and, rather contradictorily to their continuous attack on the EU, the UK Independence Party, continue to think that we should legislate behind closed doors.

It does not mean the right to access can be abused. I am especially worried by the use of the regulation by some individuals to purposefully undermine the influence of progressive civil society on legislation.

The vote this week shows that, if anything, the European parliament will be more firm and will make transparency an issue for the European elections of the next members of the European parliament but also of the European commission and its president. For the first time, the European commission president will be confronted with the voices and votes of citizens.

And citizens want to make sure that we are accountable and that is their right: parliamentarians accountable for what we do in their name, the commission for what it does in their name, and, equally, the council and the other EU bodies and agencies. How can citizens, NGOs, lobbyists and businesses do that if the way we work and who does what within all of the different institutions, agencies and bodies remains a well-kept secret, open only to those who know? What are we afraid of? Not democratic accountability, I hope.

Cornelis de Jong is parliament's GUE/NGL group shadow rapporteur on Public access to documents 2011-2013

Yesterday, the European parliament adopted Sophie In 't Veld's report on public access to documents. It contains a number of proposals I made to enhance transparency of the European parliament itself. In particular, I am concerned about the secrecy of the negotiations in our bureau and in the conference of the presidents (CoP).

Formally, each group can consult its members before these meetings; in practice, this is made extremely difficult. The agendas for the meetings are issued only at a very late stage, too late for an in-depth discussion in the groups. Minutes of what has been discussed do not give much information either, as they are extremely general and vague.

If it is already difficult for MEPs to grasp what decisions are made on the internal arrangements in the EP, for the ordinary citizen this is a complete black box. Yet, these discussions matter: the bureau, for example, discusses our security, the EP's communication activities, and last but not least our budgetary affairs. Every day, I receive e-mails from concerned citizens about these matters. With the adoption of the in 't Veld report there is now a chance that the bureau and the CoP will finally open up. Let's just hope that it is taken seriously, since again it will be up to the bureau and the CoP themselves to take the necessary implementing measures and I have no

idea when they will pick this up.

Strasbourg comment: Registration documents for vehicles. 'Roadworthiness package'