

Five minutes with the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly: “Citizens need to be honest and empower themselves to reach out to institutions”

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*The principle of European citizenship was introduced by the Maastricht Treaty and came into force in 1993. To mark the 20th anniversary of European citizenship, 2013 was officially designated the 'European Year of Citizens', with the aim of raising awareness about the rights of citizens living across the EU. EUROPP's Assistant Editor Eri Bertou spoke to the European Ombudsman, **Emily O'Reilly**, about the importance of European citizenship, and the wider role of civil society organisations in EU politics.*



We are coming to the end of the 'European Year of Citizens'. Is it possible to make every year a year for citizens in the European Union?

I think we are entering into a very exciting time for Europe. Obviously the last year was all about the citizens and a lot of politicians in EU institutions pay a lot of lip service to the idea of connecting the citizens to the institutions and developing a sense of EU citizenship. Obviously that is admirable, but from my point of view, there is still a huge disconnect between the people of the EU and the European project, specifically, European institutions.

It is not all the fault of the institutions, of course, sometimes member states have to do their part in educating young people about Europe. However, I do sense a lot of political concern about the upcoming European elections: concerns that the Parliament that will be returned might lean more to the extremes of political ideology in Europe, rather than the mainstream. I am not making a comment on that, but I am just reflecting on what the concerns are.

Therefore, there is a great deal of activity now on the institutional and political level, to try and help the citizens understand the great job that EU institutions are doing. I think there is a wonderful opportunity for civil society to insert itself in the political debates that will take place within Europe in the next six months and to demand transparency and accountability from European institutions. Civil society organisations can find out, on behalf of the people, what EU institutions are doing and make them more accountable.

As European Ombudsman, I think this is also a very exciting and challenging time for my office. I expect there will be a great deal more focus on issues of transparency, issues of conflict of interests, general issues of ethical behaviour, not just of politicians, but of EU officials and of institutions as well. I anticipate a great deal more scrutiny of institutions and a larger number of complaints in relation to such matters. I think that if my office can show that we can deal with these complaints well on behalf of citizens, it will give greater visibility to my office and that would be a good thing for citizens throughout Europe.

There have been many discussions around the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in EU politics. Do you think that both organised and unorganised civil society, with their different aims and values, can have a constructive influence on the way EU institutions function?

That is an interesting question because as Ombudsman I am obviously politically neutral and I think of my role as the watchdog of institutions, on behalf of the citizens. I think in a civil society there are rights, but there are also responsibilities and obligations. Civil Society Organisations have every possible flavour of political thought and ideology amongst themselves. I think that the responsible ones are the ones that look to inform the citizenry about what is going on within institutions and who seek to investigate, through my office or other means, what the institutions are doing and make them more accountable to citizens.

Obviously, every citizen and every civil society group has their rights and obligations, and I think if everybody spoke out of public interest, even though different groups might have different views on what that is, then only good can come out of this. Sometimes institutions can feel overloaded and pressurised by civil society, but I am confident that the solution to that is to make themselves as transparent as possible. If they are transparent, then they are less likely to be targeted by CSOs and NGOs because if everything is out there, then there is nothing secret.

Finally a word or two if you will, on the issue of solidarity across the EU?

Well, this has really been the main issue of the last two or three years in relation to the recession. Many countries have felt, and are still feeling, the outcomes of the recession, and there was a tendency for a lot of member states to retreat back to their own areas and not to reach out, if you like, to the potential of a solidarity that can be created by all member states.

I was very moved by a video that was shown at the recent [European Year of Citizens 2013 Closing Conference](#) about the Lithuanian events in the 1990s. It was incredibly moving and sometimes we forget how recent and incredible these events are. And speaking about solidarity and the fruits of solidarity, I would like to reference the speech that was given by the Polish President two years ago, where he talked about the importance, not just of economic solidarity, but solidarity around fundamental rights and values.

In my own speech at the conference, I used John F. Kennedy's well known phrase that urges citizens to think about "not just what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country", because I think that those in leadership positions should not be afraid to challenge citizens either. Citizens cannot sit passively and wait for institutions to come to them. Citizens need to be honest and empower themselves to reach out to institutions. Ultimately, we all have the vote this May, so the composition of the Parliament and of the President of the Commission is actually in our hands.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Emily O'Reilly

Emily O'Reilly is the European Ombudsman. She previously held the office of Ombudsman in Ireland.

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