

# THE CONVERSATION

## Why a US battle over corporate hijacking of science matters in Europe

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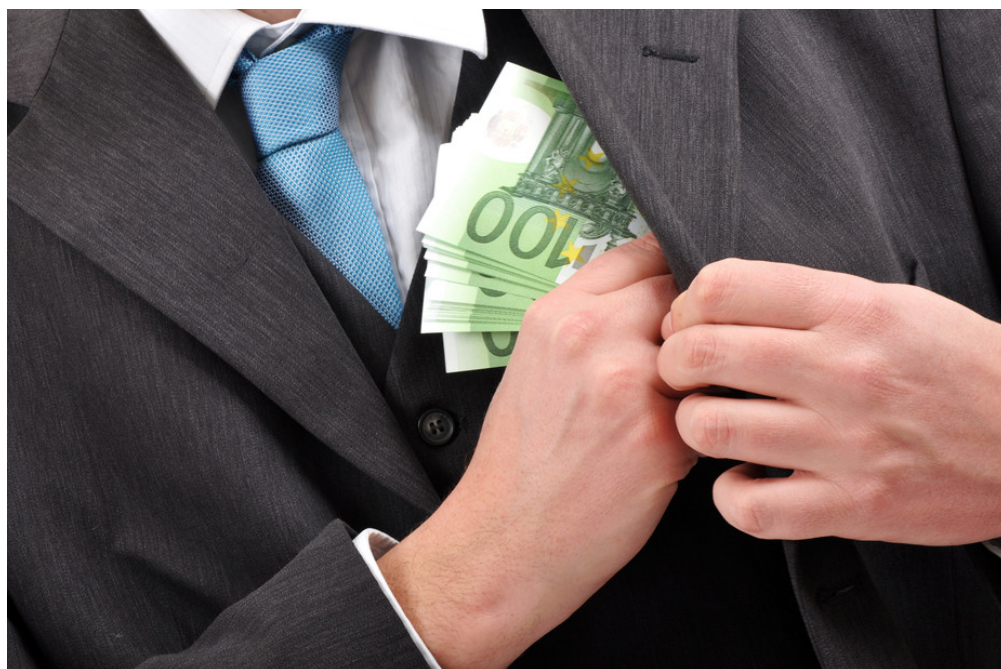
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Corporate infiltration of expert advice is a battleground on both sides of the Atlantic. Igor Stevanovic

On both sides of the Atlantic it would appear that evidence-based policy is in jeopardy. The scientific advice that government and regulators rely upon to inform their decision-making is under attack. In the US the assault comes from the usual suspects, as activist Republican representatives continue their attempts to restrict the ability of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to carry out its functions.

One proposal is the EPA Science Advisory Board Reform Act. Among its provisions are proposals to restrict experts from “advisory activities that directly or indirectly involve review or evaluation of their own work.”

While such a measure could in theory prevent the very remote possibility of a scientist simply self-certifying their own work, in practice this is likely to debar those with most recognised expertise on a subject from offering advice and public service.

Perverse as this may appear it pales in comparison to the suggestion that scientists with financial ties to industry should be allowed to advise the EPA – as long as they declare such funding. This seems to drive a coach and horses through what is conventionally understood as a conflict of interest.

Admittedly the act is likely to be vetoed by the White House. Another which may not is the Secret Science Reform Act, which aims to increase transparency by making the EPA reveal all the data it cites in making recommendations. Critics fear that in practice, it will give opponents to regulation a basis for making legal challenges to scientific studies that reach undesirable conclusions.

## Europe and experts

While those who follow science policy may well be inured to this latest episode in the long-running campaign by the Republican right to dismantle public health and environmental protections in the US, they may not be so used to similar battles taking place in Europe.

Although the stakes are equally high, the politics at play in Europe are quite different from the US context. For a start the pressure in Brussels comes from the Left rather than the Right, and has been growing for a number of years. Second, this issue has crept onto the political agenda at a particularly sensitive moment, when the European institutions are keen to be seen to be responsive to public opinion.

With little fanfare the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, last week issued a recommendation to the European Commission to make its expert groups more balanced and transparent, having launched an inquiry into the subject last May. Expert groups are little known outside the Brussels bubble, but play an important advisory role.



Agent for change: EU Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly EPA

They partly fulfil the function that civil-service experts play at a national level – a key difference between the European Commission and national governments is that the Brussels bureaucracy which supports EU policy developers is much smaller than the myth-making of Eurosceptics would have you believe.

As a consequence, the European Commission is more reliant on outside advice, and expert groups are one means of accessing scientific and technical expertise. The row in Europe at present is not about the principle of scientific input, but the practice of how it is supplied and where it is sourced. The accountability of this system has been brought into serious question for the first time.

The ombudsman's inquiry into the composition of the groups advising the commission revealed concerns about imbalance and transparency. This bore out the reservations of the European Parliament, which has previously blocked the budget for expert groups in order to force the commission to review this system. The parliament also wants the commission to address the almost total lack of transparency about its advisors and find ways of making it

accountable.

The critique is shared by various NGOs who have been concerned about the dominance of industry representatives on these expert bodies. Indeed, the ombudsman concludes that it is not possible to adequately and consistently review the composition of these bodies and there are no criteria for distinguishing between economic and non-economic interests represented in these groups.

## Spot the difference

Although the terminology used in the current science spats in the EU and US is similar, their meanings are quite different. In the US when conservatives talk about balance, this is code for greater industry influence and more industry friendly experts. In Europe balance refers to better representation for civil society and non-economic interests.



TTIP makes Capitol Hill battle matter to Europe more than usual Valerie, CC BY-SA

Why does all this matter? For one thing, concerns about the corporate capture of expert advisory groups in Europe are hardly allayed by the ombudsman's findings that she can't distinguish between the economic and non-economic interests represented in the groups. There is also the fact that previous commissions have had a habit of ignoring her office.

This issue is emerging just as the EU is seeking to negotiate a new trade deal with the US – the most transparent trade deal ever if you choose to believe the commission hype – not that there is much competition for this particular accolade.

The shadow of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) is significant. Should an agreement be concluded, it will in all likelihood require harmonisation of regulatory standards between the US and EU. This would mean that public protections on environmental and health issues may change significantly. What happens to regulation in the US is therefore particularly important to Europe at present – and vice versa.



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