

## Corridors of Silence

Yesterday (25 May 2011) in a lonely corner of the European Parliament, with a small but attentive audience, I heard something remarkable. The setting was a public hearing organised by the Budgetary Control Committee of the European Parliament, the hearing was on the effectiveness of whistleblowers within EU institutions and the comment was by the authors of a study undertaken by Price Waterhouse Coopers as follows:

*“In each of the interviews we had for this study the interviewees indicated that top and line management in the EU institutions and agencies is (sic) not transparent and constructive. People are afraid to voice their opinion no matter what the topic is.”*

The message is clear - no-one trusts our European institutions, not staff, not senior officials interviewed for the preparation of the report and certainly not those who have raised concerns and found the system is against them. No fanfare, no coverage of any significance and a web-stream taken down as soon as the hearing is finished.

One must assume that the study involved a significant amount of research – the fee for this report is rumoured to have run to 6 figures. The authors confirm that interviews were conducted with an impressive range of individuals including staff from the Commission itself, the European Ombudsman, the European Court of Justice, the European Court of Auditors, the European Investment Bank and OLAF (the anti-fraud investigative arm of the EU) and of course with whistleblowers. Not one positive story was uncovered, not one person thought the system was effective, not one person had anything constructive to say.

Now one might question the veracity of the report itself (and there is much amiss with the content, including fundamental errors in the way that the UK law is explained) but this was not evident at the public hearing – no-one questioned the content and the report was not discussed in detail. Broad principles were mentioned, further work is needed, let’s define terms and revise existing rules. Yet at core of the research is this fundamental factual statement indicating a culture of silence in which the fear of reprisal is all pervading.

All is not lost as there are some positive recommendations in the report about what should be done to change this culture – most of which are taken from our own BSI Code of Practice (see <http://www.pcaw.org.uk/bsi/index.php>) and at least there may now be a chance to tackle the deep routed cultural aversion to whistleblowing in Europe.

But the report itself demonstrates an almost schizophrenic approach to the issue. On the one hand it recommends better protection for whistleblowers and yet at the same time it suggests that malicious whistleblowers should be punished and their stories publicised. Unless and until this culture of silence is tackled, we fear that nothing will change. A good starting point would be to protect workplace whistleblowers in the EU in the hope that this will result in a change in cultural perceptions across all member states.

Until that time, we should be worried – very worried that such a culture pervades the corridors of our European institutions, worried that those who speak truth to power within Europe are not protected.

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**About Public Concern at Work:**

Public Concern at Work, the whistleblowing advice line, is an independent charity set up in 1993. We give free, confidential advice to those concerned about malpractice or wrongdoing in the workplace. We also help organisations to address risk responsibly. The charity was instrumental in getting the UK whistleblowing legislation, the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, on the statute books. The charity's work has been commended by ministers, the Court of Appeal, leading newspapers, the Committee on Standards in Public Life and various public inquiries. For more information please visit [www.pcaw.org.uk](http://www.pcaw.org.uk).