

European Commission scraps chief scientific adviser post



European Union

Anne Glover, the European Commission's last chief scientific adviser, finished her term last month.

The European Commission has abolished the post of chief scientific adviser just three years after creating it. The commission has yet to state what mechanism it will use instead to provide independent scientific advice to its president.

Former president José Manuel Barroso had pledged in late 2009 to create the post. It was not filled until two years later, when Anne Glover, a molecular and cell biologist who was then chief scientific adviser (CSA) for Scotland, was appointed. Glover's term of office as CSA for Europe ended last month, along with that of the rest of the outgoing commission, following European Union (EU) elections earlier this year. Glover will remain at the commission until the end of January 2015.

But the new commission — led by president Jean-Claude Juncker, who succeeded Barroso on 1 November — is shaking things up. On 12 November, Glover informed colleagues at science academies by e-mail that the position of CSA would disappear.

Various research leaders protested against the move, which they interpreted as downgrading the value of science advice at the highest levels of the commission. They argued that the position should instead

have been reinforced, in particular by allocating it more resources.

The commission has not yet said how it plans to replace the position. "President Juncker believes in independent scientific advice. He has not yet decided how to institutionalize this independent scientific advice," says Lucia Caudet, a commission spokeswoman.

Anglo-Saxon tradition

What influence the CSA position has had in the commission, and on its policies, is not clear, as much of its advice is confidential. Glover's office declined an interview request, but a talk titled "[1,000 days in the life of a Chief Scientific Adviser](#)", which she gave in Auckland, New Zealand, on 28–29 August, provides a candid account of her time at the commission.

For example, Glover describes frustration at dealing with in-house politics, cites a lack of sufficient staff and resources and says she was sometimes excluded from essential information.

She adds that she was surprised by the appetite for scientific advice in Brussels, and that EU policies were more technical than national ones, which drag science into a "political battlefield". However, in another talk earlier this year Glover also said that the commission's decisions were often driven by political imperatives, and that evidence was marshalled to support policies rather than being used to inform the best choice of policies.

CSAs are largely an Anglo-Saxon tradition. Few countries have them, and, as Glover noted in her Auckland talk, there are a diversity of models for providing top-level advice to government.

Paul Nurse, president of the Royal Society in London, urged the European Commission to choose one quickly. "If the commission has a plausible plan for ensuring that scientific evidence will be taken seriously they need to start sharing it with people soon," he told the UK Science Media Centre.

"Otherwise they will encourage those who portray the commission as out of touch and not willing to listen to informed advice."