

War of letters over call to abolish EC scientific adviser role



Jean-Claude Juncker will make a final decision on whether he wants a chief scientific adviser when he takes office later this year. Photograph: Olivier Hoslet/EPA

Battle lines are being drawn in scientific communities across [Europe](#) after an open letter from NGOs earlier this week called into question the need for a chief scientific adviser working for the president of the [European Commission](#). On Friday their call for the role's abolition provoked two further open letters supporting the post from major scientific organisations, including the Wellcome Trust and Royal Institution.

Nine NGOs, including [Greenpeace](#), wrote an [open letter](#) on Tuesday to [Jean-Claude Juncker](#), the incoming president of the EC, demanding that the position be scrapped.

The NGOs called the role, which was introduced in 2012 by current EC president [José Manuel Barroso](#) and has been occupied since then by a biologist at the University of Aberdeen, [Prof Anne Glover](#), "fundamentally problematic". Their letter argued that the non-elected role concentrated too much influence in one person, undermining research by the wider science community, while being non-transparent and unaccountable. The letter took particular issue with Glover's pro [GM crops](#) stance.

The NGOs want the president to take advice from a number of independent sources. Other signatories included GM Watch and the Health and Environment Alliance.

In response, two more open letters were sent to Juncker on Friday, signed by numerous European scientific organisations, supporting the CSA role and its independence. [One of the](#)

letters, with signatories including the [European Academies' Science Advisory Council](#), [Sense About Science](#) and the [Royal Institution](#), states: "Policy makers or lobbyists who seek to remove scientists because they don't like their findings or advice do so at the peril of their citizens."

Scores of academics added their names to the letter, including the TV presenter Prof Brian Cox from the University of Manchester, Prof Steve Jones from University College London, and Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal and former president of the Royal Society.

[Cancer Research UK](#), the [Wellcome Trust](#) and several other research charities signed the [second letter](#). They called not only for the role to be maintained but to be strengthened, formalising and extending the scope of the position. They also urged Juncker to continue embedding an evidence-based approach in all aspects of European policymaking.

Paul Nurse, president of the Royal Society, commented: "There will always be those who attack the messenger because they do not like the message but when that message is backed up by the scientific evidence, politicians should be smart enough to listen to the independent scientific experts."

A spokesperson for Greenpeace UK said: "There are problems with the current incumbent, and there needs to be a much closer look at what this post achieves. Science needs to be at the heart of policy-making, in Brussels, London, everywhere, and it needs to be transparent and independent. Reform the post and make it work so that evidence trumps lobbying clout, and if that can't be done then it should be scrapped and replaced with something that puts evidence first."

The future of the CSA role is solely in the hands of Juncker, who will make a final decision when he takes office later this year.