



## Is Europe to enjoy science advice or camel design?

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Experts in science policy from across Europe, have expressed some nuanced scepticism at the new EC scientific advice mechanism

A camel is a horse designed by a committee, a proverb says. And now scientific advice in Europe could well be subjected to the camel design treatment—leaving scientific advice in Europe panting in future races against fiercely competitive policy horses. The previous one-person [scheme](#) designed by Barroso—involving a Chief Science Adviser (CSA)—is expected to be replaced by a much more [complex mechanism](#). The European Commission [announced](#) its creation on 13 May 2015. It is a replacement of the CSA position, previously held by Scottish biologist Anne Glover. Juncker shut the position down six month ago amid outrage expressed by scientific organisations.

Policy experts doubt whether the proposed new '[high level group of eminent scientists](#)', a key feature of the new mechanism, will work as planned. The group will be expected to not only liaise with the Commission, but also with the national science academies through a structured relationship, as well as with other advisory bodies such as the [JRC](#). The real test will come when controversial issues such as GMOs, shale gas and stem-cells come back to public debates in the future.

### Camel in the making?

The new high-level committee is set to be formed in autumn. Carlos Moedas, Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, said, at the launch event, that the high level group will be formed by 7 eminent scientists. They will be ready to deal

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with policy demands from the EC and to raise issues on their own initiative. While Anne Glover reported directly to the president, the new committee will pass through Moedas, as “the facilitator between the panel and the commission,” he explained at the launch meeting.

Such a ‘camel’ appears to be designed to remedy the pitfalls of Glover’s action. But policy experts warn about the part-time nature of the job at the group, and the potentially conflictual relationship with other advisory bodies. “We will need to hear much more about who will set the agenda for the science advice mechanism, including who the panel will be, how they will be embedded in Commission procedures and structures, how they will be transparent and accountable and how their impact will be assessed,” writes Anne Glover in an email to *EuroScientist*.

Most experts, however, have welcomed that the Commission is restoring a form of scientific advice. “It is good news that this issue has been resolved after a period of uncertainty,” says James Wilsdon, professor of science and democracy at the University of Sussex, UK and co-author of a [report](#) on scientific advice in Europe, published in April 2015. “A second good thing is the strong logistical support provided,” says project administrator at the OECD’s [Global Science Forum](#), in Paris, France. He was involved in the realisation of the OECD [own report](#) on the art of providing scientific advice, published in April 2015. Moedas has promised to support the committee with up to 25 EC employees and to fund it with up to €6 million in 2016. By comparison, Glover had an office of five and a budget of about €100,000.

### Existing advisory structures link

A completely new feature of the SAM is the establishment of the high-level committee’s structured relationship with national academies and learned societies. This is done for the sake of subsidiarity—a feature that has rung some alarms. “Relevance of academies in different countries in Europe varies a lot. Some are very well respected, some, nobody ever hears of them,” says Alexandre Quintanilha, a physicist at the Abel Salazar Institute of Biomedical Sciences in Portugal. He is also a former member of the [Science and Technology Advisory Council](#) (STAC), a team set up by Glover to [help](#) in her tasks. Until now, the Commission has not involved national academies directly, but through 5 umbrella organisations that signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) on 26 March 2015.

The high-level committee is also deemed to work with other already existing European advisory bodies. In the first place stands the Joint Research Center (JRC), the Commission’s in-house science service, which already provides the Commission support towards EU policy making through the provision of scientific and technical support. Some believe that the new mechanism does not make the most of the JRC’s capabilities. “The JRC is isolated in the proposed mechanism. The relations [with the panel] are unclear,” says Alemanno. Others have another perception of the JRC’s involvement. “In my experience, JRC has boycotted from the beginning the former committee [STAC],” says Victor de Lorenzo, a biologist at the National Center for Biotechnology (Spain) and former member of the STAC.

JRC’s president Vladimir Sucha was explicitly [critical](#) of the CSA position. Yet, the JRC itself may need to improve its image in the community. “The weight of the JRC in the scientific world is very limited,” de Lorenzo points out. However, “JRC is focussed on a set of practical issues oriented to regulation, it is normal that they don’t publish much in high level journals,” says OECD’s Sgard. He sees the JRC’s role as being part of a wider mechanism. “The commission needs a much broader advice, for which it can rely on the whole scientific community, through information gathered by the committee,” Sgard remarks.

### Organisational issues

The replacement of the CSA with a committee has generated contrasting reactions. “[It] is a retrograde, typically bureaucratic act: if you don’t know what to do, set up a committee,” says engineer [Rudolf Hanka](#), who retired last year from being CSA to the prime minister of the Czech Republic. “The prime minister needs to have one person who he [or she] can trust and have private discussion with on a daily basis,” he points out.

Some welcome what they consider a more democratic arrangement than the previous one. “The new mechanism avoids personifying scientific advice in a sort of monocratic judge,” notes Alberto Alemanno, a professor of law at French business school HEC Paris, France. Alemanno previously [criticized](#) how Glover handled a protest against the

commission's review of endocrine disrupting chemicals by a group of scientists with alleged conflicts of interest. "A panel provides stronger defences [against these situations], due to the peer-to-peer control of its members," he argues. He adds that transparency is crucial, too.

The members of the group will not be employed by the EC for the sake of independence, said Moedas at the launch. This part-time commitment worries several experts. "It should be a proper job. They would need to be compensated. [...] Otherwise, you could create seven times the problem that Anne Glover had," says Wilsdon. "I don't know whether it would be wise that these scientist work as we did, using weekends and spare time to talk [about science advice]," says Roberta Sessoli, professor of general and inorganic chemistry at the University of Florence, Italy, who is a former members of the STAC. "It's a full-time job, not for a committee that meets from time to time with an agenda set by somebody else," says Hanka.

Time will tell how the new EC advice mechanisms will fit in with external science advice players such as the International Network for Government Science Advice ([INGSA](#)); a network created in 2014 to develop an agenda for global science policy discussions. It is constituted of academics and practitioners involved in the emerging field of science advice to government; their members include, among others, a number of CSAs from New Zealand, the UK, Quebec and Malaysia. By autumn, it should be clearer whether the SAM will be about science advice, or camel design.

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