

# The European Commission in Question

## Policy Briefing

### 1/ The Backgrounds of European Commission Officials

#### Background

In an era of anti-bureaucratic sentiment, the European Commission is frequently depicted as the arch-bureaucracy – remote, distant and arrogant. According to political debate and media commentary, Commission officials are career civil servants, who have spent their working lives in Brussels and have little experience outside the public sector. Often portrayed as ‘an administration of lawyers’, the Commission according to this view is formalistic in outlook and lacks the diverse range of expertise, experience, and imagination necessary to meet the challenges that confront the European Union.

#### Executive Summary

The European Commission in Question (EUCIQ) found little evidence to support these views. It discovered that:

- the Commission commands a far greater range of expertise than accepted wisdoms suggest
- 96 per cent of officials had worked elsewhere before choosing to pursue a career in the Commission
- a significant proportion of the Commission’s staff come from the private sector
- among the AD officials in the 31 policy-oriented departments (DGs) surveyed, there are more economists and more scientists than lawyers

#### Public or Private Sector?

In the online survey, we asked officials about their careers prior to entering the European Commission. We found that the largest single group – 39 per cent – did indeed come from the public sector (figure 1). However, 37 per cent came from the private sector and business, to which a further 12 per cent from the liberal professions might be added. Moreover, when we looked at when staff had joined the Commission, we found that for much of the past forty years more officials came from the private sector than any other career background (figure 2). Civil servants only became the largest group in the late 1990s.

Furthermore, officials with public and private sector experience are not distributed evenly across the Commission. DGs Administration, Budget, Communications, Transport and Energy, Enlargement, Enterprise, Informatics, Information Society, Internal Market, Joint Research Committee, the Legal Service, and Research and Development have particularly high concentrations of officials (i.e. more than 50 per cent) with a background in the private sector. DGs Environment, Taxation and Customs Union, and Trade, meanwhile, have attracted relatively large numbers of civil servants. Overall, Commission officials come from a more diverse range of professional backgrounds than is widely thought.



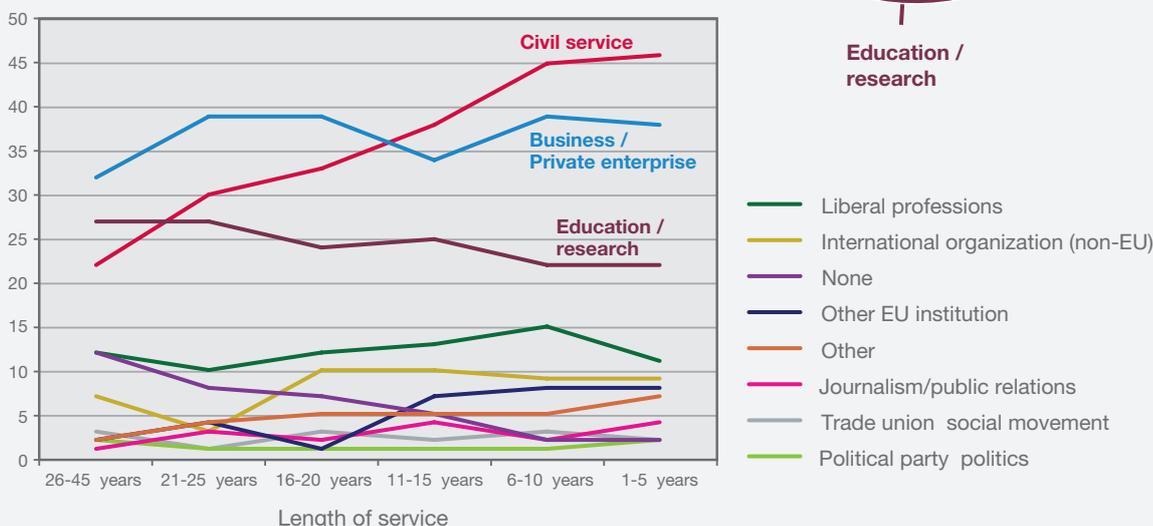
#### Resources and Further Information

- Contact Principal Investigator: [h.kassim@uea.ac.uk](mailto:h.kassim@uea.ac.uk)
- Project website: [www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ](http://www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ)
- Publication: [tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC](https://tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC)
- ESRC project: [tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC-ESRC](https://tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC-ESRC)

Figure 1: Occupation by sector prior to joining the European Commission



Figure 2: Professional background before joining the European Commission: change over time



### An ‘Administration of Lawyers’?

In the online survey, we asked respondents about their educational background. We asked them to indicate their highest educational qualification and to identify the subject of their main degree from the following list: Law, Economics/Business, Politics/International Relations, Arts, Physical Sciences, Engineering, Other, Don’t know/Prefer not to say.

The results came as surprise and challenge traditional conceptions of the Commission:

- less than a quarter (24 per cent) of the officials surveyed reported law as their main degree
- 25 per cent are science graduates
- 28 per cent have a degree in economics or business

Particular specialisms are not spread evenly across Commission departments, though economists are present across a wide number of DGs and tend to be more mobile than graduates of other disciplines. Law graduates are concentrated in the Legal Service and DGs Justice, Freedom and Security, Competition, Internal Market, Taxation and Customs Union, and Trade; DGs Economic and Financial Affairs, Budget, Development, Internal Audit Service, Regional Policy, Employment and Social Affairs, and Enlargement have a high percentage of economists (i.e. 40 per cent or more); DGs Informatics, Research and Development, Joint Research Council, Information Society, Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, Health and Consumer Safety, and Environment have a high proportion of scientists (i.e. 40 per cent or more).

### Conclusion

Contrary to popular perception, Commission officials come from a broad range of educational and professional backgrounds. The Commission is not populated overwhelmingly by civil servants or by lawyers. In short, the Commission has a workforce with wide experience and expertise. The practice of recruiting officials from a variety of backgrounds that marked the early years of the Commission has proved to be an enduring feature.

Sara Connolly and Hussein Kassim  
December 2012

## About the Project

The European Commission in Question is an ESRC-funded project that examines the origins, backgrounds, and beliefs of officials, the internal operation of the organization, and attitudes to administrative reform and enlargement. Drawing on responses to an online survey administered to a representative sample of Commission officials in the autumn of 2008 (n=1901; n=1820 after iterative proportional fitting); and responses to a structured programme of interviews with Commissioners (n=5), cabinet members (n=28), and middle and senior managers (n=119, including 15 Directors General) conducted in 2009, it answers fundamental questions about one of the world's most powerful administrations.

For further information, see [www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ](http://www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ)

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## Coming soon

Kassim et al (2013) **The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century**,  
Oxford University Press  
[tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC](http://tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC)