



No apologies for serving business

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DG Trade: No apologies for giving privileged access to business
Director General of DG Trade admits that he grants business privileged access
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During one of DG Trade's recent meetings with civil society, I raised CEO's concerns about the privileged access given to big business interests by the Commission when developing trade policy. The reply from Director General, David O'Sullivan, was surprisingly frank.

He admitted that while his door was open to NGOs and he had never refused a meeting with one, he had "indeed made efforts to have more contacts with business". As a result, "industry walks through that door more often than others," he said. "I do not apologise for that, this is the way it's going to be." Because according to O'Sullivan, trade is about industry.

And once business has walked through the Commission's door? In a letter to CEO, dated 15 June, the Commission's Secretary General admitted that EU officials "test the state of play of the negotiations with relevant industry sectors". This involves "sharing certain elements of information concerning the negotiations", but of course only "in return of a commitment from the participants to respect the confidentiality of the information received".

In short: DG Trade listens more to business than to public interest groups. It shares confidential information about ongoing trade negotiations with a select group of industry lobbyists – information that it regularly withholds from CEO and other public interest groups in replies to access to information requests. And DG Trade thinks that this is the way it should be and will continue to be.

Is that the case? Not if the Commission is serious about its own staff regulations, which state that officials must "refrain from any unauthorised disclosure of information received in the line of duty" unless it is already in the public domain.

And not if it takes its standards for consultations seriously, according to which it should neither grant privileged access to particular groups nor listen to only one side of the argument.

European trade policy constitutes no exception to the general need for EU policies that reflect the wider interests of society and not just the agenda of big business. Because EU trade policy is as much about industry as it is about consumers, farmers, workers, the environment and development perspectives – in Europe and in the South.

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