

**Introductory statement for the hearing at the Committee on Petitions
on 3 December 2019
Cecilia Wikström**

Thank you for inviting me to address you on my application to become the next Ombudsman.

I will tell you a story.

Some months after I was elected to the Parliament, back in 2009, one of my friends, knowing I was now “in Brussels”, asked me for advice: his father, the owner of a small firm in the chemicals sector, was seeking authorisation for a new product from the Chemicals Agency. He had been waiting for more than a year for an answer and had written several times without any response. You see...for a small firm that authorisation could be the difference between failure or success, life and death; for its employees it could mean, simply, the loss of their jobs.

Full of indignation, I consulted lawyers in JURI secretariat. But I was quickly disabused: yes, my friend’s father could go to the Court of Justice, but it would take years and a considerable amount of money.

The answer of the Agency eventually came, but too late to convince my friend or his father or his employees or their families about the virtues of Europe.

We have all been confronted in our political careers with cases, stories of fellow citizens who have hit the brick wall of the Union’s bureaucracy. We are but too aware of the difficulties that a single individual or a small firm experiences when trying to get redress. **Access to justice** when confronted with the European administration can be a **nightmare**. I have seen it so many times as Chair of the PETI Committee.

Nowadays, the Union’s legislation has a much greater impact on people’s lives. **However**, the chances of getting swift legal redress remain small, the road to the Court of Justice **being a long, hazardous and too expensive a journey for “ordinary mortals”**.

No wonder people feel alienated from “Brussels bureaucracy”. No wonder Euroscepticism is growing.

Here is where the Ombudsman comes in...

this is the **proper role** for the Ombudsman : **to seek redress for “normal” people when confronted with the exorbitant power of the European Administration.**

I am convinced that **the future of the Union, even its very survival**, depends on its ability to improve the position of its citizens vis-à-vis the Institutions and to guarantee the highest standards of administration.

This is what motivates my candidature. As a Member of the Parliament I tried to be a **bridge** between my constituents and European politics. It would be my privilege to try to be a **bridge between European citizens and their Administration.**

I pay Tribute to the first Ombudsman, Söderman, his successor, Diamandouros and, of course Ms O'Reilly, whose hard work I had the opportunity to witness at first hand as Chair of PETI.

I believe it is now time to renew the Ombudsman's commitment to the right to good administration, namely the right to have one's affairs handled "impartially, fairly and within a reasonable time by all the institutions and bodies of the Union".

Mere lip service to the Charter is not enough. I passionately believe that now is the **right time** to take **one more step** to pursue **a real culture of service** in the European Union institutions.

So, when I hear the word "ombudsman" I think of all those people, all those ordinary people, **who believed in the promise of Europe** but came up instead against the brick wall of a faceless and unaccountable bureaucracy.

I want to be the **Ombudsman for these people**. I will do my absolute utmost to get them, if possible, redress or an agreed solution, but in any case, **they will always get respect, a proper explanation and an apology**.

The public administration exists to serve the citizen and not vice versa.

This is my credo: **A culture of service**.

All the institutions and agencies, including Parliament, must comply with the rules of good administration. And **the Ombudsman's office will be no exception, it must lead by example and be the first to** comply with the rules of good administration. That will be my commitment.

As service to citizens will be my **priority**, I will give the utmost importance to the **efficient and fair handling of individual cases**.

Consequently, I will give renewed importance to "legal" skills and also, and I think this is very important, to the culture of "multilingualism" and "diversity" of the Ombudsman's office.

The ombudsman's office must, first at all, **understand** citizens' complains. **Multicultural staff** are indispensable to this end. We should not forget the right for Union citizens to address the institutions and receive an answer in their own language. **Multilingualism** is a constitutional feature of the Union and an **essential element of European democracy**.

The staff of the Ombudsman's office will be drawn from **different legal traditions and Member States, having a command of several languages** and selected by a fair competitive procedure.

The European Parliament hosts the Ombudsman in its buildings and provides the logistic support for its functioning. I will endeavour to **build synergies** with the Parliament administration in order to assure **efficiency, but also budgetary rigour**.

I shall never forget that the Ombudsman is the creature of the European Parliament. Her job is not to **play politics** or take the political initiative. **That's the role of Parliament itself.**

I promise to be a very parliamentary Ombudsman indeed, listening to you and interacting with you.

I shall of course report regularly to the Petitions Committee and I will consider it my duty to draw up special or strategic reports **only in the interests of citizens, aimed at improving European administration**, never in place of the political institutions.

One area where I would be particularly enthusiastic to assist Parliament would be if it should decide – as I fervently hope it will – to **resurrect its legislative initiative for a law of administrative procedure**, which aims to apply the same standards to all the institutions and bodies of the Union, in a uniform, transparent and straightforward way.

This Parliament project was based on the first Ombudsman's Code of Good Administrative Behaviour and remains a **splendid example** of the kind of initiatives that the **Ombudsman and Parliament can build together.**

I need hardly remind you that Parliament's legislative initiative, even though it was supported by the strong will of 572 MPEs, was never followed by the Commission.

With President von der Leyen's undertaking to take up legislative initiatives from Parliament, I think that this is the **right moment to revive** such a project, which could be a major step towards changing the culture of the Commission and **making the Institutions more accessible and legible for people and businesses.**

Thank you for hearing me and considering my candidature. Apart from any questions you may have now, I would be pleased to meet any of you at any time and to take up any points and suggestions you may have.