
FRENCH MINISTER TRADES BLOWS WITH MEPS OVER DIESELGATE, RENAULT

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Ecology Minister Ségolène Royal travelled to Strasbourg yesterday (24 November) to defend her response to the dieselgate scandal. But the meeting rapidly escalated, with MEPs criticising the ministers reluctance to punish French automotive champion Renault. EurActiv France reports.

I thought you invited me to congratulate me, thank goodness I came here to explain the situation to you, said a tense Royal at the end of her hearing with MEPs.

The French Minister for Ecology was forced to defend her governments actions against tough questioning from members of the European Parliaments committee of inquiry into the dieselgate scandal.

DIESELGATE EXPOSES MEMBER STATE OPPOSITION TO EMISSIONS CURBS

Germany, Austria, Spain, Italy and most Eastern member states are reluctant to adopt stricter rules to limit emissions from diesel vehicles, despite watered down proposals from the European Commission.

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Hearing cut short

Royal argued that the French response to the scandal, which broke with revelations that Volkswagen had used sophisticated software to cheat emissions tests, had been exemplary.

But many MEPs did not agree.

The atmosphere at the two-hour hearing was made all the more tense by the fact that the minister arrived nearly an hour late.

You can get from Paris to Strasbourg in one hour and 50 minutes, so we could have started on time and my colleagues could have had time to ask their questions, said Jens Gieseke, a German Christian Democrat MEP (EPP group) and dieselgate rapporteur.

Not my fault

I launched a series of tests for French vehicle manufacturers just eight days after the VW scandal

broke, Royal said, adding that she was the only minister to have established the principle of transparency in the committee tasked with investigating emissions from French vehicles.

No European country has sped up the checks and lawsuits against their national manufacturers, she said, in response to accusations that she was protecting Renault.

Beside setting up the Royal committee, the government also referred the case to the French competition authority, opening the door to legal proceedings.

MOTORISTS HIT WITH UP TO €450 IN EXTRA FUEL COSTS AS CARMAKERS GAME CO2 TESTS

Cars consume much more than manufacturers claim they do and the gap between lab and real-world performance can reach up to 42%, according to a new ICCT study. EurActiv Germany reports.

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Despite Royal's assurances that the French government acted in good faith, MEPs did not pull their punches, accusing the minister of playing a double game and trying to protect France's national champion. Renault's emissions tests yielded very different results when conducted under laboratory and real-world conditions.

One of the MEPs' main grudges was France's decision in October 2015 to back a proposal to relax emissions standards for nitrogen oxides, after Royal publicly spoke out against it.

The French civil service stepped in on this without my instruction, she said, even going so far as to suggest she may have been undermined by another minister. I have disowned the decisions of my administration [on this subject], she said.

20 CITIES CHALLENGE RELAXATION OF EU AIR POLLUTION STANDARDS

Ordered to cut air pollution levels by Brussels, a group of EU cities are taking the Commission to court over its decision to relax car emissions standards, making their objectives even less attainable. EurActiv France reports.

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The minister's response did not go down well, particularly among the French members of the committee.

She completely refuses to accept her mistakes and her shortcomings. It takes away a lot of credibility when you say that you are not responsible for the mistakes of your administration, that you are not responsible for the decisions taken in your name, said French liberal MEP Dominique Riquet (ALDE group).

The Renault case

The Royal committee's protective attitude towards Renault, which is 20% state-owned and is one of the worst performers according to the committee of inquiry's emissions tests, was also roundly criticised by MEPs.

A certain amount of care was taken in reporting the test results to members of the committee, said Charlotte Lepitre from the NGO France Nature Environnement. It is true that France was the

first country to launch a committee of inquiry. It is very French: we are the first to start and the last to finish, she added.

CAR EMISSIONS CAMPAIGNERS TURN SIGHTS ON RENAULT

Renaults flagship Espace minivan released toxic diesel emissions 25 times over legal limits in a Swiss study, despite complying with EU tests carried out at unrealistically low engine temperatures, a German environmental group said on Tuesday (24 November).

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But Royal refuted those allegations.

These petty accusations that the French government is out to protect its own manufacturers are beyond belief, the minister said, accusing Renaults competitors of fuelling the fire.

The question of whether Renault used software to cheat emissions tests or simply tuned its engines ahead of the tests was not answered by the Royal committee.

We will have an answer to the question of cheating software with the second phase of testing in December, Royal said.

BACKGROUND

The American authorities discovered Volkswagen had installed software designed to cheat emissions lab tests in around 500,000 diesel cars. Experts believe road emissions tests are more difficult to defraud.

After the scandal, the European Commission and national authorities brewed up a new, more relaxed set of emissions limits.

Inquiries were also launched in a number of European countries, including France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy, to determine the real level of emissions from diesel vehicles.

Kaynak/Source: