
DETAILS OF EU BREXIT TALKS WITH BLAIR AND SOROS KEPT SECRET

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The European Commission is keeping secret details of talks between EU commissioner Pierre Moscovici, former UK prime minister Tony Blair and Hungarian-US billionaire George Soros, about a second Brexit referendum.

The commission told EUobserver in reply to an access to documents request that the need to protect the EU's decision-making process weighed heavier than any public interest in what was discussed last January in Davos.

Despite the commission claiming responsibility of 'an unprecedented wave of transparency', it still feels the need to redact its papers 'to protect its decision-making process'. (Photo: EUobserver)

Moscovici, responsible for economic and financial affairs in the EU, met several politicians and business leaders in the margins of the World Economic Forum, the annual get-together in the Swiss Alps.

The commission released an emailed summary of what was discussed with the French EU commissioner, in what the author of the email described as a "Quick readout of a day and a half of sub-zero speed-dating in Davos".

It revealed, for example, that the financial sector saw "Italy and Brexit" as "main risks in Europe".

But the email was heavily redacted in some places.

Six lines were redacted that followed the sentence "Soros and Blair: discussions with the two earliest backers of a 'People's Vote'".

Blair, who was the UK's centre-left prime minister from 1997 to 2007, is against the UK's departure from the EU, and a vocal supporter of a second referendum - called a People's Vote by its supporters.

Soros, a Hungarian-born Jewish philanthropist, is often at the centre of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories - some initiated by the prime minister of EU member state Hungary, Viktor Orban.

At one of the daily press conferences of the EU commission in January, a Hungarian journalist from a pro-government TV station asked about the contents of the meeting.

A commission spokesman replied he would not comment "on the many contacts that are happening in Davos" but claimed that the Juncker commission had led "an unprecedented wave of

transparency", by consistently disclosing when commissioners meet lobbyists.

"Everything is out in the light of the day for everyone to see and form an opinion," he said at the time.

But in fact, Moscovici's meetings with Blair and Soros have not been listed on the commissioner's web page, three months after they took place.

Several parts of the documents were redacted, with different reasons relating to exemption clauses in the EU's access to documents regulation.

The redacted email was released on 25 March, and was followed up with an explanatory letter from the EU commission on 15 April.

In that letter, the commission explained to EUobserver that it had to blank out parts of the document because of the exemptions.

In particular, there was a risk of violating privacy, and of damaging "the institution's decision-making process".

"We have looked into the text carefully and did not assess that there would be an overriding public interest in disclosure of this parts of the document," the commission said.

EUobserver has appealed the decision. A reply is due on Thursday (25 April).

Timmermans-Blair

Meanwhile, the commission has also replied to a separate access to documents request, related to meetings held by the commission's second-in-command, vice-president Frans Timmermans.

The Dutch politician, who wants to succeed his boss, commission president Jean-Claude Juncker, reported a meeting on 6 November 2018 with the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

However, according to the commission no documents existed relating to that meeting: no minutes or presentations, or even emails sent in advance for setting up the meeting.

The commission wrote "we regret to inform you that the European Commission does not hold any documents that would correspond to the description given in your application."

Apple

The access to documents application also revealed that no minutes existed for a meeting between Timmermans and Apple CEO Tim Cook.

The only documents that were released were emails between Apple and the commission.

In September 2018, the US technology company informed the commission of Cook's visit to Europe, and requested a meeting, which was then scheduled for 25 October.

Later that month Timmermans also received an invitation from the US ambassador to the EU, to

attend a dinner "in honour" of Cook.

However, his cabinet declined this dinner invitation - although Timmermans did attend the 25 October meeting with Cook.

The lack of minutes for lobby meetings with EU commissioners has been repeatedly revealed by access to documents requests by this website.

Last month, Timmermans declined an opportunity to pledge improvement.

A spokesman for his campaign said that "nobody has done more for promoting transparency than Frans Timmermans" and that before he wanted to talk about "possible next steps", other EU institutions needed to improve on their transparency record.

Kaynak/Source: