Mr Karmenu VELLA  
European Commissioner  
for Environment, Maritime Affairs  
and Fisheries  

EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
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Ref. : JWG  
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Brussels, 27 November 2015  

Dear Commissioner Vella,

Recently you made an interesting contribution to the European Parliament intergroup on Water relating to “the role of water in the circular economy”\(^1\). This water group, which is organized by the WssTP, seeks to use the cover of the European Parliament to claim it speaks on behalf of the European Water Industry. This is simply not the case.

It does not represent, nor speak on behalf of, the tens of thousands of workers and their unions within this sector. These workers, many of whom are EPSU members, provide the quality water services the people of Europe need. They continually and committedly ensure our drinking water is both safe and clean while undertaking dangerous tasks which expose them to toxics, chemicals and other lethal risks.

It is important for a European Commission that has promoting social dialogue high on its agenda to recall that European organisations such as EurEau do not play a role in social dialogue. In this regard, they are not acting in the spirit of European employers envisioned by President Juncker\(^2\). The European Commission should therefore be careful not to give too much weight to the view of only one particular part of the water sector. Not all water operators are represented by the WssTP. As you noted in your speech, “on the role of the private sector, (the WssTP) has always been to the fore”.

Whereas membership of EPSU covers both private and public sector workers in all EU countries - ranging from large multinationals and public utilities companies to smaller municipal companies - the same cannot be said of the WssTP.

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Neither are users of water services and especially low-income households represented by WssTP. Nor is the European Water Movement, an umbrella of organisations which unite to promote safe and clean drinking water and environmentally sound waste water services. This at a time when more than 1 million people still lack access to a safe and clean drinking water supply and nearly 2 % of the population lacks access to sanitation in the EU-28. Yet their needs and the groups who represent them appear to have been marginalized by the Commission.

We agree that public investment in water services (drinking water and waste water treatment) is important. However, we would have appreciated more recognition of the role public water companies play in the European water sector. Your reference to European companies that are "global leaders in the field of reusing municipal waste water" merely applies to a small number of multinational companies. This despite the fact that in most countries water services are publicly owned industries.

Which raises the question; why would the Commission want to promote these private companies and not the publicly owned municipal ones? Especially when the latter group serve some of Europe's largest cities. EPSU has recommended that the European Commission invest more funding in promoting public-public partnerships as part of its development aid. For instance, the EU Water Facility to support such partnerships was a very successful program, and similar initiatives should be promoted going forward.

Moreover, when you argue that "(o)ur expertise in this field can become a globally recognised source for sound investments, quality jobs, and economic growth" it is not entirely clear what you propose. Is this a reference to attracting private investment into the European water sector? Treaty rules require you to remain neutral, as acknowledged in the Commissions own communication in response to the Right2Water ECI. Or do you refer to investments in other parts of the world? If so, how do you intend to monitor if companies will indeed provide "quality jobs"?

We kindly ask you and your department to take these points into consideration. The Second stakeholder dialogue on transparency and benchmarking of water quality and services meeting of 12 October was an example of what can be done when a broad range of interests are involved. We would therefore strongly urge the Commissioner and the Commission services to continue with this practice. This will ensure that going forward all relevant stakeholders and views are heard; not just those of a select few.

Yours sincerely,

Jan Willem Goudriaan
EPSU General Secretary