

10th Annual Meeting of the Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue

Summary

TACD's 10th Annual Meeting marked a decade of cooperation between EU and US consumer organisations. Over this period, TACD has matured from a loose network to the recognised unified consumer voice in transatlantic relations.

The 10th Annual Meeting included a full day of discussions with senior European Commission (EC) and US Government officials. The opening session featured keynote speakers John Bell, Head of Cabinet for EU Consumer Affairs Commissioner Meglena Kuneva, and US Chargé D'Affaires Christopher Murray, as well as consumer organisation representatives Joost Martens, Director General of Consumers International, Jim Guest, CEO and President of Consumers Union and Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC.

Working group meetings followed, including on food, intellectual property, information society, financial services, nanotechnologies and climate change. The day concluded with closing remarks from TACD and EU and US Government representatives.

A constant theme throughout the day was the opportunities presented by the political transitions in the US and EU for improving consumer protection and raising consumer influence on policy. TACD was recognised by all speakers as being a valuable stakeholder in EU-US relations and the overwhelming sentiment was that its input would be in great demand over the coming year, most notably in the context of the Transatlantic Economic Council.

Opening Plenary

Benedicte Federspiel (Current EU TACD Steering Committee chair)

Benedicte Federspiel noted that over the past 10 years, TACD turned out to be a unique and reliable opportunity for promoting consumers' views on both sides of the Atlantic. It has been crucial to develop consensus on areas of common interest (nutrition safety, intellectual property rights, digital environment...) and to work on new important issues such as climate change, nanotechnologies or financial services. She pointed out that US foundations matched the EU funding and helped TACD to become a strong and unified consumer voice. She noted that despite financial ups and downs, TACD was the most enduring of all Transatlantic dialogues, which bridged gaps between EU and US as well as among US consumer organisations, allowing increased knowledge and capacities sharing. Finally, she drew the attention on how important was TACD 10th anniversary to consider the upcoming challenges it will have to address.

John Bell (Head of DG SANCO Cabinet, replacing Commissioner Kuneva)

John Bell mentioned that in 10 years, EU consumer policy has focused more on addressing markets that were not delivering for consumers, stopping breaches to European consumer law, product safety and strengthening consumers' rights. He also recognized that like TACD itself, the EU will have much more to do in the coming years to address the challenges regarding financial services, the digital marketplace or the services of general interest. He reminded that to cope with these issues and tailor policies tightly to consumer needs, cooperation with the US would be of paramount importance. It will be pivotal to share information and to work for instance on fraudulent commercial practices or on product safety (traceability of products, convergence of technical requirements...). In this context, he placed emphasis on EU support to TACD and the Transatlantic Economic Council in order to strengthen existing ties and push consumer interests forward.

Christopher Murray (Chargé d'Affaires, US Mission to the EU)

Christopher Murray mentioned that President Obama considered transatlantic relations and economic cooperation as a vital need to face the current financial crisis but also to prevent such failures in the future and to address upcoming challenges on climate, resource constraints or demography. He also specified that in order to meet these challenges, the Obama administration was also thinking about reordering public priorities and investing in education or in new clean industry. He mentioned Obama's support to the TEC and the need to improve its process and transparency. A fundamental point will be to strengthen the role of civil society representatives by deepening for instance the collaboration with TACD and involving the Labor in TEC activities. Public websites with meeting documents and progress reports will also help in this way. Finally, Christopher Murray stressed the fact that the TEC agenda and meetings will probably focus more on strategic economic issues and on new issues such as innovation or energy technology.

Joost Martens (Director General, Consumers International)

Joost Martens mentioned the significance of transatlantic cooperation for consumers and gave examples of areas where the EU/US cooperation can and should show strong leadership (access to knowledge, fight against climate change or obesity). He also stressed that the current political changes and economic challenges that make strong and concerted action imperative. He finally focused on the need for an inclusive and transparent approach to ensure a truly democratic dialogue relevant to consumers. He noted that the presence of TACD in the advisory group to the TEC and the efforts undertaken to involve a wider community of stakeholders were important signals.

Jim Guest (President and CEO, Consumers Union)

Jim Guest praised the achievements of TACD and stressed the importance of its continuation. Building on the high level of trust that people have in consumer organisations, he addressed TACD's future and specified three areas where he believes TACD can make a difference: financial services, food safety and direct to consumer advertising regarding medicines. As the previous speakers, he focused on the current great opportunities (with a new US Administration far more interested in consumer protection than the previous one) and challenges. He reminded how wise EU/US leaders would be to follow TACD advices and consumer policy recommendations, especially given the causes of the current financial crisis. He concluded saying this context was an opportunity to recast the direction of transatlantic discussions away from being just about removing restrictions on business. He also called for greater financial support of TACD.

Monique Goyens (Director, BEUC the European Consumers' Organisation)

Monique Goyens stressed the added value that TACD brings to consumer organisations in terms of improving coordination, sharing expertise and evidence and contact with governments. She came back to the various issues on which TACD has been focusing in the past years such as Intellectual Property, Information Society, Nanotechnology, Poultry or Product Safety. She stressed the potential of EU/US cooperation to create a vibrant market, increase consumer and environmental protection, and raise regulatory standards. She also welcomed the EU's and the US Administration's efforts to reorganise TEC to be more effective. The European elections (together with the next Commission) will probably lead to a serious re-evaluation of the Trans Atlantic relationship. She mentioned the suggestions of the outgoing Members of the European Parliament to have an increased communication with the legislators in the House of Representatives and to have a clear and transparent process for setting the TEC agenda. She concluded by stating that EU and US consumers' organisations would support the inclusion in the TEC of trade union representatives.

Closing Plenary

Jean Halloran (Consumers Union, on the behalf of Rhoda Karpatkin) welcomed new US administration's openness to consumer organisations, but reminded governments that it was necessary to make consumer impact on transatlantic policy more meaningful. In particular she mentioned the low take up of TACD recommendations due to a fundamental difference of views on the transatlantic market, between a liberal and deregulated view and the consumer position, which advocates more regulation in the public interest: on food and product safety, deceptive commercial practices, climate change, privacy, drugs and medicines. She stressed that a failure to ensure proper regulation of social goods leads to market failures and loss of trust on the behalf of citizens. The protection of the weakest party in a transaction does not equal bias towards a specific stakeholder, but creating a public good. She concluded on the fact that the economic crisis was an occasion to seize and implement the transition.

Peter Chase (US Mission to the EU) commended TACD for their clear, reasoned and constructive position papers, with an increasingly genuine transatlantic concern, and stressed that they do bear an influence on decision-making. He highlighted the compatibility between TACD concerns and the new US administration, and placed the emphasis on food safety (with a recent placement of FDA officers abroad) and climate change. He noted that the Transatlantic Economic Council (TEC) was often perceived as a deregulatory forum, but its remit was to bridge the regulatory differences and removing unnecessary burdens to the transatlantic relationship, which ultimately are a cost to society. He argued that TACD should continue to feed regulators with valuable advice. Regarding the future of the TEC, he expressed confidence in increased cooperation and transparency of the process, and acknowledged that short-term trade disputes should not be solved in this forum (i.e. poultry). He reiterated the invitation to TACD to participate to a debate on TEC on 29 June at the US mission to the EU.

Mark Vanheukelen (RELEX) praised the TACD, including its capacity to discuss a large array of specific topics and produce quality discussion papers and resolutions. He stressed its rising influence thanks to the Commission financing of transatlantic dialogues, and gave examples of areas where TACD could play a key role in bridging relations between governments and consumers: a) nanotechnologies (where a comparative analysis of the US and EU regulatory framework will be available in autumn 2009) b) climate change and eco design; c) economic and financial crisis; d) nutrition (especially on the youngest, and having in mind the future pressure on healthcare systems). While the EU and the US share many concerns, they different regulatory cultures and perceptions of risk and the role of government may lead to different regulatory environments. He concluded on TEC, stressing that it has not yet reached its full potential, that stakeholder input is essential, and that the Commission is awaiting US input on the future TEC agenda, as well as its modus operandi.