

Euracoal, the European Association for Coal and Lignite, has launched a full-frontal attack on the European Climate Foundation, one of the most influential climate NGO's in Europe, accusing it of “twisting the truth” and undermining democracy with “money and power”. Energy Post editor Karel Beckman looks at Euracoal's claims and concludes that they are unsubstantiated and even cynical.

Are “NGO's for sale”? That's the accusation made in a new report from Euracoal, the European Association for Coal and Lignite, that came out on Friday 9 October. “How the US super-rich influence EU climate and energy policy”, says the subtitle, even more spectacularly.

Euracoal's “special report”, as it's called, does not shy away from strong accusations. “Well-targeted campaigns by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) promote an energy mix without coal”, it says, adding: “They use every imaginable argument against coal, often twisting the truth and playing on irrational fears.”

According to Euracoal, there is nothing less than a conspiracy behind the anti-coal campaign: “This report examines who is behind these NGOs and their campaigns. We find that a wave of money is flooding into the EU policy space, a wave that the few donors hope will influence policy and favour their own preferred solutions, whatever the cost to consumers. This is a story about money and power.”

It goes on: “Euracoal does not question climate change and the need to act. What we do question is the efficiency of the measures proposed. We want to expose the funders behind the public campaigns that are portrayed as grass-roots movements, but are in fact well-orchestrated by a small number of super-rich individuals who see democracy as an obstacle to climate action.”

Complex web

Big words indeed. From an organisation like Euracoal, you would expect them to be backed up by solid facts. But the “special report” - it is really more like a brochure - does not contain any news or revelations.

As it turns out, Euracoal has focused on one NGO only: the European Climate Foundation (ECF). The reason for this is that ECF “sits at the centre of a complex web of NGOs who together command significant influence with European governments and the European Commission. With its enormous spending power, the European Climate Foundation has been able to direct a massive campaign by apparently independent actors, but who are in fact puppets of the Foundation and its rich US sponsors.”

Now it is arguably true that ECF is one of the most influential NGO's in the European climate debate. It is also true that it has ample funds - it was able to spend €26 million in

2013. The way ECF operates is probably quite clever. As Euracoal notes, it spreads its wealth over numerous smaller groups and causes – NGO’s, websites, think-tanks, consultancies, researchers. In 2013 it disbursed €15.3 million among 150 grantees (which means these got on average €100,000 each).

ECF in turn is funded by a number of foundations, only one of which, by the way, is from the US. They are:

the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (owned by a UK hedge fund)

Nationale Postcode Loterij (a Dutch lottery organisation funded by the Dutch lottery ticket buying public)

Velux Fonden (funded by the Danish window manufacturer Velux)

Oak Foundation (a Swiss-based foundation set up by entrepreneur Alan Parker of the retail company Duty Free Shoppers)

the McCall MacBain Foundation (a Swiss-based foundation set up by John and Marcy McCall MacBain, the founders of a successful Canadian classified advertising company)

ClimateWorks Foundation, the only US organisation, which is described by Euracoal as a “behemoth”

The funders of the ClimateWorks Foundation are yet other foundations, such as the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. These are supposedly the “US super rich” who are buying EU climate policy, although Euracoal does not mention a single individual “US super rich” person by name.

The question is: what is wrong with all this?

All of the information presented by Euracoal is easily available on the website of the ECF and the websites of the organisations that are mentioned here. As a journalist, I get press releases from ECF all the time, and I am perfectly aware of the nature of the organisation. I long ago checked it out on their website. Why aren’t these foundations entitled to spend their money on a cause they believe in?

Euracoal phrases all its non-revelations in suggestive language, with sentences like: “Many NGOs struggle on limited funding, but not the European Climate Foundation which paid its CEO €299 856 in 2014 (ECF, 2015a).” So ECF is successful, is that a crime? Are NGO’s who are struggling somehow more credible than those who are not? And is Euracoal trying to say that a salary of €300,000 is somehow wrong? How much do European coal lobbyists make? I could not find any information on that on Euracoal’s website.

Or what to think of the “accusation” that ECF “has appointed several notable fellows”, namely: Princess Laurentien van Oranje-Nassau (sister-in-law of the Dutch King Willem Alexander), Bert Metz (former co-chair of the IPCC), John Ashton (former UK special

representative for Climate Change), and Julian Popov (former Environment Minister of Bulgaria). So?

Twisting the truth

Now of course if ECF were misleading the public with false information, if it were "twisting the truth", as Euracoal puts it, that would be really bad. So what evidence does Euracoal marshal to back up this accusation? None. There is not a single case of "twisting the truth" in Euracoal's "special report".

Apparently, Euracoal could not manage to find, in all the prodigious output of the ECF, any concrete examples of ECF lobbyists misleading the public. That's amazing.

Instead, Euracoal comes up with vague accusations that purport to show that ECF is somehow engaged in damaging activities. For example, it says that ECF's "priority task is not ... to protect the environment, but to create a particular type of economy, regardless of cost."

So what if ECF thinks "a particular type of economy" is needed "to protect the environment"? Is that not allowed? Euracoal's adds a little extra smear of course, saying ECF does this "regardless of cost", but it does not back this up. Indeed, Euracoal quotes ECF's own policy objectives as saying that: "Overall we believe that Europe is in a privileged position to demonstrate the feasibility of decarbonisation without sacrificing prosperity". ECF, then, according to its own official aims, certainly does look at "cost".

As a supposed final nail in the coffin of ECF, Euracoal then issues this accusation: "Finally, another objective of the European Climate Foundation is, 'limiting fossil-fuel emissions in the EU and neighbouring countries'. In practice, the European Climate Foundation has chosen to fight against one of the few reliable energy sources in Europe - coal. Most of the Foundation's funding is targeted towards its 'Power Programme' and its 'EU Climate Policies and Low-Carbon Economy Programme', where, using grants, the European Climate Foundation pays think tanks and NGOs to report and campaign against coal in Europe."

Is Euracoal trying to suggest somehow that it's not allowed for anyone to campaign against coal, since according to Euracoal coal is "one of the few reliable energy sources in Europe?" This is just plain silly.

Euracoal's strategy apparently is to simply equate coal with our standard of living, so that it can then define every criticism of coal as an attempt to wreck the economy. "The coal industry stands for progress through the deployment of cleaner, more efficient technologies", Eurocoal says. "The European Climate Foundation buys the services of NGOs who, through a complex web, campaign against coal. If coal falls, then society will be poorer." Does Euracoal really believe that people will not be able to see through this trick?

Anocratic state

All this is bad enough but Euracoal does not stop there. It goes on to argue that ECF is somehow undermining democracy.

In a press release accompanying the report, Secretary-General of Euracoal Brian Ricketts calls ECF "a project to dismantle our way of life and to replace it with an experiment promoted by an elite class which seeks influence over EU policy makers, power over EU citizens and a new concentration of wealth taken from us all."

In the report itself Euracoal puts it like this: "In a properly functioning democracy, the changes that are demanded by the European Climate Foundation and its wealthy donors would come about through the ballot box. Instead, the Foundation has resorted to tactics that, if left unchallenged, would see Europe slip into an anocratic [sic] state."

Since when does democracy mean that we cannot "demand changes" in a public debate? Certainly Euracoal does have a point that "a small number of very wealthy individuals [that] do not represent civil society" have a lot of influence on the political decision-making processes in our democracies. That does include organisations like ECF, which deserve scrutiny. It also includes the far larger number of organisations that lobby for coal, oil, gas, nuclear energy, cars, GMO's, banks and other interests and are paid by "super-rich" individuals and corporations.

Personally, I am left to wonder what made Euracoal come out with a "report" like this. Possibly they did it out of desperation, with the Paris climate summit coming up. But they may also feel that their message will resonate with many groups in society who are under pressure in one way or another. That would make this a very cynical move - a deliberate attempt to tarnish opponents of coal with vague smears. Or is this normal practice in the coal sector?

source: energypost.eu