

23th of January 12:30-14:00

Translation: English / French

"LATE LESSONS FROM EARLY WARNINGS"

**LAUNCH OF THE EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENT AGENCY'S NEW REPORT
ON THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE**

Corinne Lepage MEP is pleased to invite you to a lunch, with **Jacqueline McGlade**, Executive Director of the European Environment Agency, for the launch of their eagerly awaited new report on the use of the precautionary principle.

David Gee, editor of this report, and several authors, will be present to discuss the lessons that can be drawn for better policy-making against a background of scientific uncertainty on the real impact of new products and technologies.

Late lessons from early warnings: science, precaution, innovation Volume 2 assesses the use of scientific evidence and the precautionary principle across a wide range of human health and ecosystem case studies such as leaded petrol, mercury products, DBCP pesticide, vinyl chloride, DDT, tobacco, and fossil fuel energies. These historical studies are used to derive lessons for handling **current and emerging innovations and issues**, such as nicotinoid pesticides, BPA, mobile phones, nano products, GMOs, alien species, and ecosystems resilience. Both historical and current chapters provide unique insights into how the precautionary principle has been applied or ignored, and the consequences. The report concludes with ideas for maximising innovations and minimising harms.

The lunch debate will be held in the European Parliament (Altiero Spinelli Building, member's restaurant) on

Wednesday 23th of January

from 12:30 to 14:00

How to help business actors to apply the Precautionary Principle?

by [Marc Le Menestrel](#) (25/01/2013)

On Wednesday 25th of January, I was part of the EEA delegation that launched the second volume of [Late lessons from early warnings: science, precaution, innovation](#) at the European Parliament (see my former entry in April 2012 [here](#))



Jacqueline McGlade, Corinne Lepage and Sybille van den Hove during the Press Conference

The delegation presented the report to [Green Ten](#) (a group of NGOs acting at the EU level), to the European Parliament, to the DG Environment and to [Friends of Europe](#).

The general message of the report is that **early warning signals of a technological risk for the environment or human health are often ignored and even suppressed, thereby leading to negative consequences that could have been avoided by early action.**

Because business actors often play an important role in developing and applying these risky technologies, it is important to understand why business not responded with precaution to these early warning signals.

This is the question that our chapter with Julian Rode attempts to answer on the basis of published academic literature. Without much surprise, we find that economic motives are often driving non-precautionary decisions. However, these decisions are also influenced by a complex mix of epistemological, regulatory, cultural, and psychological aspects.

Clearly, the interest of our work is to lay ground for more advanced and constructive findings. In particular, I am especially interested in the concrete application of the precautionary principle by business actors. To this end, my impression is that there is still much to add to the current debates. For instance:

▶ **The legal definition of the precautionary principle is open to interpretation.**

Understanding these interpretations require us to understand the ethical issues that lie beyond;

▶ **We can neither be totally free nor totally “precautionous”.** In practice, we need to [draw a line in the grey zone](#). To some extent, this is what each one of us does every day. What I find interesting is to understand and improve how this line is drawn;

▶ Prima facie, **business actors often face a dilemma between profits and precaution.** For the use of precaution to be profitable, much work is necessary. Technological risks, when they involve the environment and the public, are a specific case of ethical risks. Clearly, [identification, mitigation and transformation of ethical risks](#) is not easy. This is a major challenge for [ethical training](#);

▶ **The profoundly difficult dilemmas facing business actors must be acknowledged and spelled out,** in order for the debates to gain constructiveness and not be lost in ethical ambiguity. As I attempt to teach to [Master students](#), companies should clarify for themselves **what profits they would forgo for precautionary reasons** and with which managerial process they would make such decisions.

Of course, there is much to work out, but the idea is to promote intellectual courage and honesty so that we can create and develop trust. For instance, imagine a business actor saying

"We want to be “precautionous” but we cannot always be because it would cost us too much. Hence, we have to draw the line somewhere. This is the part that we are ready to pay for. Clearly, we can’t solve the issue alone. We need help and support from all stakeholders to move this line further towards sustainability."