



## FIRST THINGS, LAST THINGS: THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS OF PRIORITY

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December 13th is not technically mid-winter. However the coincidence of the signing of the Reform Treaty in Lisbon and the joint initiative by twenty Central Banks to address the global liquidity crisis, make it a good day on which to reflect on the setting of priorities and the establishment of coherent policy. The signature in the Jerónimos Monastery marks the completion of the second stage of the European Union's recovery of its confidence. Two years ago the Union was faced with the triple need to sort out its leadership vacuum, to unpick the mess around the Constitution and to agree on a new metaprogramme - a theme that could be communicated to the people of Europe. With the exception of the UK, a new and more confident leadership is in place. The Reform Treaty is both useful and outward looking. The direction of a "Europe in the World" policy has been set. That the Treaty is being signed at the point of departure of the Portuguese discoverers will have escaped no one.

A similar triple exercise is in progress at global level. The leadership of Russia and China for the next ten years is now clear. Whatever the twists and turns of the soap opera, otherwise known as the US Presidential Primaries, the name of the Democrat Party Presidential candidate will be clearer earlier than usual at the start of 2008. The process leading to the signature of a post-Kyoto agreement on climate change can be interfered with by the USA in the dying months of the Bush Administration, but it now looks unlikely to be derailed. The initiative by the twenty Central Banks brings a long overdue recognition that the credit crisis, triggered by sub-prime lunacy, now threatens the real world as well as the job prospects of bankers who danced into the flames in the thrall of groupthink. Avoiding a global recession and correcting global imbalances to reflect the new reality of the global economy is now an immediate priority, rather than a theoretical possibility. In parallel the tangled paralysis of foreign policy at last shows some signs of movement. The prospect of a US attack on Iran has receded. There are even some tentative signposts to a way out of the twin quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Strangely it seems that it is only in the UK that this sense of a mid-winter turning point cannot be detected. I predicted in August that Gordon Brown would not have the nerve to call a snap election in October, but I had not anticipated the complete paralysis that has affected one of the most intellectual politicians ever to be Prime Minister. To govern is to choose. Deciding what to do first is the everyday duty of a Prime Minister. Gordon Brown should abandon his increasingly embarrassing quest for the Vision Thing. He does not have the deadly Blair eloquence which allowed the previous Prime Minister for many years to constantly redefine himself as situations changed. The country would have a higher opinion of Mr Brown if it thought him capable of setting priorities and sticking to them. As usual the fault line in British politics shows up on the European issue. Gordon Brown rightly concluded that a referendum on the Treaty would dominate the available time that he had inherited from Tony Blair. It was logical therefore to renege on the foolish promise to conduct a referendum on the issue. However he makes himself look foolish by avoiding Brussels and photo opportunities involving champagne or collective Treaty signing. By contrast, David Cameron has had a good autumn. His nerve, and that of the Conservative Party, held during the crucial weeks in October. He was on solid ground in calling for a referendum as long as he could be certain that there would not be one. A referendum on Europe would have irretrievably re-opened the wounds in the Conservative Party and negated his attempt to move the Party onward from its obsession with Europe. He now has to avoid an ugly burst of Euroscepticism in the House of Commons during the parliamentary reading of the Treaty. The British electorate do not need to be reminded of how Europe rendered the Conservative Party unfit for government under its three failed leaders. David Cameron has laid down his priorities. He decided what needed to be done first. The last thing he now needs is to be re-impaled on the European issue.

The ECPA Circle in Brussels in December was treated to a fascinating presentation by a leading recruitment expert specialising in public affairs. He spoke to the title "What Qualities are we looking for in Senior Public Affairs Appointments". The speaker began by showing how the public affairs function was becoming increasingly professionalised and gaining recognition from other management functions. He maintained that the day of the amateur public affairs practitioner, relying on charm and a well stuffed address book, was clearly past. Public affairs professionals were defined as needing specific competences, most notably about the decision making process and the mind of regulators of all kinds. Success in public affairs was increasingly being measured against concrete results. In these

circumstances choosing your battles wisely, gaining internal and external alignment and leveraging key executives were indicated as important competences. The ability to make complex issues simple for both internal and external audiences was underlined, provided it was allied with the ability to master technical expertise on specific issues. A terrifying list of adjectives describing the ideal public affairs personality followed. The practitioner should be "thorough, investigative, curious, open minded, forward looking and constructive". The successful public affairs personality should be "outgoing, interested in people, capable of listening, focused, tenacious, consensus-driven and communicative". This figure should be both a team player and a team leader, and, just for the hell of it, should be smart and a good linguist! I don't dissent from any of this, but I suspect that the key public affairs skill at senior level is the ability to set priorities and stick to them. My dictionary defines priority as "something given or meriting attention before competing alternatives". Today's public affairs practitioners, whether in-house or consultants, diplomats or trade association executives, live in a world of intense time pressure. I know of no other function where the 'urgent' is more likely to drive out the 'important'. All too often we settle for what can be delivered in the available time, rather than what could be delivered if we followed the Decision Mapping(c) discipline of scanning the whole external environment of our customer.

Decision influencers push their case too often by resort to volleys of superlatives. Their preferred answer is always "cheapest, quickest or wisest". A few weeks ago a colleague in Brussels observed that the European Centre for Public Affairs was the oldest organisation in Europe devoted to the study of public affairs. We started teaching in 1986, but were not formally established until 22nd April 1988. I was minded to ask if there is an advantage to being the oldest? We were set up to "record, analyse and improve the conduct of public affairs". Surely the true virtue should be in how close we have come to achieving those goals, rather than in how long we have been in existence? St Pancras International, in its much hyped launch, boasts that it has "the longest champagne bar in Europe". Surely a relevant boast should be about the quality of the champagne and the speed of service rather than its geographic extent?

Of all these dangerous superlatives, the most puzzling and potent are that ancient couple 'First' and 'Last'. I have long thought of assembling a group of public affairs practitioners from companies who are cursed by working for the 'leader' in their sector. Such companies acquire perceived responsibilities, which in public affairs terms at least, often more than outweigh the market advantage of their size. Rather like eldest children, they are expected to be better behaved, more organised and more responsible than their junior siblings. Psychologists tell us that place in family has more impact on personality and life chances than any other single factor. Apparently eldest children often marry 'spoil' youngest children in order to cheer themselves up a bit. The Spencer household, on the other hand, is a union of two oldest offspring. It occurs to me that we might commission some research to see what position in family produces the most successful public affairs practitioner. This and other suggestions for inclusion in the next ECPA State of Public Affairs Questionnaire gratefully accepted.

I am glad that public affairs has increasingly adopted the habit of the advertising industry in establishing annual celebrations of the "Best This or Best That". This is a kind of celebratory benchmarking that should over time lead to the spreading of best practice. I am not sure however that I can find it in myself to welcome the "Worst EU Lobby Award" organised by the opponents of public affairs practice. Judgement by one's peers seems to me a legitimate exercise. Judgement by a random and unlimited audience, without due process, strikes me as questionable.

Eschatology, the study of 'Last Things', is a branch of theology, currently somewhat out of fashion. Of course it should not be confused with the study Eshatology which is the interpretation of prophesy! (Thank you Google). Karen Armstrong's latest book is entitled "The Bible - the biography". Amongst many other gems, she points out that it was only in the nineteenth century that people began to take the Bible literally. Before that date they valued the stories as myth that made sense of the complexity of human existence. Never for a moment did they believe that God created the world in six days. So much for the credentials of modern day fundamentalists who want to influence American foreign policy on the basis of the Book of Revelation. She also points out that the doctrine of original sin was conceived by St Augustine as a response to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in his lifetime. What shifts in mankind's thinking can we anticipate as American and European empires give way to Asian power?

Perhaps we would have a better sense of priority if we were more prepared to evaluate our lives and deaths in Tibetan Buddhist style, and to assess the total contribution which we individually make to humanity. Such thoughts are brought to mind by the increasing number of friends who seem determined to disrupt my network by either dying or retiring. Worthwhile public affairs leaves an imprint for better or worse on our collective future. *Ars longa, vita brevis*. Public affairs life is indeed short, even as its impact can be long. We can all improve our effectiveness by being more conscious about how we set our day to day priorities. The ultimate effectiveness may however be in consciously deciding what impact we want to make with our own lives. With the reputation of public affairs increasingly under scrutiny in the democracies, we should all give priority to defending the validity of the common enterprise in which we are engaged. It is comforting that other management functions are increasingly valuing the contribution of good public affairs. However it would be a self-defeating tragedy if the reputation of public affairs practitioners rose inside their own organisations in direct response to the decay in the reputation of public affairs itself. The first thing for all public affairs practitioners to do in 2008 is to concentrate on defending the validity of public affairs in democratic systems. Here as elsewhere in our complicated world Europe can take a lead.



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