

Public affairs and boundaries

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In all fields of human endeavour, boundaries are the exciting, if dangerous, places to be. Arnold Toynbee built most of his 'Study of History' on the argument that societies on boundaries are the most successful because they have to learn how to adapt and survive under the constant stimulus of different pres-

ures. The public affairs function is a classic of boundary stimulus. Its practitioners must be both in touch with the internal reality of their organisations and of the external environment in which their corporation, organisation or government must survive. The ECPA is currently exploring the public affairs implications of two important and tricky boundaries.

Some years ago, in Iceland, I stood athwart a rather undistinguished crack in the earth. My left foot was on the North American tectonic plate and my right foot on the Eurasian plate. Poor Iceland is being pulled apart by continental drift. It is this long-term and fundamental shift which gives Iceland its dramatic scenery and potential for tourism. Public affairs practitioners could be forgiven for feeling that they are also being torn apart by continental drift.

The transatlantic agenda looks full of unusually threatening problems. In addition to the usual collection of trade tensions we now have major political problems in the competition field after the European Commission's rejection of the General Electric and Honeywell merger. George W. Bush's cavalier rejection of the Kyoto Protocol has acquired a political significance well beyond its already massive environmental importance. Companies on both sides of the Atlantic find themselves challenged by Families Against Bush. Some of them find themselves facing boycotts and all of them have discovered that behind the generalities of corporate social responsi-

bility lurks the prospect of immediate damage to their relations with consumers.

The row over Kyoto is of wider significance. It is a symbol of US increasing reluctance to ratify, or in extreme cases even to be involved in, international agreements. The Landmines Treaty, the International Criminal Court and the Bio-Safety Protocol are just part of an emerging pattern. In a recent lecture to the Free University of Brussels, I speculated on the different foreign policy responses shown by Europe and America to the collapse of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. For Europe this meant a concentration on the consequences of German reunification, the creation of the Euro and the rapid acceleration of enlargement in Northern Central Europe to secure the eastern boundaries both of Germany and of Europe.

For policy-makers in Washington, however, this year was all about the nature of being the sole superpower and of managing foreign policy without a visible external enemy. Into the vacuum created by the collapse of the USSR, came Clinton's policy of putting foreign policy more directly at the service of US commercial interests. Twelve years later, American supporters of National Missile Defense demand 'full spectrum dominance' in military matters. The equivalent in political and economic affairs is the dominance of the American school of thought which sees the USA as a *hegemon*. In a globalised world where everything is connected to everything else, it is not possible to separate commercial and public affairs issues from such matters of high politics. The position of US corporations in Europe must become increasingly sensitive. The American Chamber of Commerce has often been used as a transmission mechanism for US policy proposals in Europe. It cannot be chance that the newly revived and influential European Round Table of Industrialists increasingly has the policy ear of the European Commission and of European governments. Such

trends are made more acute by the downturn in the US economy and the consequent cut-back of the public affairs budgets of US companies operating in Europe. Most of the large public affairs consultancies in Europe are now ultimately American-owned. At a more subtle level this provides a challenge for the whole practice of public affairs in Europe given the origins of much public affairs culture and academic research in American models.

The Kyoto Protocol provides an interesting case study of the impact of public affairs on foreign policy. The differential impact of the fossil fuel lobby on both sides of the Atlantic is a major determinant of differing attitudes. As the European Parliament's former rapporteur on the CO₂ energy tax and subsequently on climate change, I know from personal experience the efforts that were made to extend the fossil fuels industry's expensively-purchased control of the 'choke points' of Congress into the European arena. They feared that otherwise US resistance to climate-change legislation would eventually be 'swamped' by the Europeans giving a lead to the rest of the world. However, even such a sophisticated analysis as that contained in 'Climate Change and American Foreign Policy', (see Harris (2000)) published last year, fails to give sufficient weight to the impact of such large public affairs budgets intelligently deployed by the Global Climate Coalition and others.

The question for public affairs practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic is whether these trends are of fundamental and long-term nature, or whether they apply only to the Bush Administration, in office courtesy of a couple of hundred 'hanging chads'. It would take another Alexis de Tocqueville, author of 'Democracy in America', to make such a long-term judgment. As it happens, he also furnishes us with a useful thought on the more subtle boundaries which public affairs must navigate. In his 'Recollections' he wrote

'I mixed with people who lived by their pen who described history without interfering with politics, as well as with politicians who were engaged solely in creating events without any intention of describing them. It always struck me that the former would see general causes in everything while the latter, living in an entanglement of day to day facts, tended to imagine that everything was caused by minor incidents, and that the world moves thanks to small wheels similar to those that their hands are pushing. I believe that both of them are mistaken'.

The ECPA has always valued its position on the boundary between practitioners with their hands on the 'small wheels' and academics who see 'general causes in everything'. It is in this spirit that we are planning an important research project intended to guide the Centre's research activities and publication plans for several years to come.

The project will be carried out by Jon White, a member of the ECPA's Research Committee. Professor White is a researcher and academic involved with public affairs teaching at a number of universities including City University Business School in London, and the Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI) in Lugano, which offers public affairs as part of an executive master's programme in strategic communication management. Research among Europe's academic community forms part of the project, which will use the Delphi method to establish the research priorities in European public affairs practice. The project will also involve contacts with leading public affairs practitioners.

Jon White will now explain.

At this point, public affairs is a field of study in which practitioners set the pace of development. Innovations in practice often occur as a result of pressures faced by practitioners, rather than as an outcome of investigations by researchers or university study of practice. An important part of the ECPA's

planned project is that it will link the Centre more closely to practitioner's views about the requirements of the field and allow the Centre to develop research activities that can feed results directly into practice.

The Delphi method allows researchers to test expert opinion, through several rounds of questioning. In the case of public affairs, a selected panel of European experts – academics and practitioners – will be asked to identify research priorities. They will also be asked to express opinions on the conduct of research, possible sources of support for necessary research, and practical methods of sharing research results. The approach produces a number of insights from the opinions expressed, and it allows a range of agreement and disagreement to be set out for further comment. The Delphi approach continues through several rounds until no new insights emerge, and positions on issues identified are clear.

I carried out a similar study with a co-researcher (White and Blamphin (1994)) when groups of UK academics and practitioners were asked to identify research priorities in public relations practice. The groups contacted identified definition of the field, clarification of the role of public relations in strategic management and evaluation as top priorities. Practitioners were also concerned about the impact of technological developments on practice and new opportunities for communication between organisations and their publics.

Preliminary stages of the ECPA's research will examine existing literature on public affairs research, and will gather the results of research already carried out to establish trends in the practice. A number of other centres that have completed studies of practice, such as the Centre for Corporate Public Affairs in Australia and the US Public Affairs Council, will also be contacted. Preparatory work will also involve selection of the panel of experts to be contacted.

Practitioners to be invited to take part in

the study will be drawn from practitioner groups in the corporate, civil society and public affairs consultancy communities. It will be part of the project's intention to identify differences of opinion on priorities.

The ECPA is enthusiastic about the outcome of the project. The Centre's research committee feels that the time is right to carry out this and a number of related projects to delineate recent developments in public affairs practice and project their consequences into the future. Underlying themes to the questions in the Delphi study will relate to the professionalisation of public affairs practice, and to the principles of best practice. These themes may surface explicitly in questions that follow the first round of the Delphi study.

The project will also give impetus to the Centre's rapidly developing programme of publications, as part of a planned programme that meets identified needs. The results of the project will guide researchers to priority

research areas, and research will contribute to the understanding and management of priority issues in practice.

The ECPA plans to have the results of the study available for the Centre's Annual Conference in Leuven in February 2002, but practitioners, teachers and students interested in the study are invited to contact Jon White with comments or suggestions ahead of that time (DrJonWhite@compuserve.com). A summary report from the study will appear on the ECPA's website.

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