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**“The State of Public Affairs after September 11<sup>th</sup>”**

**by Tom Spencer**

**Executive Director of the European Centre for Public Affairs and  
Visiting Professor of Global Governance, SEMS, University of Surrey**

There is a curiously subtle relationship between the public affairs function and the political world which it seeks to influence. A shock to the political system of the magnitude of the attack on the World Trade Center has effects on the practice of public affairs. Some of these impacts are obvious. Others will only become apparent with the passage of time. In its fifteen years of existence the European Centre for Public Affairs has sought to be a “safe space” in which the elements of the political world could meet and discuss in an independent manner and with a degree of academic rigour. From the moment of our founding, we rejected the idea of a world divided between government and lobbyists. It has always been our view that journalists and the media, lobbyists, both from civil society and from the corporate sector, and ministers, members of parliament and civil servants all form part of one seamless political world. They have the same fascination with power and with process. They are intimately and umbilically linked. With this holistic view of the political world, it is natural for the ECPA to be interested in assessing the impact of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> on the practice of public affairs. Jointly with the Journal of Public Affairs and The Public Affairs Newsletter, we created a seminar at Chatham House on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2002 entitled “Public Affairs and the World Crisis: What has changed since September 11<sup>th</sup>?”

The destruction of the World Trade Center was a brilliantly executed, symbolically powerful act which, by creating a visible external enemy, obviously changed the context of European integration, Transatlantic relations and America’s view of itself. Not just America, but the world looked suddenly and horribly different as “radical insecurity” replaced celebrity nonsense in the headlines. As Europeans observed a three-minute silence, they were aware that European cities might suffer a similar fate. The nature of transatlantic relations underwent an immediate transformation which pulled the governments of the North Atlantic closer together, gave them common aims and a common incentive to produce positive results in global negotiations such as the World Trade Organisation Ministerial. Most importantly of all however it radically changed the psyche of America, ending for the foreseeable future the American sense of invulnerability and separation from the rest of the world, the so called American 'exceptionalism'. At least in the short run, America needed co-operation in matters of intelligence, money laundering and diplomacy. Europeans welcomed this, as they did the new Keynesianism of an American Administration acting to limit the risk of a global recession. The debate about globalisation, and particularly the activities of the anti-globalisers, which had dominated the western press between Seattle and Genoa, was converted into a new interest in the structures and potential for co-operation in global governance. In this new phase it is no longer sufficient to be against globalisation, it is now necessary to propose new, robust, and hopefully even democratic, institutions by which the species might live. The Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt recognised this when inviting many of the anti-globalisers to a European Union Presidency

Conference in Ghent on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2001. The need to make positive recommendations is much more difficult for a diverse coalition than is the emotionally satisfying chanting of slogans against an ill defined globalisation. There are new constraints for ngos of all kinds in the world of “radical insecurity” in which they, as the rest of the political world, must now operate. Debates about the weakness of government and indeed the desirability of government action were everywhere replaced by a brutal re-assertion of the security and economic aspects of state power.

At a more subtle level, the impact of bin Laden was to destroy the comfortable belief of the developed countries that they lived in a secular, global and homogenous world in which the triumph of Judeo-Christian values was both inevitable and desirable. Jihad had met McWorld with a vengeance. The nature and context of these particular acts of Islamic fundamentalism gave a new prominence to the arguments of Professor Samuel Huntingdon about the “clash of civilisations” in a post-ideological world. It is arguable that American policy makers were in any case looking for a visible external enemy to replace the threat from Communism and from Russia which had evaporated in 1989. The twelve year period after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which had seemed to be the new reality in which death was absent from public life, suddenly looked more like an unusual interval in human history.

I believe the “clash of civilisations” analysis to be both wrong and profoundly dangerous. I prefer the thoughts of Karen Armstrong in her book, “The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam”, published in 2000, in which she identifies fundamentalism in all three religions and notes its presence also in Hinduism, Buddhism and other faiths. She characterises fundamentalism as a response to secularist policies, which the fundamentalists see as a cosmic war, threatening the very existence of their religion and spirituality. She is at pains to point out that theirs is a modern response to modernity, a deliberate attempt to provide a plan of action to re-sacralise an increasingly sceptical world. I would link this to Marc Luyckx’s argument that the most dangerous tensions are not between religions, but inside them. (“Transmodern” Dialogue of Cultures, Beyond Samuel Huntingdon, a Crucial Role for Business, available from marcluy@hotmail.com). He points to the conflict between fundamentalists and the mainstream in every religion. He sets his analysis in the context of the transition from industrial or ‘modern’ society into the knowledge or ‘trans-modern’ society, drawing parallels with the moment of transition from agrarian or ‘pre-modern’ society at the time of the Enlightenment. The symbolism is made more powerful by the fact that the world’s great religions still draw their imagery from an agrarian pre-modern society. Theirs is the paradigm of the pyramid in which God is the only truth. The clergy interpret this truth to the politicians, who pass it to men, who communicate it to women and children. The modern paradigm replaced God with reason and the clergy with scientists, but otherwise left the pyramid intact at least for public purposes. It relegated religion and ethics and culture to the private sphere. He argues that the trans-modern paradigm is no longer a pyramid, it is rather a disc with an empty centre in which many forces interact. If this analysis of paradigm shift and its impact on the political world is accurate, the implications for public affairs are indeed significant. What worked in the pyramid will not work in the disc.

In the immediate aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, I argued the need for public affairs practitioners to re-examine everything that they had written before September 11<sup>th</sup>. To examine every assumption and every strategy. I argued that the 'intelligence' role of the public affairs function as carriers of messages into the organisation would be more important than the traditional role as spokesman for the organisation in the political world. Since then I have been struck by the way in which attitudes to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> have evolved month by month. I would characterise the first month as one of "shock", during which even the brightest brains were struggling with the magnitude and strangeness of what had happened. I characterise the second month as one of "fear". The political world was gripped by fear of a deepening global recession; fear of possible further attacks and fear of the problems of war in Afghanistan. The third month has seen a certain "re-balancing", given the comparative ease with which the Taliban regime has crumbled and the physical presence of bin Laden's organisation in Afghanistan has been dismantled. Only in January of 2002, four months after the event, will we be in a position to begin to make an assessment of reality post September 11<sup>th</sup>.

We do not know whether the world of 2002 will revert to look like its predecessor on September 10<sup>th</sup> 2001. It is at least possible however that the events will leave a widely felt desire to incorporate more of an ethical dimension into the *réal politique* of world affairs. How for instance is the debate about corporate social responsibility and new definitions of social partnership to develop? Will it be seen as a central concern of business and government in the new era, or will it be dismissed as the pleasant fantasy of a prosperous decade?

What are the likely responses of business? Some will undoubtedly be dictated by a deepening recession. Others will be influenced by a sense that the public perception of business' role in the world has changed. Will this lead to more global organisation of public affairs? Will there be more meetings or fewer? Will there be larger public affairs budgets or will they be more constrained? What will happen to training budgets? Are we training public affairs practitioners for a world that no longer exists? In recent weeks, I have come across several examples of CEOs ordering wholesale reviews of their public affairs strategy. These have involved cutting traditional detailed involvement in trade associations and investing instead in a broader enhancement of the CEO's ability to understand the world in which he or she now has to operate. There are consequences from all this for the public affairs consultant. Will they need to be more specialist? Will they be expected to show a greater understanding of global institutions and global politics?

We need to recognise that we only in Act Two of what is probably a five act opera. The Europeans made their response clear at the Laeken Summit in December 2001. They are pursuing more integration internally, especially in the area of Justice and Home Affairs and setting out to re-shape the constitution of the Union in the period between now and 2004. Externally they favour a multi-lateralist global solution to the new insecurity. The position of the Bush Administration is much less clear. Initial analysis in Europe suggested an American swing away from isolationist attitudes towards a new multi-lateralism. I am impressed however by the argument that the US has in fact pursued a

course which is neither isolationist nor multi-lateralist, but which might be characterised as internationalist. The Americans have been more active internationally than before September 11<sup>th</sup>, but have sought to maintain their freedom of action and to resist what they still regard as multi-lateralist entanglements. As this great drama develops public affairs practitioners will have to remain alert to shifts in the mood of a political world in transition. The state of public affairs will require our constant attention if the function is to continue to serve its purpose effectively in the newly insecure global political space.