

“HOW TO GET THE BEST OUT OF YOUR LOBBYIST!”

An open letter to new MEPs

Dear Colleagues,

Congratulations! You have done the difficult bits – getting elected and surviving your first Strasbourg Plenary – now for the next five years. Get the basics right first. Find comfortable accommodation in Brussels and some way of making sure that you don't over-sleep and miss those important moments at the beginning of Committees. A good parliamentary assistant is essential. Buy or steal one with experience of how Parliament works. Invest time in understanding how the parliamentary expenses system works. Do this not for the sake of your bank balance, but because it will be the first subject which every journalist asks you about. Don't worry about inevitable mistakes. Keep smiling. Indeed, keep smiling at everybody until you sort out the difference between that blonde Spaniard and the dark Swede with the confusingly similar names. Don't worry about any damage you inflict on the English or French languages. EU “Corridor Français” is your language – use it, invent it, enjoy it!

Happily you are not alone in this strange new world. There are hundreds of lobbyists keen to help. If they are any good they are already programmed to feel your pain, understand your problems and provide you with a tailor-made set of views that will ensure your effortless rise to the pinnacle of parliamentary power. These helpful people will offer you cocktails. They will make you feel both grand and guilty. They may frighten the pants off you, but they also promise a tantalising whiff of celebrity to help fuel your career.

All they want in return is that you take an interest in their ideas. They are traders in the most important commodity in the European Union – information. Although they are often too shy and self-effacing to say so, they are fulfilling an important part of the democratic process. Most of them have big, round soulful eyes, like puppies. All of them have agendas. Indeed they are best thought of as pets – helpful, loving, the ideal companions for your down moments. Medical evidence shows a sharp reduction in stress-related diseases amongst politicians when they have the opportunity to stroke and be stroked by lobbyists. Like all good pets they are best kept in small numbers and in good conditions where they can come to understand your needs and wishes. Occasionally un-house trained lobbyists get into the system and leave a nasty smell. The number of Italian chocolate companies with gangland manners is thankfully small, so you should be able to choose a comfortable collection of pet lobbyists. Start with a couple of Irish Wolfhounds for hunting, a farm cat to keep the mice down, an iguana for interest and a brace of parrots to repeat your words of wisdom.

Remember lobbyists come in different guises. Corporate lobbyists are worried about jobs in your area. Non-governmental organisations are worried about your eternal

soul. National governments are simply worried that you may discover the weakness of their case when you have seen twenty-four other governments making the same mistake. Then there are voices from your political party reminding you of future selection procedures and the desirability following every word of your Manifesto, however ignorant or badly drafted.

To survive all this attention from public affairs puppies you need some clear rules for your own conduct.

Be selective. You cannot take up every cause. You cannot follow every amendment in a four-hour voting session. Get used to depending on your colleagues who write the whips in subjects you know nothing about. Divide issues into those you can ignore; those where you need enough knowledge to survive; and those where you want enough knowledge to change policy yourself.

Audit your own interests. What do you really care about? Seek out the more influential parliamentary Inter-Groups, because they set agendas and influence voting outcomes. Care about the environment? Go for GLOBE (Global Legislators Organisation for a Balanced Environment). Want to reform the CAP? Go for LUFPIG (Land Use and Food Policy Inter Group).

Consider your parliamentary career in the round. Do you wish to shine in your Committee, in your Delegation, in your political Group or in the Plenary? There will be lobbyists keen to help you in all settings.

It is generally wise to start by building a few lasting relationships with lobbyists who share your interests and whose company you enjoy. Beware the exotic, the exuberant or the overly generous. As a general rule you should be suspicious of the lobbyist you first meet when he abseils through your parliamentary window. Similarly it may be wise to avoid the lobbyist who introduces himself while breathlessly waving an invitation to speak in Cape Town during springtime.

Bear in mind that the lobbyist you are talking to is the smile on the face of a very extensive tiger, much of which may not be visible to you. The civil servant on the telephone from your national capital will have spent months negotiating in Council and knows exactly what he wants Parliament to do. The delightful diplomat offering to share a kebab on behalf of his applicant nation may well be experienced at skewering previous parliamentarians. The innocent civil society activist is talking from a script that may well have had to be agreed at national, European and global level. The company representative will already have made her case to Commission and Council and may well be a veteran of internecine warfare in trade associations or employers' groups. This lobbying is just the tip of the public affairs iceberg. It represents the conclusion of months or years of research, coalition building and strategy formulation.

This autumn will see the resumption of the three very different public affairs campaigns, all of which will be deploying lobbyists with big brown eyes. The titanic struggle over the REACH Directive goes into its second round. My advice would be to let WWF measure your chemical content. It may not decide your vote on the issue, but it's just the story for the local newspaper. Colleagues with an alcohol problem may wish to pass this one, unless they have major wine or whisky interests in their

region! Governments of all kinds are the most numerous lobbyists of Parliament, so expect to be heavily lobbied by the Turks. Parliament has the power of Assent on new members so don't give this one away lightly. Undoubtedly the most complex lobbying of the season will come with the Constitutional Treaty. This is a process in which you also get to play lobbyist. Nobody understands the whole document, so my advice would be to become a specialist in particular sections of the Treaty. Article numbers should trip from your tongue. The really ambitious may also indulge themselves with Protocols. But remember this is an issue which really matters both for you as an MEP and for Europe so listen to the lobbyists. Use them to bring you information and to hone your debating skills. Enjoy their company, but treat them with respect. They are as much a part of the political process as you are. Remember one of the golden rules of public affairs - "There is always tomorrow". Today you are the Member and they are lobbying you, but tomorrow ... ?

Good luck,

Tom Spencer

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