

“DANCING TO THE MUSIC OF POWER: CHALLENGES FOR LOBBYISTS IN THE NEW EUROPE”

Article by Tom Spencer for E!Sharp Magazine

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Philosophers tell us that it is logically impossible to “step into the same river twice”. For lobbyists it is equally true that you never lobby the same European Union twice. The process of change is continuous, subtle and unrelenting. Treaties are the milestones by which the Union marks the passage of current practice into legal form. Each act of lobbying and the response to it creates new precedents and open new possibilities. The Union is a vast dance to the music of power. Prime ministers, parliamentarians, diplomats, consultants, civil society and corporations constantly form new patterns and learn new steps. The speed and complexity of this continent-wide barn dance has accelerated in 2004 – the Year of Change. The coincidence of the end of the quinquennial cycle of the Union with both a major enlargement and a new Constitutional Treaty has kept everyone on their toes. As these autumn evenings draw in, more change is due as the new personalities elected, appointed or employed in Brussels find their feet and chose their partners. However now is as good a moment as any for lobbyists of every ilk to consider how they respond to the challenges of the next five years.

It is unwise to etch imaginary boundaries between the impact of enlargement, constitutional change and new personalities, but enlargement is a good place to start a review of the effectiveness of public affairs practice. Brussels has had more than its fair share of seminars and briefings on enlargement, most of them descriptive and predictable. Enlargement is a process not an event, for the re-unification of Europe is not yet complete. The shadow of the next enlargement will influence practice and policy in the five years to 2009. Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Norway and some or all of the remaining states of the former Yugoslavia are likely to be corralled into a single Enlargement package in 2009. There can be little doubt that another treaty will be deemed necessary by that date. Taken together these two enlargements to the east give a new relevance to old history and old enmities of which western Europe has only the dimmest of understanding. We talk glibly of “new neighbours”, but few western Europeans appreciate the thought patterns of Orthodox Europe. Of all the new members of the European Parliament from the east the wisest is Bronislaw Geremek, a medieval historian and former Foreign Minister of Poland. He electrified the Foreign Affairs Committee in the late 1990s with a speech on how a re-united Europe would think and feel, with its eastern lung restored.

In the immediate future western Europeans need to get over their “Chirac Syndrome” of treating those from the new states as ill-informed, second class citizens of Europe. Submersion of two generations to Russian domination and Communist dictatorship

has done nothing to dim the pride, passion or intellectual vigour of individual east and central Europeans. Most of the assumptions about the way they will behave have already been proved fallacious. I see no indication that they will be either instinctively pro- American or slow in understanding the rules of the European game. Lobbyists however should make a clear distinction between the conduct of public affairs in the new member states and the impact of their membership on the public affairs system of the Union as a whole. As always in public affairs an ability to listen and an instinctive empathy will be essential in both contexts.

The European Parliament is perhaps the easiest institution in which to assess the challenges for public affairs in the next five years. It has already internalised the experience of having the newcomers as Parliamentary Observers. It gains under the Constitutional Treaty and, despite the continuing nonsense over the Member's Statute, I expect it to be in frisky and assertive mood vis-à-vis both the new Commission and a Council of Ministers preoccupied by the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty. Look for more developments of the 'trialogue' in all its forms. My advice to participants at European Centre for Public Affairs programmes in the last year has been consistent. Wherever you see three people in Brussels having a coffee, join them immediately. It may well be an informal triologue setting the parameters for an EU decision!

Notwithstanding the Martin Report and the stupidity of individual lobbyists in the case of chocolate eggs, there is no reason why the new Parliament and the other institutions should adopt an aggressive stance towards lobbying of all kinds. If they do so it will be because public affairs practitioners have failed to explain the validity of their craft. As the corridors of power become more crowded with new arrivals and new issues, the professional public affairs community may need to review whether the current level of self-regulation is sufficient. Much better that professional lobbyists propose any changes, rather than wait for some heavy handed imposition in response to an as yet unknown idiocy. An idiocy perpetrated by individuals who neither understand nor respect the current delicate balance based as it is on the inter-institutional need for elegant information flow. Journalists and public affairs practitioners are essential lubricants of the European political system. Both must be alert to the need for change in their behaviour in this new Europe.

Nowadays the power of the European Commission depends more than ever on the personality and credibility of its leadership. If the Commission can collectively succeed in recovering from its mid-life crisis, it may yet exercise as much influence as in its heyday. The complexity of the new system will be its ally. The fragile flower of its morale depends however on a shared ability to visualise what kind of institution it will be in ten years. It will remain however the paramount target for pro-active lobbyists, who are themselves part of the Commission's decision-making in the underground chambers of Commission-led comitology.

It is the Council of Ministers for whom the next five years looks most challenging and where creative lobbyists could fish convincingly for power and influence. For the Council working at the level of twenty five is more than a numerical adjustment. It requires new practice, much of it centred around the increased significance of the Council Secretariat. Despite the rhetoric about a new inter-governmentalism, the Treaty which the Heads of State and Government have blessed has a logic of its own

which will in practice drive a dependence on the community method. The Council will be distracted for the next two years by the need to achieve ratification of the Constitutional Treaty. Long before the new President of the Council settles himself into some grand new office, the system and its attendant lobbyists will have been adapting to the end of the rotating six-month presidencies. Of course lobbying in national capitals to influence the European debate, rather than push national interests, will become more common. However it will be ineffective without a keen sense of the new balance of inter-institutional power in the European Quarter of Brussels.

Taken together these myriad challenges should be an invitation for lobbyists to think of new ways of reaching their goals. Those who believe that more of the same will be sufficient in a Union of twenty-five, heading towards thirty-five, will be painfully disappointed. The merely mechanical is doomed to lose out to the innovative and the courageous. Effective public affairs, whether by diplomats, civil society, trade associations or officials can no longer be “learned on the job”. Every player in the game should now be setting themselves training and competence targets for the next five years. In recent months I have talked with NGOs, trade associations, pan-European consultancies and numerous corporations about the practice changes necessary for success. All agree that a Europe of fifteen member states represented the outer limit of instinct and amateurism in European public affairs. In reality nobody can now claim credibly to understand the public affairs of twenty five nations. The day of the renaissance public affairs prince, who armed with a decent education and three languages, could make a good fist of universal European coverage is now past. It is not just the formal structures of the Union which need to adapt to the new challenges. European public affairs is now a team effort requiring preparation and planning. Every lobbyist must recognise that these are our challenges as well as Europe’s. Experience and an instinct for how Europe works remain necessary, but, of themselves, are insufficient for success on this new dance floor.

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