



THE EUROPEAN TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVE : A RING CYCLE FOR TODAY?

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Public affairs, the interaction of society with its political institutions, is serious stuff. It is essential to democracy, particularly to a 'new' democracy on a continental scale. The examples of the USA and India should remind us that such democracies are possible, even as they warn us of dangers ahead.

It is truly tragic therefore that the debate about the European Transparency Initiative, as it relates to public affairs, has never risen above the level of soap opera. For four years we have been treated to regular instalments of the superficial, driven by personality and sliced into 90 second sound bites. It is as if the Ring Cycle had been written by Wikipedia rather than Wagner. Great themes, but no linking leitmotif. Great characters, but no direction and no evolution. Diatribe not dialogue.

The plot so far does not reflect well on any of the performers. The public affairs culture of the European Union is in transition, but it is not broken. The question of lobbying was included in the European Transparency Initiative, and is maintained in the public eye, by a brilliant but ruthless campaign directed by the Corporate Europe Observatory. The role of Albrecht is taken convincingly by Erik Wesselius, who on behalf of Nibelungen everywhere, passionately believes that public affairs is the ring of power, which if possessed can break the hold of capitalism on the European Union. Campaigners in the grip of such certainty see nothing immoral in personal viciousness, trial by website or in stooping to the worst supposed habits of the very system which they seek to overthrow. The campaign has missed no opportunity to peddle fallacious comparisons with the US system and to equate the transparency debate with a crusade against corruption.

The behaviour of the European Commission will one day make an excellent case study of how not to produce policy. From the beginning it has been all tactics and headlines, with little strategy and no sense of an ultimate destination. Commissioner Kallas has been cast in the role of a diffident Siegfried, alternatively heroic and vacuous. It is as if the old Gods of a Commission-led corporatism – the social partners, the great companies, the sprawling trade associations – sense somehow that their time is past. Strangely they have entrusted their fate not to a Wotan, but to the Sorcerer's Apprentice. This distressed pantheon includes the Member States and their national champions, frozen in immobility on their rainbow bridge. In the shadows we find scavenging Eurosceptics always keen to equate Europe with corruption and deceit.

What should we make of the performance of public affairs professionals in this evolving tragi-comedy? Clever, complex and irredeemably focused on the short term, they have been good at the public affairs of their clients and gravely inadequate in defending the legitimacy of their craft. Rich in ego, but poor in co-ordination, only in the last act are they realising their failure to communicate the purpose of public affairs. They have allowed themselves to be defined by their enemies. With rare exceptions they have failed to distinguish the different roles of consultants, trade associations and in-house practitioners. They have quibbled over codes and fussed over financial disclosure. Those who should have been seen as the life blood of democracy have come to be perceived by the public as a cross between Abramoff and Abrahams. How have we allowed the carriers of vital information between society and its political institutions to have a public profile more appropriate to a group of smokers huddled in the rain on the doorstep of democracy?

Part of the problem lies in the use and abuse of the word transparency. Transparency International is partially to blame. Its success, due in great part to skilled public relations, has permanently positioned transparency as part of the fight against corruption. Transparency is much more than that in a society in transition. Lobbyists may long for the 'Tarnhelm' of invisibility, but the Facebook Generation know that there is no invisibility in the world of the 21st century. The real driver of transparency as an issue is the technology which makes privacy impossible. Those of an older generation may doubt the wisdom of sharing the details of their private lives in a public space. Facebook fans have decided to enjoy the luxury of living in the light, impervious to future employers who already prowl the new social media. No doubt in time we will all learn to live in this new world, but for the moment we are like every other generation caught in a paradigm shift – uncertain and alone.

The ETI debate has concentrated on what is described as 'lobbying', despite the fact that the act of lobbying is probably about 15% of public affairs. Public affairs is a complex tapestry. The ecology of the public affairs world – the companies, the consultants, the think tanks, the churches, the NGOs, the ministries, the civil servants, the parliamentarians is rich and varied. Public affairs takes ideas and turns them into policies. If we could better understand how that process works, we could be honest and reject the trite model of thinking of politicians as either venal or stupid. We could recognise that politicians may not be heroes, they may be weak at times, but they are responding to a system. If we could improve that system, we would improve the quality of the outcome. Can we create a public affairs process in Europe which commands genuine public support and helps politicians do their job?

All is not lost. As in all good operas, "it ain't over till the fat lady sings". In this case the European Parliament is well cast for a dramatic appearance in the last act. The modern age of public affairs in the European Union can be accurately dated to 1979 and the first directly-elected European Parliament. Parliament's rise blew through the cosy corridors of interest representation with a cleansing zeal. Parliament shouldn't "sweat the small stuff". It matters little how much corporate entertaining is taking place on parliamentary premises. Food and drink are debased currencies in an institution rightly hungry only for information. Rather Parliament should rejoice that it is now the stage on which every issue is fought out, regardless of the details of institutional competence. Real transparency is a mixture of democracy, mandate, openness and accountability. In this game Parliament holds all the high cards.

Strangely, given the Anglo-Saxon expertise in public affairs, it is the northerners who now have key roles to play in the emerging parliamentary drama. Specific casting would be inappropriate, though Dagmar Roth-Behrendt seems chosen by the fates to play Brunhilde. How will Hans-Gert Pöttering deploy Parliament's forces? Alex Stubb and Jo Leinen played their parts well in the recent European Parliament Workshop on Lobbying. Alex brings Finnish traditions of openness and intelligent pragmatism to the minefield of a challenging Rapporteurship

Parliament has traditionally acknowledged the usefulness of public affairs in providing the ammunition with which to amend Commission proposals and rein in the hubris of the Council. Sir Julian Priestley used to be particularly eloquent on this subject. The involvement of Parliament fundamentally changes the cramped context of the Commission proposal. Any action in this field, if it is to be effective, must embrace all three institutions. Concentrating on the Commission is pandering to its outdated vanity and is meaningless when real lobbying is at its most powerful in the interrelationship between the three institutions. A 'one stop shop' is not just a matter of convenience. Any system should also recognise that governments, both EU and external, lobby furiously and in an ideal world should be subjected to the same standards. Government representatives in the cellars of comitology and the warrens of Working Parties are central to the European public affairs process. If it right to involve all three institutions, it must also be possible to find a legal base on which to act, or at least an Inter-Institutional Agreement.

Alex Stubb is clearly aware of this institutional geometry as Parliament's Rapporteur. We should encourage him. Proper parliamentary involvement in the debate offers the opportunity to correct some of the errors which have marred the debate so far. The Union needs separate solutions for decision makers and for decision influencers. Brussels could learn much from the London experience in policing the behaviour of MPs, ministers and civil servants. I have long believed that we need a Public Affairs Ombudsman to oversee public affairs practice by those seeking to influence decisions in the Union. Such a figure would take us beyond the current obsession with codes and registration. Codes of conduct are a black and white snapshot of a moving Technicolor reality. Every month something changes in the DNA of the Union. A Public Affairs Ombudsman, assisted by a panel of practitioners and stakeholders, could emulate WTO Panels in expressing best practice as it evolves. Codes are the Old Testament on tablets of stone. Our current situation demands a New Testament rooted in real transparency, if not precisely in loving one's neighbour.

Wagner's Ring starts with an embittered Albrecht renouncing love in order to acquire the Ring of Power. Such a concept rightly belongs in our shared mythic past. In the 21st century power is diffused and rests on consent. If Parliament seizes the opportunity, this music drama could yet see the Rhine swelling up to reclaim the Ring and parliamentarians, to the strains of the Ode to Liberty, laying a proper basis for a pan-European democracy.



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