

# **The Future of Public Affairs in Europe**

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No one can say with certainty how Europe will work in the next five years. We are all beginners now. First we must navigate 2004. It will undoubtedly prove to be the most complicated year to date in European public affairs with a dearth of legislation and a surplus of political uncertainty and institutional change. My advice to professional public affairs practitioners is to take heart from Machiavelli's teaching that complexity favours the well prepared. 2004 should be treated as a precious opportunity to re-skill, re-learn and re-invent ourselves for successful operation in a post enlargement, post treaty Europe, which by 2009 may include the rest of South East Europe and Scandinavia.

In theory it should now be easier to predict institutional interaction and development as the European system matures and the range of options declines. However the world is more radically insecure than we have seen in two generations. Paradigm shift, terrorism, environmental pressure and accelerated migration flows should inhibit over-confident prophecy. The best we can hope for is to get the questions right and stay constantly flexible as different answers emerge.

How will public affairs cope with the interaction of states in our 'post modern Europe' under any conceivable version of the Constitutional Treaty? Already the talk is of alliances. An army of gurus are already trying to plot new divisions on the face of political Europe – small v large, east v west, north v south, etc. I doubt that any such divisions have real meaning. Indeed if the US experience in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is any guide, we should be fearful of the consolidation of myriad differences into blocs harbouring recurring resentments. Better to look for 'clusters' of national interest, subject by subject and sector by sector. The existence of so many states is a challenge primarily for the Council of Ministers. For some the answer is the creation of pan-European corporations, consultancies and business associations capable of influencing all 35 states at once. To my mind the intelligent public affairs response will rather be to concentrate on the Commission, European Parliament and, as far as possible, on the Council Secretariat, at which points the interaction of the states can be influenced. I expect to see consultancies, trade associations and corporate public affairs being successful by stressing specialisation and flexibility, rather than by lusting after the supposed synergies of largeness.

Some predictions are easy. Trade associations will have to become more global and run ever faster to keep up with the expectations of their members. The relationship between the media and public affairs, the accountability of NGOs and the impact of corporate governance rules will continue to make transparency a key issue. The shadow of the rest of the world will fall across Europe in the shape of the public affairs of competition, trade and security. The impact of decisions in Washington and Beijing will ebb and flow around us. Technology will continue to simultaneously empower and frustrate.

The most difficult question is about the coming generation shift. What will public affairs look like when no longer conducted by the builders of Europe and the baby boomers? How will European public affairs operate when it is in the hands of a generation that takes for granted the institutions of the European Union. A generation for whom the divisions of the twentieth century are an increasingly distant memory? Public affairs practitioners and politicians under 40 are literally 'the future of Europe'. Truly we are all Europeans now. Now it gets interesting.