

## **Thoughts from “Public Affairs and Power” : Essays in a Time of Fear**

Power is indivisible and public affairs is an interlocked series of holons from the most humble struggle on a parish council to the thunder in the sky of Mr Blair’s increasingly risky stratagems for winning President Bush’s ear.

Public Affairs is the study of power and, in particular, consists of an organised attempt to influence decision- taking within a political system.

People want the target they can deal with, the decision they think they can influence; rather than the target they actually face or the decision they really need to influence.

Public affairs is one way in which we decide on the division of power within and between societies. In more cases than we perhaps feel comfortable with, it decides who lives and who dies as well as who lives well or badly. The public affairs function does itself no favours by denying its relationship to power – public, private, principled or perverse – because power is what decision making is about.

... the most efficient use of European funds would be to make direct campaign contributions to American political parties rather than spend time and money in finding alternative ways of supporting Europe’s traditional banana policy.

The fossil fuel lobby provides a textbook case of how to disrupt the fragile political structures of an emerging global governance in defence of particular sectoral interests.

... the quality and quantity of public affairs knowledge contained in modern MBA’s is clearly inadequate. Little is done to systematically prepare either line managers or potential public affairs specialists for the conduct of a strategic function.

Globally organised NGOs, such as Greenpeace and WWF, have the scale, budgets, personnel and expertise to match and exceed the public affairs efforts of the largest multinational corporation. They face similar problems of co-ordination and control.

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, process and outcomes.

Civil society activists, while careful to court parliamentarians, have seen them as rivals for the ear of the Executive. They have also displayed a tendency to regard parliamentarians as dumb and ill informed by comparison with themselves.

Working in public affairs is like farming on the flank of a volcano. It pays to keep your eyes on the horizon for signs of trouble.

The key skill of the Shaman is ‘to know what to do, when you don’t know what to do’. Public affairs practitioners need to develop this. Shamans are renowned for ‘cleansing the doors of their perception’ and transcending the human tendency to only see what they expect to see. They cultivate a peripheral vision. Public affairs practitioners need to develop their own vision, such that they spot the little detail early, before it becomes the trend that everyone can see.

I have met few CEOs who would be successful in the world of politics and vice versa.

Post 911, big government is back with a vengeance. The belief that corporations and social movements could between them somehow dispense with the usual apparatus of political power looks as dated as dotcoms and the Goldilocks economy.

Nobody expects a miraculous conversion of all those who practice capitalism, but there may be minimum levels of behaviour below which public faith in the whole system is undermined.

If "shareholder capitalism" is convicted of having abused shareholders in the late 1990's, despite centuries of experience, what are the realistic prospects for making the infinitely more fragile "stakeholder capitalism" work? Companies must learn that the safest form of conduct is to actually be what you say you are.

The abolition of privacy by technology means that truth may be simply the most economic way of conducting business.

We must expect the practice of public affairs to be once more in the firing line unless we can persuade key audiences that public affairs is not an art which thrives only in the dark.

There is an excellent PhD thesis in public affairs waiting to be written on the "Public Affairs of War". It would examine the interaction of domestic difficulty and external challenge and should perhaps be sub-titled "Wag the Dog in Theory and Practice".

Public affairs and politics do not inhabit a Newtonian, mechanistic universe, where one lever pulled produces a predictable outcome. Rather, everything is in a chaos of simultaneous interaction and apparently isolated acts can change the whole 'landscape' dramatically.

There is a fallacy of believing only what you can measure and therefore missing the really important information that does not fit neatly into the categorisation process.

Most governmental and corporate failures are the product of missing data. It is the gaps which are deadly, not the manipulation of detail which we already possess in abundance. Of course public affairs should be about influencing key decisions in the political arena, and yet the embattled public affairs function is very rarely given the time to scan the corporate horizon for the killer issue. This can be particularly deadly in a world where apparently solid structures such as an accountancy practice, a huge corporation or a dot-com boom can evaporate in a matter of weeks.

For the last fifty years the world of physics has had to live with an incompatibility between the micro and the macro; between the truth of the sub-atomic world and the equal but clashing truth of the world which we can see and feel. String theory may or may not unify these conflicting truths. Public affairs practitioners need to be able to operate simultaneously both in the micro world of detailed decision making and the macro world of great underlying changes.

In this century the 'ground' of public affairs has shifted. War, Pestilence, Famine and Death are back in the public consciousness with a vengeance. Bin Laden planned September 11<sup>th</sup> as a ritual public sacrifice and we are still suffering the whiplash of 911. Those who practice public affairs need to recognise that civilisations go through mood changes at both elite and popular level. I believe that we are in mid mood shift at this moment.

Seven of my fifteen Corporate Members of the ECPA are women. They are spectacularly good at running the public affairs function, with its boundary nature and Janus-like characteristics of having to look simultaneously inwards into the company and outward to the world. I would further argue that the elite group of really effective public affairs consultants in Brussels is dominated by women and gay men. I suspect there is something in the quality of empathy necessary for successful public affairs, as well as in the continuing barriers for both gays and women in elected politics, which encourages this phenomenon.

When 22<sup>nd</sup> century historians ask the Bernard Lewis question "What went wrong?", they may ask it not of Islam, but of Western civilisation. They may well conclude that the West became full of hubris, defensive, lost its flexibility and creativity - that, in a phrase, it failed to honour its feminine side.

It was a brilliant use of the nightmare of September 2001, to take that horror and use it to give wings to what were pre-existing ideas about the nature, reinvigoration and extension of US hegemony.

I know very few naive Americans. I know many extremely intelligent, extremely hard nosed, extremely worldly-wise Americans. I know a lot of vain Europeans who think that they are the sophisticated ones and the Americans are the bumbling naive ones. If that vanity continues the Europeans will pay a huge price for it.

Both Europe and America are changing in demographic terms. Each becoming two nations. One secular, rich, old and feeble. The other Islamic or Latino, poor, young and robust. It is happening on both sides of the Atlantic.

I spent two days trying to decide whether I was watching Monsanto push the US Government, or, as seemed apparent from the body language, that American diplomats had so fully internalised the corporate case that they were now driving the company forward.

The militarisation of space, the doctrine of pre-emptive intervention and the rest can trace their origin extensively, if not exclusively, to American corporate boardrooms chewing on the uncongenial gristle of the 'peace dividend'. More than a decade on, the world's diplomats and politicians find themselves struggling to cope with some of the consequences. As the European Union struggles to re-forge its Foreign and Defence policies, can we look to European corporate interests to devote similar time, money and thought to these issues of high foreign policy? Tear up the textbooks! If we can have war for Exxon, why not have peace treaties for COPA or reform of the UN for toy manufacturers?

European attitudes will not be changed by American hectoring. In Pat Cox's words this continent is 'capable of telling the difference between Alliance and Allegiance'. The global political space just became more political. Companies need to learn to live

in this operational new reality, rather than in the optimistic virtual reality of 1990's rhetoric about globalisation.

Anti-Americanism, like anti-Semitism or racism, is the kind of generalisation which lurks in the semi-conscious mind of business associates as well as global consumers.

America has lost control of its cultural icons to an accepting world in much the same way that the English have lost control of a language that has become a global lingua franca. The much-abused French are the best example. In the last fifty years the Americans have deprived France of her empire, replaced her language, mocked her culture and undermined her food. A certain degree of dislike might reasonably be expected to follow!

... a government determined to go to war and desperate to find intelligence justification. This is an inversion of the way in which the process is supposed to work. It is also the basic flaw at the root of most public affairs failure – the fervent desire that the real world will conform to what the CEO wishes to see from his windows rather than what a good public affairs function is actually reporting.

Do retired spies make good public affairs practitioners? Is this yet another of the ill-defined responsibilities of the public affairs function? Nowadays it seems impossible to have a dinner party of public affairs practitioners without discovering at least two people with intelligence backgrounds.

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