

Book Review

Private power: public interest

BY CHRIS WHITE

Tom Spencer is one of the more colourful of MEPs past and present. He is also one of the brightest figures ever to be engaged in the EU's development on which, ironically as a British Conservative MEP, he exerted positive influence.

Anyone who thought they could write-off Tom after his sudden departure from the European Parliament must now think again. He has stamped his intellectual authority on the political process, now with a seminal book 'Politics and Power'.

Sub-titled 'Essays in a time of fear' the collection of 15 thought provoking articles add up to a deep analysis of where both Europe and America are heading. Both have reached a crossroads and it is Tom's thesis that much of the solution rests in the hands of the public affairs industry.

Tom and his wife Liz are, of course, founders of the European Centre for Public affairs and it is not to gainsay his book if we question its title with a 'hold up there guv'. For one striking thread running through everything that Tom has written here over time suggests that he is taking the role of public affairs too far.

How do we define 'public affairs'? There are many layers not withstanding the serious media. Some might be thought of in America as 'snake oil salesmen'. There are the consultants and lobbyists doing their paymasters

bidding and seeking to adapt legislation to suit them. There are the think tank experts and academics - doing their masters bidding but perhaps with less commercial imperative. Then there are the true academics who are increasingly nudging their way into the political arena and who are not elected. Tom covers them all.

It does not detract from this book to say that Tom has too fine a mind to be confined by the label 'public affairs'. It is a book for politicians and for political analysts. It is an equally open book that this newspaper supports an old fashioned democratic system in which elected representatives, drawing on experience and advice, make their decisions according to their consciences - and in the perceived interests of those who voted for them. What we say should be judged in that light.

Tom himself defines public affairs (page 86) as an "organised attempt to influence decision making within a political system". He points out that in Europe we no longer regard lobbying as the influencing of foreign affairs.

Hard hitting comments about lobbyists and NGOs lead Tom to say that we are today witnessing the fruit of an early 1990's public affairs investment in the shape of nothing less than "the complete recasting of the principles of American foreign policy".

As the former chairman of the European Parliament's foreign affairs



Tom Spencer

committee Tom has not lost his political passion for his subject. It is in large part a book about EU - US relations today and in the future. He has, as he says, "witnessed the black arts, which if they are intelligent, involve the manipulation of ideas."

He describes how he was offered "a large sum of money" for his advice. The issue was about denying the science and pretending that the proposal was a tax. He deals brilliantly with transatlantic issues, with Al Queda and the Gulf War

right up to and beyond the Hutton inquiry in the UK.

He says (page 35) that public affairs features some identifiable personalities from different cultures. He would describe himself as a Sherpa, someone who needs to have the instinct to know what is going to happen six weeks ahead of the crowd and can thus spot the political deal, shape the compromise and find the words.

There is another that he identifies: The Crazy Wise One from the Hindu Tradition,

this is explained in terms of ethics and not being able to define them in terms of what is completely legal. It involves, he says, "a sensitive awareness of what can be ethically justified in a world where what is acceptable practice changes with bewildering speed".

This is Tom Spencer for, before his talent for public affairs whatever his involvement may be; he is a politician and an academic first and foremost. This is a book for everyone and a required read.

Public Affairs and Power; Landmarks SA www.landmarks-publishing.com



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- Working with governments and civil society – do Public Policy Networks deliver?
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- Beijing and Brussels – how to identify public affairs best practice?
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"Public Affairs and Power: Essays in a Time of Fear" by Tom Spencer, now available online

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