

“TEACHING PUBLIC AFFAIRS: WHY UNIVERSITIES SHOULD CARE”

Speech to Brunel School of Business Management on the launch of the MSc in Public Affairs and Lobbying

I congratulate Justin Fisher on the launch of this MSC in Public Affairs & Lobbying. I am delighted to see that it is a sister programme with the MSC in Business & Public Ethics and the MSC in Business Ethics & Sustainability. Between them the three degrees cover just about everything that I find interesting in the world of the twenty-first century.

As someone who now attempts to teach global governance, I am equally pleased at its cosmopolitan location in the Faculty of Arts and Social sciences in the School of International Studies located within the Brunel School of Business Management. Such an address pays a mute tribute to the fact that public affairs is a boundary discipline that can be approached from different directions.

Why might one consider it important for universities to be taking public affairs seriously at long last? There is, I suppose, the ‘Everest’ answer. Because it’s there! And because we know we can do it better.

There is the ‘careers’ answer where the function has been crying out for a more rigorous and disciplined approach, to which we at the European Centre for Public Affairs have tried to make our contribution. More and more people now go consciously into something called public affairs, rather than merely falling in to it in their declining years as a passé politician, a side-lined manager or a journalist with a drink problem! For graduates in their twenties, public affairs can and should be a stimulating pathway into a dozen specialisms. For some it is a weigh-station en route to a political career, for others a way of exercising genuine influence without the insane humiliations of electoral politics.

There was a time thirty years ago when student politics provided a rather similar jumping off point for a variety of careers. In those days public affairs could be practiced by anyone with quick wits and access to at least one major European language. Those happy days are no longer with us and it now takes some months to acquire the basics of what can be described as the *acquis communautaire* of European public affairs in Brussels. It then requires the intellectual flexibility to vector in the impact of the transition to enlargement, to guess the likely outcome of The Convention and the IGC, and the probably un-teachable skill to know how recent global events will impact on the practical conduct of decision-making in the European Union. There are competitors such as lawyers and accountants every-ready to claim the turf of public affairs as their own, especially as “consulting adults” post-Enron are suffering a degree of myth-deflation.

The ideal public affairs practitioner should have the bureaucratic skills of a Treasury mandarin, the suspicious nostrils of a top journalist and the political instincts of a Cabinet Minister.

There are, however, wider reasons why public affairs should be better taught in both European and global context. We have in recent years seen numerous CEOs gamble and lose their companies because they had got to the top of the corporate tree without any real understanding of the political of societal context in which they and their businesses operate. It is my hope that some of the products of this new degree will not limit themselves to being excellent public affairs practitioners, either in consultancies, the corporate sector or civil society. Rather that they will rightly aspire to be part of the next generation of corporate CEOs, where it is recognised that public affairs is a strategic discipline. Perhaps it is not unreasonable also to hope that universities and business schools will come to regard the proper study of decision-making in political structures as an essential component of all business education.

Tom Spencer, 2nd June 2003

