



“EMPATHY & POWER: SUCCESS IN EUROPEAN UNION PUBLIC AFFAIRS”

Lecture Delivered to the Department of Trade & Industry, Europe & World Trade
Directorate “Lobbying the EU Institutions” Seminar

21st July 2003

Madam Chairman, Ladies & Gentlemen,

I am delighted to follow Ben Butters of Small Business Europe. I absolutely endorse everything he had to say about lobbying the EU institutions. I wrote my undergraduate dissertation on small business efficiency and I regard the effective defence of small business interests as one of the great-unsolved problems of public affairs. Small businesses lack the management time to devote to public affairs issues. As a result they almost always lobby too late and on a one-off basis. In every country in Europe, they are prone to Poujadism and its modern manifestation of simplistic euro-scepticism. If we turn from the challenges of small business to those of big business or big government, we can see that in these cases what Ben has to say was necessary, but not sufficient. Indeed the title “Lobbying the EU Institutions” is redolent of once in a lifetime lobbying by us against them.

Madam Chairman, you said rightly that the DTI has a good reputation in Brussels, but that it was still possible and necessary for you to raise your game ahead of the British Presidency in two years time. Unlike the people who Ben Butters represents, the DTI is a big institution, in a big country, with big issues of an ongoing nature. I would like to believe that one of the reasons the DTI has a good public affairs reputation, is rooted in the twelve seminars, which John Mogg commissioned from the ECPA in 1989, in advance of the Single Market. He was very aware that strength may also be a weakness. That strength makes enemies and that expertise in one area does not guarantee expertise elsewhere. Current examples to illustrate my point might be HM Treasury, and in a very different context, the United States of America. As we stressed in the seminars we taught for the DTI from 1989 to 1991, power is not enough; there must also be empathy. There must be an understanding of how your public affairs targets and competitors see and respond to your initiatives. I will always be grateful to John for his insistence that we should teach mixed seminars of civil servants, corporates and NGOs, rather than teaching undiluted groups of civil servants, however high their individual intelligence or good their knowledge of specific parts of the Brussels maze.

In establishing the European Centre for Public Affairs, we deliberately avoided the word “lobbying”. In most circumstances, lobbying is not more than 15% of what needs to be done. The rest of the time is taken up with monitoring, analysis, networking, strategy formation and a healthy dash of informed guesswork about likely future developments. These percentages apply whether you are a company, a foreign ministry, a church or a trade union. I often recommend corporate audiences to think of themselves as if they were a government department. Indeed, I would recommend those of you here this afternoon to think of yourself as a corporation as a way of correcting the internal biases which we all carry within ourselves.

Before I examine the ECPA’s own golden rules for the conduct of public affairs in the European Union, let me take a quick look at what has changed in the conduct of public affairs since 1991.

Public trust in everybody and everything has declined. Remember our friends transparency, legitimacy and accountability next time you go into bat on behalf of government policy. Your target audience will have trust issues on their mind as you approach. There is more lobbying by more Member States now than there was in 1991. As the European constitution moves forward, Member States have become the biggest force lobbying the European Parliament. Third Country governments are the runners-up in this contest; with civil society and industry coming some way behind. So we may say with confidence that most “lobbyists” in the European system are in fact civil servants of one kind or another.

The polity has got much more complicated. Not only are there now more nations lobbying each other, but they have more complicated sub-national, regional and county pressures at their backs. Fifteen years ago, it was possible for a handful of individuals in the Commission and Parliament to effectively design and create European environment policy. By comparison with today there was very little global structure, and the political world was not yet inoculated against our green empire building!

The system is altogether more “mature”, or put differently, there are fewer pushovers in the world of public affairs today. Professor van Schendelen of Erasmus University, who for many years chaired the ECPA’s Research Committee, would always argue that “one lobbyist is an offence against the public good; but a thousand lobbyists are a guarantee of good governance”. I agree with him. However, it does lead to long drawn-out battles such as the current debates over genetically modified organisms or fossil fuel and climate.

To add to the general jollity of nations, some governments have taken to playing hardball. They have come to view public affairs as the extension of diplomacy and war by other means. We have seen this with the privatisation of American foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and in more recent years, the militarisation of US diplomacy. In this new game of shock and awe diplomacy, it is acceptable for nations to dispatch public affairs operatives off around Eastern Europe to sell Europe-splitting resolutions to applicant governments along with American fighter planes. No-one in the DTI will need me to underline the arrival of new players in the public affairs field; such as the trade lawyers who now cluster around the World Trade Organisation. Accountants, management consultants, IT consultants and the rest have all brought their won particular flavours to the European Union public affairs arena. In addition, the specialist public affairs consultants are now substantially organised in huge groups with ultimate American ownership.

I circulated earlier the ‘Ten Golden Rules’ for the conduct of public affairs in the European Union that we created in the late 1980’s, review regularly and have not felt the need to update. You will see how closely they correspond to the advice which Ben Butters is giving today. I would only like to underline the importance of integration between global, European Union and national level activities and the importance of being sensitive to differences of language, nationality and religion that can undermine the best of public affairs strategies if ignored. It is not so much a question of “don’t mention the war” as of “don’t forget the history and experience of Europeans both individually and collectively”.

What then has changed since these ‘rules’ were drafted and what will continue to change? Undoubtedly the most important is the incorporation into Treaties of Co-decision and Conciliation and the consequent pattern of Trialogues. The EU is much more tightly timetabled inter-institutionally than used to be the case. There is a finer balance between Commission, Parliament and Council than was the case, but of course all the institutions absolutely believe that each is the font of real and final power. Wherever you see three people gathered together in Brussels, it is my strong advice that you should join them - just in case there is an inter-institutional dialogue in process!

The next eighteen months hold out major opportunities for the better organised and more Machiavellian amongst you, as the existing public affairs acquis is impacted by the triple force of enlargement, constitutional change and the unintended knock-on from Iraq-related disputes inside Europe. In due course the system will settle down as it always does after enlargement or treaty change. Those of you seeking guidance on potential short-term opportunities, might like to go to our website www.publicaffairs.ac and download “Enlargement: Enough of the Grandeur Now for the Interesting Bits”.

In summary, let me encourage you as a department with a proud record of public affairs to think big, but also to care about the process details. Let me encourage you to think power, but to link this with thinking empathy. How are you perceived? How will any action impact on your future room for manoeuvre? It is not enough to understand how the system currently works, it is wise to have some idea how the system is likely to evolve. Nowadays the European Union is serial or a soap opera rather than a play in five acts. It is The Archers not Hamlet. For Brussels is still a village, but after more than thirty years of membership, it’s our village.

