



“INFLUENCING DECISION MAKING: PUBLIC AFFAIRS IN NORTH WEST & SOUTH EAST EUROPE”

1. Historical Roots

The politics and public affairs of North West Europe have much more in common with those of South Eastern Europe than the smug elites of well-established democratic traditions pretend. In Western Europe the post war reaction to the nationalist, fascist and racist excesses of the 1930s entrenched a belief in a model of a largely secular society where collective memories, religion, tradition and identity have often been fatally underestimated. Western Europe has for long used the very word ‘Balkanisation’ as a way of dumping its psychological baggage eastward onto the unknown.

In any balanced view of the two regions over the last five hundred years, the Europe of the Rhine has been substantially more bloodstained than the Europe of the Danube. The process of nation state formation was un-interrupted and, from the Treaty of Westphalia onwards, conditioned its citizens to think of largely coherent states with one religion and one political system which influenced over upwards of 80% of the decisions which impinged on their citizens. In South Eastern Europe the process of nation state formation was interrupted by the Ottoman incursion. The Ottoman Empire was substantially more tolerant, multi-layered and multi-ethnic for many centuries than its later critics allowed. Inevitably however the suppressed identities of the subject peoples erupted in the nineteenth century. Western views of the Balkans remain distorted by the bias of Western elite education which stresses Athens and Rome and largely ignores Constantinople. Such a viewpoint tends to stress the differences between East and West rather than their joint heritage as European peoples. There are of course substantial differences, such as the role of the Orthodox Church and its relationship to the state both before and after 1453.

The monumental ignorance of West Europeans was illustrated during the war over Kosovo when westerners massively underestimated the sense of suspicion and betrayal which still exists amongst the Greeks and other peoples of South East Europe. These cultures feel themselves deserted and betrayed by what they regard as a consistent pattern of Western behaviour dating back to the twelfth century. Such issues are of current importance for the elites of both parts of the continent in the context of the next enlargement of the European Union, which I anticipate taking place in 2009 and which will be substantially the embrace of Orthodox Europe. This reconciliation is at least as significant as the healing of the fifty-year split between Communist and non- Communist Europe represented by the accession of ten new member states in 2004, nine of whom are Catholic or Protestant states. Given the Union’s historic preference for expanding in batches, the next enlargement will in my judgment include all the remaining states of former Yugoslavia, Albania, Romania and Bulgaria. This is an entirely separate from the contested question of when and if Turkey will join.

2. Public Affairs & Decision Making

Public affairs is the art of influencing decision making in a political system. It is wise at the outset to remember that states are human organisations and that their decisions are not necessarily made rationally or by platonic guardians. A good government probably gets seven out of ten decisions right. It is very apparent, when viewed from the European Parliament, that the European Union is an on going study in comparative government. For as long as the six month revolving Presidency continues, Europe will be treated to the twice annual spectacle of nation state governments exercising their national traditions and prejudices and seemingly reluctant to learn from each other’s successive failures. It is also wise to remember that power is never as concentrated as the politicians in power choose to believe. Even the strongest of governments is a constant tussle between the power of the executive, of political parties, of parliaments, of legal structures and of the media. In every country in Europe the reality of power and decision-making does not accord with the rhetoric and its sustaining national myths.

The UK is a good example of this. In theory it has an unwritten constitution in which power resides in the elected House of Commons. In reality it has one of the most dominant executives in Western

Europe, capable in three out of four terms of effectively ignoring both chambers of Parliament. The Dutch also have a powerful parliamentary tradition, but it is set in a historically federal state with an overriding imperative of social cohesion to maintain the dykes and surmount the tripartite 'pillarisation' of the Dutch society. If the English operate as a 'crowned republic', the French operate much more as 'republican monarchy'. They have a strong state and a weak parliament. Belgium and Italy have weak states and operative parliaments and a long tradition of the manipulation of power by organisations and networks which are not made explicit in their constitutions. Even those Western European states with ancient traditions of democracy and parliamentary government differ in the way their political systems operate. There is no one magic formula for parliamentary democracy which can be copied and exported in toto to the newly democratic states of South Eastern Europe. If this is true of European models, it is doubly true of American concepts of democracy. Indeed American aspirations to remodel Islamic societies in the image of Washington are likely to be as unsuccessful in the Middle East as they have been in post Communist Europe.

There is a persistent, but in my view utterly unfounded, sense in Western Europe that the new accession states will find it difficult to adapt to the institutional structures of the European Union and may be a drag on the further development of its supra-national political institutions. This underestimates the extraordinary achievement of the eight former Communist states since 1989 in recasting their economic, political, legal and constitutional structures. Such experience will serve them well in the further development of the European Union. This is particularly true, as they have already learned lessons not yet fully apparent to many political elites in Western Europe. All modern political elites must come to recognise that we live in a multi-level polity, where power and therefore decision making is shared between local, regional, national, European, Atlantic and global structures. No one level of government controls the majority of decisions that affects its citizens and electorates know this. The Union, which South East Europe will join at the end of this decade, is increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious. Such complexity is not easily portrayed to even the most sophisticated of democratic electorates. As anti-globalisation demonstrators have shown, it is not acceptable to electorates to be told that 'no one is in control other than the unseen hand of the market'. This is a rationalisation too far for electors. They will look at political systems and view them through their own historical experience. All too often they will identify a 'them' who they believe to be in control. This 'them' may be the other tribe, the other ethnic group, the Jews, the Mafia, the multi-national companies, the Communists or the Euro-Federalists according to taste.

Such a situation would be a challenge for democratic systems in good health even at the best of times. In fact the political systems of Western Europe have demonstrated extraordinary weaknesses, which have contributed to the substantial collapse of public trust in almost all institutions. We have numerous examples of corruption in government, such as Kohl in Germany, a succession of Irish figures and most recently Juppe in France. The electorates see open and flagrant dishonesty in business from Enron to Parmalat. They are not blind to manipulation in the media whether it is by Murdoch or Berlusconi. Scientific research in universities is coloured by state and commercial patronage and think tanks employed as vehicles for public affairs campaigns and ideas management. Even governments with two hundred years of democratic tradition are open to charges of cronyism and special pleading. A lesson which London and Washington are now learning to their cost, as they pay the price of the high-handed actions that misled their electorates over the war in Iraq.

3. Legitimacy, Accountability and Transparency

In reality no political system is perfect, but all require occasional stern doses of legitimacy, accountability and transparency if they are to maintain the trust of their citizens. All elements of complex political systems lobby each other. The very process of European integration is one of constant lobbying by governments of other governments, of the European Commission and the European Parliament. Lobbying is not a defect in a political system. It is the essential lifeblood of functioning, complex, modern politics. Professor Rinus van Schendelen of Erasmus University in Rotterdam, regularly and wisely points out that "one lobbyist is an offence against the public good, while a hundred lobbyists are a guarantee of good governance". The great scandals of European unification such as the Common Agricultural Policy are often the result of the dominance of one lobby over its weaker or non-active rivals. The cost is always paid by the citizens.

'Lobbying' is a difficult and ambiguous concept in many European languages. It implies a separation between lobbyist and the lobbied. It improperly concentrates attention on the activities of

commercially motivated hired guns, supposedly preying on the innocence of elected members of parliament and the governments which they support. 'Public affairs' has, for the last twenty years, been adopted as a phrase to cover all the activities by which the different elements of the political system interact. Public affairs covers monitoring, analysis, strategy development and coalition building as well as the actual moment of interaction between the players, be that in an expensive restaurant or a trades union conference. Healthy public affairs that is transparent is not an optional extra in a democratic system. It is a key element in the operation of genuine democracy in which the voice of minorities, be they commercial, religious or social are adequately expressed. It is in this light that we should examine the similarities in the challenges faced by all the actors. Trades unions, businesses, churches, single issue campaigns, protest groups and indeed governments themselves must surmount the same hurdles. They must identify their goals, understand the full range of options, maintain an empathy towards other interests and marshal their limited resources around those decisions which really matter to them. There exists a body of experience about how to practice public affairs. It is partially a set of skills, but more importantly it is the maintenance of a holistic vision of how democratic societies operate. 80% of this body of best practice is common to all political systems at all levels. 20% is specific to national traditions and industrial sectors. It is not rocket science. However the experience of the European Union is particular is replete with public affairs disasters brought about by ignoring the most basic rules. Understand the whole political system. Do not be blinded by the rhetoric of your institution. Do not sacrifice long term credibility for short term benefit. Assume that everything you do will be in the public domain within months. Prepare properly. Be tactically flexible but strategically consistent.

4. What can Western Europe learn from the Balkans?

At this moment in history the political systems of much of Orthodox Europe is in a process of rapid change. The political 'wiring' is both visible and incomplete. It will take time for the peoples of the region to find their own balance within their own institutions. Their challenges cannot solely be answered by the wholesale importation of western models. This is not a case like the legislative transfer of the 'acquis communautaire'. The lessons which South East Europe can learn from the political systems of the nations of the European Union are obvious and often over-stated. What is less readily appreciated are the lessons which the rest of Europe can learn from the Balkans. The price of success in political systems is eternal vigilance. Governments can be too strong. Political parties can be bought by financial contributors, be they trades union barons or euro-sceptic millionaires. NGOs can lose their independence by being co-opted into governing systems. Single-issue campaigns can be exploited for purposes other than those intended by their originators.

The Enlightenment vision of a rational, secular society does not accord with the reality of the 21st century. European states do not exist on a separate planet. They may maximise their independence from the rest of the world by co-operating, but they too are influenced by what goes on at global level. If they are to retain the trust of their electorates, they must find convincing answers within an open, transparent and accountable political framework.

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