

Article for E!Sharp – April 2003

Foreign Policy and Public Affairs: Legitimate, Accountable and Transparent?

“A consortium of European companies invites you to pitch for a three year campaign to create an efficiently functioning European Foreign & Defence Policy”

“A consortium of US companies, suffering from brand damage due to the activities of Neo conservatives in Washington, seeks discreet campaign to help the US Secretary of State win argument on the future of the world”

Courtesy of my subscription to ‘Eschelon Monitoring Services’, these two highly confidential e-mails might come flying in my direction at any moment. How common, legitimate and desirable is it for commercial interests to seek to influence the high foreign policy of nation states? In the middle of the banana dispute, I suggested in Parliament that the most cost-effective way to counter the continued pressure from the US on the banana issue was to make a larger contribution to Bill Clinton’s finances than the various American banana companies had done. A rather literal minded German colleague pointed out that we might have some trouble finding an appropriate legal base in the Treaty for bribery of quite such scale and openness.

Since leaving the European Parliament in July 1999, I have been struggling to construct to my own satisfaction a model of how the global political space operates in reality. The textbooks of international relations theory have not been helpful. They almost totally ignore the impact of public affairs campaigns on the policy formation processes of governments and foreign ministries. Yet anyone involved in public affairs knows that the practice is widespread in Washington and growing in Europe.

The ECPA defines public affairs as an “organised attempt to influence decision making within a political system”. There is of course no reason in principle why lobbying for the invasion of North Korea should be different from that of lobbying on the curvature of cucumbers. In Europe we have become so used to the institutions of the European Union and to its public affairs practice that we rightly no longer regard lobbying in our system as the influencing of foreign affairs. We are absolutely used to the French Government defending big agriculture or the British Government defending the interest of the City of London. But how do lesser issues come to be accepted as matters of unchallenged national interest in Foggy Bottom or the Quai d’Orsay?

We are all used to the hired-gun political consultant giving electoral advice to foreign political parties, be they in or out of government. However, in cases such as the advice to the Israeli Government to attack the Iraqi nuclear power station in 1981 in order to win an election, they can have dramatic foreign policy implications. Similarly, we are used to the request to consultants to help re-brand a country. The current advertisements for Croatia as a holiday destination are about more than filling hotel rooms. Then there are the invitations to pitch for accounts with governments,

who for one reason or another, are unable to use traditional diplomatic methods to the full, such as the Republic of Northern Cyprus or Taiwan.

Multinational companies have always needed to cultivate relations both with their home government and with the host governments of their subsidiaries. This is normally represented in the popular literature as a big company leaning on a small developing country with or without the help of the British, American or French Government. In globalisation theory, these companies are represented as having substantially more power than nations. They stand accused of urging the American and other advanced countries to restructure an entire economic global system in the interests of corporations.

Here in Brussels, there is obviously a close link between AmCham and the US Mission, but it does not extend to either party being the catspaw of the other. Given the current assertiveness of US foreign policy in its “shock and awe diplomacy” mode, it is significant that AmCham companies did not feel moved to collectively fall in line behind the stars and stripes as it approached Iraq. Traditionally ‘trade follows the flag’, with CEOs bundled into presidential and prime ministerial planes on trade missions. A closer look at history, from Venice or the British East India Company onwards, might well rather suggest that the flag follows the trade. A good case can be made for empires, from the Dutch to the American, as having evolved commercially, only subsequently acquiring the appurtenances of imperial administration. At a recent seminar on GMOs in Brussels, 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. This is not new. With the collapse of the evil empire, the US Foreign Service under President Bush Snr, and even more so under President Clinton, found itself missing a convincing antagonist on which to focus. It was overtly put at the disposal of US corporate interests.

However, it is the cases such as the Global Climate Coalition, which spent extensively and effectively to change and shape US climate policy, which interest me most. Not that we should regard attempts to influence foreign policy as purely a corporate domain. US NGOs, with their ability to move media opinion, were the driving force behind the US intervention in Somalia. European NGO’s, during my time as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, clearly felt they had an absolute right to both dictate and draft the European Parliament’s urgency resolutions on Human Rights. A shift in the US position on the enlargement of NATO was hastened by defence companies keen to see new recruits to the alliance required to spend substantial sums of money on upgrading their forces to NATO standards. In the language of decision-mapping this is known as ‘raising the scope’.

Today we are witnessing the fruit of an early 1990’s public affairs investment in the shape of nothing less than the complete re-casting of the principles of American foreign policy. 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. A Commission on Globalisation conference, ‘National Sovereignty & Universal Challenges: Choices for the World

After Iraq', (18th -20th June, Brussels), will bring politicians, diplomats and industrialists together to examine how these consequences might now be mitigated. 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? How keen are we on our old friends legitimacy, accountability and transparency?

Tom Spencer
15th April 2003