

## CHAPTER 23

# Public affairs



## Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- define public affairs and recognise it in practice
- understand the societal context in which it is done
- describe its key operating principles and methods
- judge the ethical consequences of public affairs.

## Structure

- Scope of public affairs
- Public affairs defined
- Contexts of public affairs
- Public affairs: knowledge, skills and behaviour needed
- Ethics and public affairs

## Introduction

Public affairs (PA) is a crucial and demanding specialism inside the broader field of public relations. It can claim this status because it involves influencing governments and therefore affects the quality of a country's democracy. In liberal democracies which are market-oriented and capitalist, external public relations for an organisation or group can be divided into two parts: dealing with markets; dealing with government, businesses, interest and pressure groups. Marketing public relations communicates with the purchasers of goods and services, whether they are individual consumers or other businesses. Public affairs communicates with government and other external stakeholders affecting a company or an organisation on matters of public policy.

Public affairs is not just the preserve of big businesses talking to government about the very big issues of public policy, such as signing up to the proposed constitution of the European Union (EU) or joining the euro. It can be businesses talking among themselves trying to form a common front before they meet their national government or the European Commission about, say, food labelling. Consumer-facing companies also do public affairs, with the Body Shop being a long-established example through its campaigns to stop testing cosmetics on animals. Public affairs is not confined to commercial organisations; public sector bodies and charities need public affairs as well. For example, UK universities brief members of parliament and talk to the media about varying tuition fees for students and Oxfam campaigns for better national coordination of emergency aid.

Interest and cause groups are also very active in public affairs. For example: the British Medical Association tells the media about its negotiations with the National

Health Service over junior hospital doctors' hours of work; 60 Greenpeace campaigners demonstrate outside the headquarters of the UK supermarket Sainsbury's dressed as pantomime cows in protest against genetically modified feed allegedly given to milk cows; the Vatican lobbies the European Constitutional Convention to insert a clause about Christian heritage in the proposed EU constitution; the European Referendum Campaign organises support in over 30 countries for national votes on that constitution.

Finally, interests and causes rise and fall in the political agenda all the time. For example, concerns about workers' rights have increased since the death of Chinese cocklepickers in the north of England in 2004. Employers bringing in legal immigrants formed the Association of Labour Providers to lobby MPs and ministers and to talk to the media, in order to stop human rights abuses. The fashion house Gap monitored how clothes manufacturers treat their workers with a view to pressurising governments to set minimum standards.

### Scope of public affairs

Public affairs (PA) can be conceptualised as the 'voice' that lets organisations and groups (big and small, commercial and non-profit, public and private, religious and secular, conservative and radical, permanent and temporary, national and local) in a country or in a larger political union talk to each other and to government, publicly and privately, about public policy at international, transnational, national, regional and local levels. (For a detailed explanation of how political organisations work, see Chapter 5.)

Public and private 'voices' are both used in public affairs practice. The first speaks through media relations mainly but also through corporate brochures, websites, conferences, event management, protests and demonstrations, while the latter is heard by senior officials, ministers, members of parliament (MPs), members of the European Parliament (MEPs), local councillors and officials in their offices when they make policy. The more powerful the organisation or group doing public affairs, the more likely it will use the private, office-based 'voice' of lobbying (see Mini case study 23.1). The opposite is true with less powerful, 'outsider' organisations and groups.

For example, transnational companies such as Airbus Industries has guaranteed access to ministers and officials throughout the EU. It has 16 development and manufacturing sites in France, Germany, Spain and the UK and has sold 5000 airplanes worldwide. Radical groups such as Reclaim the Streets and Stop the War in Iraq, however, are oppositional to capitalism and to core government policies and so are limited to doing their public affairs through protests, demonstrations and media relations. They are not invited to the prime minister's office or to the European Commission in Brussels. They are, both physically and metaphorically, 'outsider groups'.

While public affairs is a specialised part of public relations, it is still closely connected with other parts of the public relations discipline. It can be seen, for example, as the operations side of issues management (see Chapter 19). Opportunities and threats facing organisations or groups need first to be identified before there can be a public affairs response. For example, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) needed to 'boundary scan' proposals by the United Nations (UN) to make multinational companies responsible for labour and human rights abuse by their overseas customers, suppliers and host governments before it

#### mini case study 23.1

### Lobbying for a fairer tax

Lunn Poly, a large UK travel agency, along with the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) lobbied government to ensure that consumers paid the same rate of tax on travel insurance, whether it was bought from a bank/financial services company or a small family-owned travel agent. There was a hefty 50% difference in the tax rate, depending on where it was bought. These two lobbying partners wanted the support of the whole travel trade and so they linked up with the leading travel trade magazine, which published a feature

on the advantages of the policy change for small agents. A fair tax helpline distributed information packs to these small businesses and encouraged them to write to their MPs, who then asked questions in the UK's House of Commons. A petition was organised and articles appeared in the national press and there were meetings with the Treasury. The lobbying goal of a single rate tax was achieved a year later and refunds for past overpayments were given to travel agencies.

**activity 23.1****Helping organisations to prosper**

Look around your community and identify one business, one charity and one pressure group that you support. What public policies would help them prosper more? What should your government do to help them more? List three ways you could work with others to help.

could lobby the UK government to block any such resolutions. Community relations (see Chapters 6 and 18) is another close cousin of public affairs. British Nuclear Fuels illustrates this through its engagement in active dialogue with its critics and the communities around its plants in north-west England. (See Activity 23.1 and Think about 23.1.)

**Public affairs defined**

If *public affairs* is a widely practised and challenging specialism inside public relations, how is it defined? A good starting point – one that clarifies by separating things out – is to see it as the relations of organisations and groups not with markets but with government. White and Mazur (1995: 200) take this non-marketing focus and say that: ‘Within public relations, public affairs is a specialised practice that focuses on relationships which will have a bearing on the development of public policy.’

It is very hard to find a definition of public affairs that does *not* centre on public policy. It is important to remember this when considering a variety of titles under which public affairs is conducted. Besides ‘public affairs’ departments, you will find ‘corporate affairs’, ‘corporate communications’, ‘government relations’ – all doing what we have defined as public affairs.

The focus on public policy extends, of course, to policy made by local councils, regional tiers of government, national governments and the EU. For example, businesses and environmentalists want to

influence the route of high-speed railways through their villages and countryside, towns and cities, regions and national territories.

**Definition:** *Public affairs* is a public relations specialism that seeks to influence public policy making via lobbying and/or through the media.

This chapter says throughout that public affairs is done by organisations and groups. Organisations include commercial businesses, state services such as hospitals, police, schools, and established voluntary bodies such churches, charities and trade unions. They have bureaucratic features – hierarchy, structure, managerialism, instrumental reasoning and legal foundations. Groups, contrariwise, are entities representing the interests and causes in society and have non-bureaucratic features – collegial decision making, where power is shared equally, unclear lines of command and control, open membership, uncertain legal status and a values orientation. However, it is best to see organisations and groups as two ends of a continuum, with established businesses at one end (e.g. Ford Motors, Mercedes-Benz) and groups of protestors (e.g. against more airport runways, against nuclear power) at the other, and with shades of fixity and fluidity in between. (See Think about 23.2.)

This organisation/group distinction largely matches an important characteristic noted by Grant (2000) – between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. The former are those that government recognises as bodies to consult about policy and who want to be called on; the latter are those outside the government’s network of advice seeking and who are happy or not happy to be excluded. An ‘insider’ example in the UK is the National Farmers’ Union; an ‘outsider’ example is the fuel tax protest by Farmers’ Action. Organisations tend to be on the inside and groups on the outside.

There is a cooperative aspect to the public affairs of many organisations and groups: they network to maximise support for their policy and they join industry- or activity-wide representative bodies that

**think about 23.1 Lobbying for change**

Have you been a lobbyist without realising it? Have you been a member of a school or college student union and asked your teachers for rule changes? For extra computers? For more books?

**think about 23.2 Public affairs**

Can you think of three people from among family, friends or colleagues who have said: ‘I don’t like that new law’; ‘they shouldn’t make people do that’; or ‘that’s wrong and I want to change it’? What did they do about it? If they did nothing, why not? Do you agree with their judgements and actions?

can speak with one 'voice' (e.g. the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress). The Food and Drink Federation is the UK 'voice' for that industry and the British Dental Association speaks for dental practices around the UK. Cancer Research UK liaises with the Sunbed Association to promote good tanning practice in salons. Protestor groups use mobile phones to coordinate demonstrators.

All of this can be summarised as follows: public affairs is the public relations specialism that seeks to influence public policy for the advantage of those doing it and it is undertaken by a wide range of businesses and public sector bodies as well as interest, pressure and cause groups. It is done by established bodies that work within the existing policy set-up and by those who seek to reform it. It is done by national and transnational bodies and by small groups of people making a local protest. Public affairs can work for the powerful and for citizens. (See Box 23.1.)

## Contexts of public affairs

### Pluralism

In what sort of environment is public affairs done? The answer is that public affairs is stimulated by

#### box 23.1

### Public affairs for all – an accessible specialism

The skills needed to do public affairs can be learnt by residents' groups who are unhappy with student parking and partying near their homes and who want to protest to the university and the local council.

The same skills can be hired in by a large insurance company unhappy with a UK parliamentary select committee condemning the sale of endowment mortgages and wanting to deflect criticism. We can talk about citizens' PA and corporate PA.

the increased *pluralism* (publicly expressed differences of values, interests and behaviours) of the UK and much of Europe. This pluralism takes two forms and both involve an increased need for public affairs.

For example, since the 1960s, the UK has witnessed great, observable changes in personal behaviour by its citizens and in collective behaviour by voluntary groups. These changes derive principally from altered values regarding sex, lifestyle, the environment, race,



PICTURE 23.1 Much public affairs and lobbying has been done in the past in private. Less so today as professionals, workers, students and individuals seek more say about their roles at work and in society. (Source: Sipa Press/Rex.)



PICTURE 23.2 Influencing government is at the heart of public affairs. Here is a traditional British way. (Source: Tony Kyriacou/Rex.)

consumption and religion. They, in turn, generate social pressure for acceptance and tolerance of individuals practising them. This pressure frequently leads to collective, group action by like-minded individuals to promote and defend their choices. Increased pluralism of values and groups has been associated with social movements such as feminism, gay rights, environmentalism, consumerism and multiculturalism. These movements are often distinguished by 'contentious collective actions' (Tarrow 1994), such as sit-ins, media events, petitions, demonstrations, all of which are designed to influence public opinion and government. Stonier (1989: 31) argues that 'social movements are of prime importance to the public relations practitioner'.

**Definition:** *Pluralism* refers to the social and political condition whereby differing values, behaviours and material interests coexist, with different organisations and groups representing them. Civic and commercial pluralism are these differences expressed outside and inside markets.

So what is the link between this accelerated pluralism and public affairs? The answer lies both in the individual's need to have their new values and

behaviours accepted, or at least tolerated, by society and in the pressure on government to react to these changes in civil society. We cannot be openly gay if homosexuality is illegal: government is challenged to make same-sex acts legal. We cannot be free citizens if there is excessive security legislation against terrorist threats. We cannot be a sovereign consumer without knowing, say, food ingredients; one would be a dead sovereign consumer unless the government regulates for food safety. We cannot be an informed citizen about the environment if levels of river pollution are not monitored and published. Employees want workplace rights on health and safety and on pensions: only government can enforce minimum standards. Individuals and groups urge involvement by government and representative, accountable government responds in a *liberal democracy*.

**Definition:** *Liberal democracy* is a political system based on free elections, multiple political parties, political decision making made through an elected government and an independent system of justice that is responsible for law enforcement.

In this way, public affairs activities between organisations or groups and government express the concerns and hopes of the former and the policy responses of the latter. They are the conversations of a liberal democracy. This shift in UK society and in much of the EU to more individual expression and supportive voluntary groups is identified here as value pluralism and group pluralism of a civic kind. Brought together, they can be called *civic pluralism* (Moloney 2000).

In addition, a commercial variant of pluralism has come to the fore in the UK in approximately the same period. From the middle of the 1970s, it was noticeable that the climate of ideas about markets and business was shifting away from the collective and the planned towards the singular and the autonomous. This altered paradigm for the UK political economy has resulted in business and pro-market interests predominating over their ideological and material competitors. Mainstream political parties are more business friendly and, as a result, there is now in the UK a pronounced *commercial pluralism*. Without it, accelerated pluralism would not affect the lives of all the UK population. Tens of millions are affected by personal and civic value changes; all are affected by market and business changes. This commercial pluralism speaks when we hear calls for the abolition of farm subsidies and when the gaming industry lobbies for the use of credit cards in casinos.

**Definition:** *Commercial pluralism* is the condition where market and business values, ideas and practices prevail over substantial challenges from non-business or anti-business groups.

In liberal, market economies, popularly elected governments react to changes in civil society (voluntary associations outside the family and government) and in the political economy (the wealth creation nexus in society). We are closer to those changes when we see them legislated for, and regulated by local, regional and national governments. Increasingly, however, the source of this legislation is further away from us at the EU level, and yet we often feel the consequences of legislation close to our homes and work (animal welfare in abattoirs, workplace rights for part-time employees). (See also Chapter 5.)

## European context

Public affairs at the European level is made more complex by the number of interests and governmental institutions involved and it is likely that, because of the interrelated forces of EU expansion and closer integration, there will be more *lobbying* at this level.

(See Chapter 5 for further discussion of European institutions.)

**Definition:** *Lobbying* is the influence of public policy making through the private means of meeting MPs, ministers, civil servants, councillors or local government officials.

Cram (2001: 162) is not exaggerating when she writes 'it is generally recognised that the EU policy process is very complex', for she notes that 'no single actor has total control'. It is clear, however, that the Council of Ministers, representing the member states or countries of the European Union has significant powers of veto (the right to reject something) over the European Commission, which proposes policy and regulates its enforcement, and over the European Parliament, which can scrutinise policy and budgets but not initiate legislation.

Around these European institutions are a great array of interest, cause and pressure groups, staffed and led by professional and citizen lobbyists. There are, for example, nearly 5000 lobbyists accredited to the Parliament. To cut through this clamour for influence, the most effective way is to have the unconditional support of the lobbyists' national governments. With this support, organisations and groups have a direct route into the confidential power politics of the Council of Ministers. For example, UK private healthcare companies wanting new business in Europe are in a better position than British trade unionists wanting stronger rights to strike, because their national government supports business and market interests more than it does employee interests.

## Lobbying within Europe

Without that national government support, the lobbyist is faced with a choice of various tactics. McGrath (2005) notes that successful European lobbyists start their work very early in the life of a new policy and congregate around the officials and consultative committees of the Commission. The reason is that the Commission develops new legislation by consensus building across 25 national governments, its own institutions and dozens of interest and cause groups. Officials, who are mostly lawyers and economists, are keen to have technical views on how policy will work in pan-European circumstances and this need for expert opinion is a point of influence for public affairs people. Facing these complexities, therefore, the Commission follows a snowball approach which favours early persuaders trying to steer the direction of policy and ensures that most proposals backed by the Commission become law. Lobbyists for consumer and environmental protection and animal welfare will also keep close to

the Parliament, which has a pronounced interest in these areas. But remember that national interests keep surfacing, for many MEPs will only see national public affairs personnel or those with an established public interest in their home state. In all these circumstances, the importance of personal contact is high and that of media relations relatively unimportant.

### Personal influence and public affairs

Because of this importance, personal influence models of public relations are relevant to public affairs, although it is an open question whether this is a positive or negative effect. Chen and Culbertson (2003: 27) note how in China *quanxhi* (personal networks of connections and friendship to acquire what is needed) pose ‘challenges’ including the possibility of corruption of public officials. Chay-Nemeth (2003) sees personal influence at work in Singaporean policy making. These comments illustrate how national cultures (see Hofstede on national cultures in Chapter 18) can influence public affairs and it is manifest that personal relationships do affect the course and outcome of European lobbying.

Many professional lobbyists mention their personal connections to indicate that they have access to powerful policy makers and it is undeniable that lobbying projects need the meeting of minds and values to be successful. There is, however, an important balance to be struck in these relationships to avoid illegality or favouritism. The UK saw such flawed relationships in sleazy ‘cash for questions’ incidents involving MPs in the early 1990s. The result was a damaged government and a public loss of confidence, in part restored by the Nolan Committee (1994) (see ethics and public affairs section later).

### The ‘public sphere’ and public affairs

If corrupt personal relationships are the worst environment for public affairs and lobbying in a democracy, the ideal setting is the public sphere concept. This was developed by Jürgen Habermas, one of the most influential of European social philosophers since the Second

World War in the middle of the last century. The ‘public sphere’ has two meanings: the historical one, which describes the emergence of middle-class public opinion in eighteenth-century England, France and Germany; the normative one, which describes how public opinion *should* be formed in civil society. It is the latter that concerns us here for public affairs operates in the medium of public opinion and the conditions set by the public sphere offer an ideal as a gold standard to aim at. Those conditions are threefold, stipulating that debate to form public opinion should be:

- rational
- open to all wanting to partake
- conducted in a disinterested way (Moloney 2000: 150–155).

(See also ‘Ethics and public affairs’, p. 457.)

These are manifestly the conditions of perfection and thus beyond practice, but they are a constant reminder to working public affairs people and lobbyists about how to behave. Having defined public affairs and put it in national and European contexts, we can now explore how it is done. (See Think about 23.3.)

### Public affairs: knowledge, skills and behaviour needed

The core skills needed in public affairs to operate successfully in the competitive environment of accelerated pluralism are lobbying (both in private and publicly) and media relations (see Chapter 16).

Lobbying is persuading public policy makers to act in the interests of your organisation or group (Moloney 1997). The first operational decision is to decide whether to lobby in private or publicly, or both. Three questions will help you decide. Do you know the decision makers? Is the matter to be lobbied on the current political agenda? Are you an ‘insider’ organisation or group? If the three answers are ‘yes’, then you should go the private route and avoid the media and public events. If the answers are ‘no’, then your lobbying may be best achieved by using the media and organising public events. (See Box 23.2 and Activity 23.2, overleaf.)

### think about 23.3

### Student issues and ‘ideal’ conditions for debate

To what extent do public debates on issues affecting students (for example, on tuition fees or student accommodation) meet Moloney’s three conditions? How is public opinion formed? Do you feel able to put forward informed arguments and to participate in debate? How are public debates around these issues handled (e.g. by your student union/university)?

**box  
23.2****Health warning for lobbyists**

Before starting to think of lobbying tactics, consider this. Lobbying is a serious activity with costs, risks about outcomes and possible damage to reputation. It is also very time consuming, may last for years and involves mental, emotional and physical commitment. It may be more prudent not to use the lobbying 'voice' and instead to accept public policy as it is or is proposed. Remember that when you lobby, you can activate opposition and set up a competition for favourable policy that was not there beforehand. You could avoid this and seek to influence policy through membership of a political party.

Because public affairs seeks to influence public policy making, it deals with elected government and in so doing is in contact with the most powerful institution in a liberal democracy. The organisations and groups seeking change or the status quo are dealing with a constitutional power, refreshed by periodic popular mandate, which can legislate and regulate in any area of the political economy and of civil society. Lobbyists should also remember that politicians are always asking themselves – privately – 'how many voters will support a 'yes' or 'no' decision'. This is not necessarily cynical if the politicians also have in mind the rights and wrongs of a decision and the public interest. We are, after all, a democracy that enshrines the principle of majority voting for decision making. So numbers do count.

For all these reasons, lobbying is a serious matter not to be undertaken lightly. Furthermore, while success can greatly improve circumstances, failure can make matters worse. For example, a trade union lobbying today to abolish a secret ballot of members before strike action would be seeking to overturn a piece of legislation very widely accepted as part of the current UK political settlement and would call into question the quality of its overall political judgement. And, finally, the odds of success are no more than even in the best of circumstances: for every successful lobby, there is invariably an unsuccessful one on the other side of the argument.

**activity 23.2****Government involvement in public issues**

There is intense argument about what government should or should not allow, particularly on issues of personal morals such as abortion, age of consent, drugs. Can you list three examples of human behaviour, public or private, in which government should *not* be involved? Now list three examples where they should be involved.

Would you lobby or use the media to get the result you believed in?

**Who are the lobbyists?**

Because public affairs is an accessible activity, lobbyists are not only professionals but laypeople armed with the skills set out in this and the media relations chapters (Chapter 16). Professional lobbyists work inside organisations and groups as employees or in lobbying firms, which are usually small to medium-sized businesses offering their lobbying skills for hire. (These latter professionals are also called commercial lobbyists.) Professional lobbyists are usually graduates in politics or communications and have an intense interest in daily politics and policy development. They have often worked for MPs or for political parties as researchers. They often swap between employee and hired status. Their most distinguishing feature is that their main skills concern lobbying rather than the subject matter being lobbied about.

For example, a lobbyist hired to help supermarkets build out-of-town developments will know more about parliamentary and local government procedures than about the retail sector.

The lay (non-professional) lobbyists are often very knowledgeable and impassioned about the subject or cause for which they are lobbying (e.g. animal welfare, railway safety, inheritance tax, domestic violence) and this knowledge and concern leads them to develop lobbying skills. Their knowledge and passion means that their formal educational background is unimportant, as is their age. They are the local members of national organisations (e.g. speaking in the local media for the UK's National Pensioners' Convention) or the core members of a small and temporary grouping (e.g. getting speed bumps installed in a residential road). They make up what Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century political philosopher, called the 'little platoons' in civil society (Burke 1969) – small groups of citizens who share common interests and give each other support. In the USA, they would be called 'grassroots' lobbyists (McGrath 2004). These lay lobbyists can be called citizen lobbyists, doing civic public affairs. Lattimer (2000) has written about the skills they need, as has Levine (1993).

One point of caution: like-minded people who share a strong belief or interest can get overenthusiased with their cause and can forget the hours, days, months, years needed to change policy decisions. So

**box**  
**23.3****What do lobbyists do?**

When employers advertise jobs in public affairs, they say things like:

- 'You will be responsible for the day-to-day management of our parliamentary relations and be working with a range of other stakeholders in communicating our key messages.'
- 'You will play a key role in the continuing development of socially responsible policies for the industry and communicating them to relevant audiences.'
- 'You will develop and implement public affairs strategies that promote our members' policies to government, parliament, others organisations and the public at large.'

whether the lobbyist is a professional or an individual citizen, representing the rich and powerful or poor and neglected, the assumption should be that the desired objective will only happen – if it happens at all – after much planned, sustained and persuasive effort. Success invariably depends on a well-planned public affairs campaign, concentrating resources to achieve a predefined goal in a limited time and with a distinctive launch, middle and end. All campaigns, military as well as civilian, are risky, demanding ventures. (See Boxes 23.3 and 23.4 (overleaf) and Think about 23.4.)

**Skills set**

The skills needed to lobby have been described by David Curry (1999), who was a UK minister and who therefore gives advice from an insider's point of view. Charles Miller (2000) has done the same but from the lobbyist's position. These skills can be summarised as two major categories:

- 1 *Gaining access* involves: the knowledge and skills associated with work and social networking; identifying allies and opponents; knowing how to get the attention of policy makers.
- 2 *Making representations* is presenting your case clearly and briefly, persuasively, and accurately in terms of the wider interest. This is a key point – to persuade accountable politicians and officials to change policy, you have to align your interest with the wider, public interest. Moreover, underlying effective representation is knowledge of how policy is made in: political parties; ministries; the Prime Minister's Office; local authorities; and the EU. This knowledge includes the understanding that timing is vital in lobbying, because proposals are much easier to change than declared policy.

See Mini case study 23.2 and Think about 23.5 (overleaf).

It is usually impossible to know why your lobby succeeded or failed. This leads to another vital skill – patience. The readiness to 'play a long game' can make

**think about 23.4**   **Jobs in public affairs**

Would you apply for a public affairs job? What attracts you? What repels you? Would you work for a tobacco company, for a pro-cannabis group, for a pro-choice abortion rights group? Would you work only for a cause or interest you believe in or would you work for any cause or interest if the money was right?

**mini case study 23.2****Gaining access and making representations**

The British Ceramic Confederation has 150 members who represent 90% of the UK pottery industry. As the trade association, it is the 'voice' of an important industry, has access to ministers and represents the industry's views on various issues. One such issue is how foreign counterfeit ceramics are threatening UK jobs and markets.

This example and the terms 'access' and 'making representations' highlight again the 'outsider' and 'insider' distinction, and draw attention to the power of business, the sensitivity of government to employment and trade issues and the importance of contacts.

**box**  
**23.4**
**One week in the life of a public affairs consultant**
**The practitioner diary of Richard Casofsky, public affairs account executive for Finsbury Public Relations Consultants**
**Monday**

**5am:** My taxi arrives to take me to the office to get me there for 5.30. A House of Commons select committee has released government responses to its earlier report and I need to summarise these to present to our client by 7am.

**9am:** Begin to check the press and emails and to prepare for an 11.30am meeting with another client. This client is following the progress of a bill through parliament and it is my job to stay constantly in touch with any developments as they take place – we need to always be the client's first source of any new information.

**3pm:** Client meeting went well. I now need to draft the minutes and relevant action points ASAP to send on today. Also a number of points of detail need to be researched further to uncertainties that emerged during the meeting.

**4pm:** I get home early to compensate for the very early start.

**Tuesday**

**8am:** Check press and respond to emails. We're trialing a monitoring service to help us follow the progress of a bill and I am inundated with information – much of this is superfluous to the client's needs.

**12pm:** Phones have been very busy with our clients wanting to know our position on a controversial government White Paper. A brief team meeting is convened and we return each client call with our predictions and a simplified explanation of what the White Paper will mean to them.

**3pm:** Further team meeting to discuss strategy for preparing for a pitch for new business. With the team, I now need to begin speedy background research into the relevant sector and the related governmental departments. We (the account execs) are preparing a first draft of a PowerPoint presentation and an accompanying contact list.

**Wednesday**

**9am:** Check emails and answer the phone. The secretary is on leave today so we all need to muck in to spread her workload (answering phones mainly).

**1pm:** Have been spending the morning making calls to government departments trying to get hold of the government's draft priorities for health for the UK's presidency of the EU. This is for a pharmaceutical client. The sponsoring department doesn't wish to give out the information, so I try to get this from the part of the cabinet office that coordinates on all EU-related matters – not proving easy to get hold of this information.

**6pm:** Today has been busy with all the team managing their part of the research for the new business pitch in between regular daily tasks and constant ringing of phones . . .

**7pm:** Tonight is the company's anniversary party – there is a drinks party with clients from 7.30 to 9.30 and the team go out after the clients have left.

**Thursday**

**9am:** Hung over, I need to prepare 20 biogs of MPs to send to a client hosting an event at parliament. The MPs have been selected for having an interest in the client's business area. I also make a point of calling parliamentary offices to remind MP researchers of the event.

**1pm:** Lunch with a friend from when I was at university. He is now working as a press officer for the Conservatives (UK political party).

**2pm:** The remainder of the day is spent amending the presentation for the pitch we are working on.

**8pm:** Still in the office – manager has been out at meetings for most of the day and is only now catching up with his emails/work. I have just been given several tasks (finding recent press articles and past emails relating to a particular client issue) to complete before I leave the office.

**Friday**

**10am:** Today has been fairly quiet. We've been preparing a strategy document for Britain in Europe setting out the advantages the European Constitution would bring to British business.

**2pm:** Have been making calls to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about the Gambling Bill. Preparing a briefing document for a client who is meeting a minister and his officials on Monday.

**4pm:** The rest of my day has been spent trying to understand the European Commission's recently updated merger policy for a briefing note to send to clients. The new Merger Regulation is very complex and this is proving to be a daunting task.

*Source: Richard Casofsky*

all the difference. There are so many variable factors influencing policy making that it is extremely difficult to say which are crucial to success or failure and when they will change. As an example of how policy priorities change, there is now more public money for anti-alcohol and anti-obesity campaigns. Because of this uncertainty, it is unwise to claim publicly that your lobbying tipped the balance and got the desired outcome. Besides, public boasting about changing the minds of politicians and public officials is not attractive in a democracy and may stir up opposition.

The difficulty of isolating the winning factors in a lobbying campaign leads to another warning to the lobbyist – do not believe that there is a winning formula. There is most definitely not. There is, however, a set of behaviours that have been associated in the past with successful lobbying. Moloney (1996) Curry (1999) and Miller (2000) outline many of these but they should be treated as guidelines, pointers suggested by experience, not recipes for

guaranteed success. (See Box 23.5, Activity 23.3 and Mini case study 23.3, overleaf.)

## Ethics and public affairs

Because public affairs seeks to influence public policy in a democracy, it receives more scrutiny than any other public relations specialism, and rightly so. The use of professional lobbyists on a hired basis, their relationship with MPs and ministers, the declaration of interests by lobbyists and politicians and the use of entertainment and free gifts were all matters of public concern regarding UK lobbying in the late 1980s and early 1990s and led to the Nolan Committee (1994) investigation into standards in public life. Today the responsible lobbyist in any country should be aware of the seven principles of public life recommended by Nolan (see Box 23.6, overleaf); these have set a 'gold standard' for behaviour by holders of public office.

## think about 23.5 'Insiders' and 'outsiders'

What are the implications for democracy when an 'insider', say a London business person belonging to a Pall Mall club (a social club for the London elite) has more chance of meeting ministers than 'outsiders' such as long-term unemployed people from poorer regions?

### box 23.5

#### How to lobby government – a checklist

- Define the matter to be lobbied.
- Define success and failure.
- Network with allies.
- Monitor opponents.
- Establish who the decision makers are.
- Decide whether to influence privately, publicly or both.
- Lobby before policy is decided.
- Write your case on one sheet of A4 paper.
- Gain access.
- Let your most powerful and persuasive person lobby.
- Socialise with decision makers.
- Consider joining/supporting the party in power.
- Be persuasive both on paper and in person.
- Be technical – don't challenge policy directly.
- Be knowledgeable about how policy is made.
- Lobby in the name of the public interest.
- Be discreet about whom you are lobbying.
- Plan public events if private lobbying is not working.
- Use the media when they add pressure.
- If you change policy, never take the credit – in public!

### activity 23.3

#### Understanding lobbying

- What is lobbying? Write down your own definition of lobbying.
- Write down what you think are the top three skills needed to lobby.
- Under what circumstances is a private lobby better than a public one? Write down an example.
- Do you think you have lobbying skills? List them.

Any scrutiny of public affairs asks three questions:

- 1 Who has access to public decision makers and under what conditions (private or publicly known access)?
- 2 What weight do policy makers give to representations made to them?
- 3 Have powerful interests more right of access to public policy makers than poor and marginal interests?

### mini case study 23.3

## Lobbying on student top-up fees

In the UK, two academic unions (AUT, NATFHE) and the National Union of Students mounted a short six-day joint campaign to remove all references to variable student top-up fees in the third reading of the 2004 Higher Education Bill. To succeed they needed to change the minds of three Labour MPs.

Branch officials in the regions were asked to contact all members, give them the briefing previously sent to

MPs, urge them to write to their MPs and visit them in their surgeries. They were sent a template letter and told that the union websites provided briefings and supportive arguments. They were supported by the small number of vice-chancellors opposing variable fees who lobbied sympathetic members of both Houses of Parliament. The campaign lost because government business managers persuaded previously rebellious MPs to be loyal.

#### box 23.6

### Standards in public life – the Nolan principles

Professional and citizen lobbyists should be aware that holders of public office are expected to behave with:

- selflessness
- integrity
- objectivity
- accountability
- openness
- honesty
- leadership.

Concerns over access may be triggered by private meetings between officials and business people at the Prime Minister's Office or in Brussels when policy is developed. Critics say that their meetings should be publicly flagged up in advance and that a record of their contents made public later.

All these health warnings strengthen the need for caution when deciding whether or not to lobby. The caution has two aspects, one self-interested and the other principled – and both should be asked in the context of the Nolan principles. Do we help or harm the interests we represent when we do public affairs? Do we help or hinder the quality of our democracy when we lobby? (See Boxes 23.7 and 23.8, Case study 23.1 and Activity 23.4.)

### activity 23.4

#### Analysis of Case study 23.1

- Whom did the residents have to convince that their case was right?
- Rank in order of importance the tactics which brought about the result.
- Why do you think that the government supported the residents' case?

#### box 23.7

### Whether or not to lobby publicly?

An organisation or group would first ask itself:

- Is there easy access to councillors, MPs, senior civil servants and ministers?
- Is our policy position on the mainstream political agenda?

If the answers are 'no', you are halfway to doing a citizens' lobby.

The next stage has two more questions:

- Have we got many people who would support us publicly?
- Can we get media coverage?

If the answers are 'yes', a public lobbying strategy would be more effective.

#### box 23.8

### Public lobbying – action checklist

Influencing public policy makers is a 'numbers' game'. So can you:

- drum up support in public at a rally, protest, demo
- organise a well-supported petition
- get testimonials of support from celebrities, experts, losers and gainers
- develop slogans
- organise attention-seeking events over time
- work cooperatively with enthusiasts
- have an agreed script for your interest/cause and stick to it
- develop a news sense?

## case study 23.1

## A ‘David and Goliath’ public affairs battle on the English Channel

The primary definition of globalisation is the integration of markets across the world and it is a definition that foregrounds the role of ports. As international trade increases, ports expand and contract with changing patterns of demand. Examples are Felixstowe and Rotterdam, which grew in tonnage and area occupied, unlike London and Amsterdam, which grew smaller or stopped trading.

Modern ports are capital intensive, take up large areas of land, generate jobs and markets for their suppliers, disturb their environments from ecological, physical and amenity perspectives and are the subject of national government policy. Most of these features came to the fore in 1997 when Associated British Ports, owners of Southampton port on the south coast of England, proposed a £745m expansion of the docks on the western side of Southampton Water, on a site known as Dibden Bay.

That proposed expansion, however, was the subject of intense debate in the city and surrounding communities. While Southampton City Council supported the new dock, opposition to it coalesced around the group known as Residents Against Dibden Bay Port (RADBP). Paul Vickers, who had a background in the petroleum industry, was its chairman. He led the group to a successful conclusion and here he describes the seven-year campaign that led the UK government to refuse planning permission for a new dock in the bay. It is a campaign that shows the benefits and costs of concerned citizens doing public affairs. He tells the story of the Dibden Bay incident by the English Channel.

### Background

The proposal was for a container port at Dibden Bay, which is directly connected to the proposed New Forest National Park. The bay’s foreshore is home to 50,000 rare birds and protected under the European Birds Directive, as well as being the strategic gap between the townships of Hythe and Marchwood. It would have been the UK’s biggest port infrastructure project ever. One-third the size of Heathrow Airport London, it was to take 10 years to construct.

‘The announcement provoked a public outcry. Associated British Port’s (ABP) argument was that there was a national need for extra container capacity and that Dibden Bay was the only available site. The New Forest District Council soon organised a public meeting, which led to the formation of our group. We ran the campaign from 1997 up to and through the public inquiry, culminating on 20 April 2004 with the government’s decision on the expansion.’

### Gathering information

‘At the outset, the ABP case appeared cut and dried and most organisations and institutions thought that the only option was to compromise and limit the damage. The European Directive provides no protection if there is deemed to be an overriding public need. Consequently it is possible to win the argument at a public inquiry and still have the decision go against you.

‘From day one, RADBP set out to be a professional organisation. Whilst we would inevitably be accused of ‘nimby’-ism [i. e. ‘not in my back yard’ (NIMBY) or property-owner self-interest], our plan was to be consistently articulate and accurate with facts and arguments. The first requirement was to gather data about the UK container port industry: the facts/story as put forward by ABP and the growth in container demand, etc. This was achieved by RADBP writing letters which were sent in the name of either the New Forest Council or the local MP. A letter on House of Parliament paper guarantees a reply! At the end of this period it was abundantly clear that ABP’s case was flawed.’

### Lobbying

‘With as much information as possible, our next objective was to lobby all of those organisations which could potentially become opponents to the expansion proposal. At the outset, there were only two groups on our side (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and New Forest District Council) but slowly and following presentations, leafleting and more letters from the MP, other groups began to doubt ABP. By 2000, we had become the coordinating group for the opposition and taken on the role of passing information between the groups, heading up the media campaign and vetting statements made by other groups to ensure accuracy and consistency. By now the media wanted to talk to us.’

### The strategy

‘This can be summarised as follows:

- maximise the opposition in advance of the formal planning application and the expected public inquiry
- sponsor alternative locations (to give the government a way out)
- delay ABP as long as possible to allow alternative proposals to come forward (one of the ways of achieving this was to continuously put more and more questions into the public arena, so that ABP had to respond).’



### case study 23.1 (continued)

#### Tactics

'Between 1997 and 2004 we used a number of different methods to get our message across. These included:

- frequent leafleting
- car stickers
- letters to ABP's shareholders pointing out financial weaknesses in the proposed extension
- information packs handed out at the ABP annual general meeting
- getting the BBC to make a documentary on the project
- persuading other interest and pressure groups to go public
- media relations
- and asking parliamentary questions.'

#### Winning the public affairs battle

'By 2000, the tide of expert and public opinion was moving against ABP. The turning point came at a decisive public presentation in January in the chamber of the New Forest District Council between us and ABP, when our case was much stronger. After this, ABP never appeared in public with us again. The same presentation was used extensively throughout 2000 to lobby support.'

#### Fighting the planning application

'The formal application was submitted by ABP in October 2000. By this time the opposition was extensive. Six and a half thousand individual objections went to the government in the six weeks allowed, a record for a planning application, and the official bodies and pressure groups that lined up with us came to 50.

'By contrast, ABP only had the support of Southampton City Council.

'Also by this time, our involvement with the possibility of building a container port on a redundant refinery site in Essex came to fruition with the decision by P&O Ports (a competitor of ABP) to go ahead with this project. Furthermore, we had agreed with P&O that they would announce this project to coincide with ABP submitting their application. This allowed us to go to the media with the story that this development (the London Gateway project) was on a brownfield site and that Dibden Bay was a protected greenfield site.

'ABP appeared to believe throughout that no one would turn down a project for the strategically important port of Southampton. The inquiry inspector organised a preliminary meeting in April 2001 to agree the scope and the management of the inquiry. We asked for two extra topics – financial viability and human rights – to be inserted, knowing that these were weak areas for ABP.

'The inquiry was set to start in December that year, after everyone had submitted their evidence. In the intervening period, it was expected that ABP would fly barrage balloons in the bay to indicate the height of the cranes and the line of the 1.8-kilometre quay on the foreshore. But this did not happen, so we planned the event for the weekend immediately before the inquiry opened in order to maximise publicity. ABP, in the role of harbour master, tried to prevent us going ahead, but faced with the inevitable media coverage this would have given them, they relented.

'The flying of the barrage balloons at 330 feet high over the length of the proposed quay in an unspoilt bay was a master stroke, as this was the first time the local population had seen anything visual to indicate the size and impact of the project.'

#### Giving the government a way out

'As I have said earlier, it is possible to win the inquiry and lose the political decision. We wanted therefore to ensure that the government had other container port expansion options besides Dibden Bay and to this end we also contacted Hutchinson Ports, the owners of Felixstowe (the largest UK container port) and Harwich. They were well aware that if Dibden Bay went ahead, it would severely affect their own business. They therefore decided to put in their own application for expansion in Harwich and they agreed to announce this on the day the inquiry opened to give us yet another media opportunity. This meant that the media story was now "why do we need Dibden when we can have London Gateway and also Harwich, neither of which involve such a large environmental impact as Dibden Bay?"'

#### Decision day: 20 April 2004

'The inquiry and the government denied the application to make Dibden Bay a port on a long list of grounds, not just the environmental issues, e.g. ABP failed on the two topics we inserted, financial viability and human rights. We had won a seven-year battle of public campaigning and private lobbying. It was incredibly hard work and needed sustained commitment but it showed that it is possible for a small group of determined citizens to succeed against a powerful company. Those who care can win.'

#### Endnote

From Paul Vickers' account, the outstanding feature of the residents' campaign was the result in their favour. Most pressure groups do not win their case so completely against well-resourced interests. The residents were a David to the Goliath of Associated British Ports in terms of the resources that could be devoted to a public affairs campaign. In this case, the residents



**case study 23.1 (continued)**

spent £120,000 compared to ABP's estimated £45m. In terms of the 'insider' and 'outsider' distinction about relationships with government (see earlier in the chapter, p. 449), ABP provide much of the physical infrastructure which allows the UK to trade by sea, while the residents were a temporary and changing association of volunteers who had not worked together before and who were unknown to public policy makers. It is this imbalance of resource and status that is so striking about this case. The success of RADBP is reminiscent of the struggle between Greenpeace and Shell over Brent Spar in the mid-1990s. Indeed, the Dibden Bay incident may well be seen eventually to have had greater significance in environmental, political and public affairs terms.

For ABP, there was disappointment about the decision not to expand – a reminder that in public affairs work, there are always competing views. In a statement immediately afterwards, it said that the decision was 'extremely serious'. It added that: 'The decision not to give ABP's Port of Southampton the go-ahead for its expansion plans to handle growth in the UK's international trade will certainly result in a loss of job opportunities in the area and will have a worryingly adverse effect on the local and regional economies. The future shape of the port will now be significantly different to that of the expanded Port of Southampton which we had planned for.'

Source: Moloney and Vickers 2004

**Summary**

Public affairs is the much used public relations specialism that seeks to influence public policy making through lobbying, done either privately or publicly, along with media relations, or by combining both routes. Lobbying is at the heart of public affairs and is often connected to the linked specialisms of issues management, community relations and sponsorship (Chapters 19, 18 and 27). It is conducted by the widest range of organisations and groups, from the largest companies to the smallest groups of citizens, both seeking to advance some interest or cause or right some wrong.

Public affairs is done in a particular social, political and economic context, i.e. accelerated pluralism, where organisations and groups seek advantage for their values, behaviours and material interests over

their competitors. They often act cooperatively with allies to achieve this. Public affairs is the 'voice' of this competition for advantage.

There is a particular skills set required to do public affairs whether by professional lobbyists or laypeople. The core skills are those of identifying and analysing issues, building a case in response, getting access to decision makers, aligning private and public interests, persuading officials and politicians in your favour and deciding on private and/or public routes of influence.

Public affairs can be a controversial activity and it should not be undertaken lightly. It touches on the quality of democracy by influencing elected representatives and officials. It is part of public life and should be conducted to the high standards established by the Nolan Committee.

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