

The lobbyists' lobbyist

By Edward Steen - 16.05.2007

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“At the end of the 1980s,” says José Lalloum, “it was a strange wish for a Frenchman to become a lobbyist. It was not seen as a profession.” In the stuffy, secretive world of Paris boardrooms and cabinets 20 years ago, hyper-educated Enarques had cornered what market there was for bending ears as grand as their own. Lobbyistes, evidently. But you did not so much as whisper such a vulgar word.

Hiring a consultancy company to influence French legislation, rather than a high-price ‘Someone from the Grandes Ecoles’, was unthinkable in those days. Traces of such snootiness remain: “The French are not as advanced as the British in terms of lobbying.” The French 20-something graduate (in marketing and communications, and a postgraduate qualifications in European law, not from the Grandes Ecoles) found Brussels distinctly more open and ‘Anglo-Saxon’.

His entrée was as a stagiaire or trainee; it was the usual way in. It still is for the estimated 15,000 consultants now working in Brussels. Among the ten staff at Logos, co-founded by Lalloum nine years ago, everyone except the office manager began as a stagiaire. Their field of operations is above all the European Parliament; their office next to the Wiertz museum is 30 seconds, if it is urgent, from the main entrance.

Aged 42, Lalloum can look back on 15 years of steady progress, a career recently crowned by his election as chairman of EPACA, the European Public Affairs Consultancies' Association. It will also open the door to expansion beyond the EU, where most of his clients are now. Already, perfect English, if not English English, is expected; Lalloum's Parisian-accented international English is just the thing. “I have been praised by non-native English speakers about how understandable my English is,” he says. “I am told that people from the UK are often so difficult to understand.”

A high-profile battle – Logos' first big campaign – tested these qualities to the full. This was the cosmetics industry's battle in 2000 over the 7th amendment of the cosmetics directive. The job was to protect the industry against the immediate ban on testing products on rats and rabbits demanded by a vocal and highly-emotional animal-rights campaign. The campaigners needed only a split-second image of a rabbit to make their point, says Lalloum. Arguing the industry's corner “is a question of ten minutes and no one wants to hear the argument”. In reality a very small number of rats and rabbits were subjected to tests for toxicity and carcinogenic properties.

“People say successful lobbying is about money, but it's not so,” says Lalloum. “That was one example.” The net result of the expensive counter-campaign was not much more than a breathing space for the industry while alternatives were sought. Lalloum, who says he will not represent “interests putting forward exaggerated arguments”, is insistent about the social and political usefulness of lobbyists. But what of his work as the new EPACA chairman, the lobbyists' lobbyist? He has well-rehearsed answers to the industry's critics. First, European political parties are that in name only, he says. Lobbying is not as party-politically wired as in Washington – where the ultra-strict rules are in any event ineffectual. On openness: “There is a difference between transparency and voyeurism... anything to do with fees charged by consultancies to their clients is a private matter.”

But he faces a determined anti-lobby lobby, notably the Amsterdam-based Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO).

There are now restrictions on the number of consultants allowed to lobby in the European Parliament and under the European transparency initiative, the Commission recently opened a voluntary public register of everyone working to influence decisions taken in EU institutions. Registrants would have to supply information such as: in whose name am I speaking? What are my goals? How am I funded and by whom?

It is not good enough for the anti-lobby Savanarolas, but a clear sign that squeaky cleanness is supposed to be the order of the day or anyway of tomorrow. European Commission's sweetly-reasonable press release explains: "The initiative offers an opportunity to all interest representatives to underscore that lobbying EU institutions is a legitimate and useful activity and one that can stand up to full public scrutiny."

- Qualifications: law or economics degrees are preferred and/or a background in journalism. Science increasingly useful if combined with political 'feel' (apparently a rarity). Languages: fluent English and French are a must, German very useful (because of the powerful German presence in the European Parliament); any other languages a plus.
- Pay: stagiaires earn +/- what they can expect in an EU institution, around €1,000 a month, and it is the usual way to start. Rising to €3,000 and up to the level of international lawyers if you manage to establish yourself. But the competition is fierce.

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