Prompters on the Political Stage

Lobbyists are looked on as pullers of strings who work in furtive secrecy. In Germany, their stalling tactics are considered to have added to the backlog in political reform. Cornelia Woll, who worked for several years at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne, paints a somewhat less ominous picture for Europe as a whole. Many lobbyists are more concerned with keeping their companies or associations informed of current legislative intentions than with pressuring politicians. On issues of particular complexity, their expertise is actually in demand.

As one of the most disputed pieces of legislation passed by the European Union, it exemplifies the power and powerlessness of interest groups in Brussels: the chemicals regulation REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals) that takes effect on June 1 introduces new rules for chemical substances in Europe – for the benefit of consumers. In an ambitious undertaking, some 30,000 substances are to be registered step by step. The EU Parliament approved the legislation by a large majority in December 2006. In the future, a new Chemicals Agency in Helsinki will supervise registrations and approvals and development works well in the EU,” says Woll. “The lobbying came from all sides: from industry, from regional groups frightened for their countries’ ability to compete, and therefore about jobs, and from consumer groups and environmental bodies.” These lobbyists systematically attempted to influence the media and public opinion in a fight for attention that lasted years and that has now ended in numerous compromises being written into the regulation. The fact that no one was satisfied in the end could also be taken as a good sign, Cornelia Woll suggests. Lobbyists do not enjoy a good reputation. They are regarded as well-paid whisperers in political ears, professional schemers and manipulators. German media, too, are fond of casting the profession in a bad light. Die Strippenzüchter (“The pullers of strings”), for example, is the title of a book by journalists Cerstin Gammelin and Gottz Hamann that examines the sinister power of interest groups in Berlin.

Cornelia Woll, on the other hand, tries to draw an unemotional balance. She is interested less in special interest politics at the national level than in the European perspective. The main focus of her work is on Brussels, where there are estimated to be around 15,000 active lobbyists. Only in Washington are representatives of interest groups present in greater numbers, though the perception of these lobbyists is far less critical in the US. That is a good reason for Woll to compare lobbying practices in Washington and Brussels. Since the mid-1980s, some 350 companies have set up shop, giving the impression that the EU Commission is besieged by special interests. Originally, the 29-year-old researcher intended to concentrate on the influence of trade associations on commercial policy matters. However, in the course of her work, Woll became aware of how strongly interest group politics in Europe has changed: the influence of corporatist associations has declined substantially. Today, it is mainly individual companies that have offices in Brussels and maintain contact with the resident bureaucrats. Since the mid-1980s, some 350 companies have set up shop, giving the impression that the EU Commission is besieged by special interests.

Lobbying Is an Expensive Business

This also reflects the political significance that the EU has acquired: with
Not even the color of a rubber duck’s beak escapes the attention of the European Parliament.

Lobbyists are not just concerned with exercising influence. One important task is to act as observers of European politics. After all, companies have a legitimate interest in knowing in advance what new laws and directives are coming their way – and how to prepare for them. Cornelia Woll refers to this as monitoring. And the fact is that even associations and industry representatives often lack information about the EU, as an amusing example illustrates: The Brussels office of a national employers’ association once received a call from an agitated employer in Germany who was evidently upset. He had heard about a proposed new directive and urgently wanted to speak to Mr. Corporation, who was, to his knowledge, competent to deal with such matters. Only as the conversation proceeded did it become clear that the COREPER he was referring to was not a bureaucracy, but the Committee of Permanent Representatives that comprises up to 180 working parties.

The Case of the Rubber Duck

Politics in Brussels is sometimes less than transparent, which is one reason why lobbyists mediate between the one committed and corporate heart and the actual quarters back home. However, the growing importance of interest groups also has to do with the fact that more and more technical decisions are being made in Brussels. The chemicals regulation REACH is just one example, albeit one with many emotional issues attached. In general, the more complex the subject, the greater the demand for expert knowledge that interest representatives possess. Woll, who worked as an intern at the European Parliament and once spent three weeks grappling with the color of rubber ducks, has a personal insight into the problems: particularly in Brussels, the devil is in the detail. And if rubber ducks glow bright red, then to an expert eye, that may mean that they contain hazardous substances. "In a worst-case scenario, the bureaucrats and Streng’s lawyers know so little about a piece of legislation that they have to rely on the lobbyists’ suggestions," says Woll. When the researcher first began studying the lobbying practices of American and European businesses several years ago, for her doctoral thesis, she first had to convince the skeptics in her own academic environment. Colleagues and professors frequently found it difficult, even gaining access to the offices of such interest groups and getting honest answers. "When it starts to get interesting, they’ll clam up," was one well-meaning piece of advice. But Woll was not to be deterred. She inquired, interviewed a total of special interests in Brussels and Washington regarding their activities and working methods. "If you ask different stakeholders about directives coming out of Brussels, after a while, a lot of interesting details come to light," says Cornelia Woll. As Woll has gained experience in dealing with otherwise discreet interest groups. Sometimes it is only worth appealing to the eyes of lobbyists who are happy to report their successes in Brussels – and to relate what they have achieved for their companies. Most lobbyists also have an eye for the political process and know what lobbying can achieve in these respects. Finally, lobbyists are fundamental to the core business of interest groups: to protect their companies against financially clout of companies active in Brussels, from which they can then draw conclusions about the influence of each player.

In the course of her interviews, Cornelia Woll has not come across a single smoking gun or scandal: “The popular cliché of intrigue and voices in the dark is somewhat off the mark.” Without doubt, there are some black sheep in the fold. It also regarded as ill-advised in Brussels to aggressively coerce decision-makers. The preferred method is to suggest that a new directive will cost jobs. In the case of REACH, the chemical industry was not the only one to use this strategic move to manipulate opinion against the regulation. The auto industry also recently mobilized its forces when the issue of an EU-wide limit on new vehicle emissions arose, with companies in Germany signing in Federal Minister of Economics Michael Glos as an advocate of their cause.

Generally, however, businesses try to exercise a more subtle influence. The responsible bureaucrats in Brussels are not, after all, up for election and are therefore less susceptible to political pressure than, say, members of the German Bundestag. Cornelia Woll concludes. Most lobbyists are simply concerned with articulating their interests at the right time and in coordination with Commission representatives, avoiding unnecessary costs.

A Register for Lobbyists

Conversely, it is also in the interests of those of a political hue to resolve problems in dialogue with European interests. This contrasts sharply with the typical practices of American lobbyists, who argue their case with far greater vehemence – and are happy to cite the will of the electorate in support of their argument. “European lobbyists are fundamentally concerned with influencing both political events, because access to the political process is dependent on their adopting a constructive approach,” Woll believes. Still, there is growing public pressure on the EU Commission to control the lobbying scene more rigorously in the future.

Just recently, the EU Commission for Administrative Affairs, Audit and Anti-Fraud, Siim Kallas, introduced the European Transparency Initiative. Among other provisions, this would require lobby groups to obtain accreditation in Brussels, apply for entry in a register and submit to a code of conduct. The actual content is to avoid corruption, with warning bells still sounding after the scandal surrounding the American lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who used huge bribes to purchase the compliance of US senators. For some, the Transparency Initiative won’t go far enough. The Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulations (Aler-EU), of which Greenpeace, for example, is a member, is demanding that lobby groups should be required to disclose the funds they receive.

In principle, Woll believes the Estonian EU Commissioner’s moderate approach to be correct: “It makes good sense to be able to see who was consulted in a particular legislative process and which groups actually said.” The opportunity already exists to request copies of every document the Commission has received on every piece of legislation, including policy papers and lobbyists’ proposals. On the other hand, anyone taking the trouble to request them would have reams of paper to work through. It is not only EU officials who often balk at this time-consuming and expensive task. Brussels-based journalists. Even scientists find the going tough. Yet Cornelia Woll sees a need to address the issue of lobbying – even if only to put the cliché of shadowy figures behind the scenes into perspective.