

'The lobbies in Brussels — How much do pressure groups influence the Executive of the Common Market?' from Communauté européenne (October 1964)

Caption: Article from the monthly publication Communauté européenne in October 1964 shedding light on the identity of pressure groups — or lobbies — and their relationship with the Commission.

Source: Communauté européenne. Octobre 1964, n° 10. Paris. "Les "lobbies" de la joyeuse entrée", auteur:Lewis, Paul , p. 16.

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Last updated: 19/09/2016

The lobbies in Brussels

How much do pressure groups influence the Executive of the Common Market?

As a ‘European authority’ comes into being, it is inevitable that all kinds of special and private interests — most importantly the trade unions and the industrial and business associations — will try to secure a hearing in the deliberations on which the future of the Community will largely depend.

At a time when foreign governments are hastening to arrange accreditation for their diplomatic representatives to the European Executives, it seems natural enough on the face of it that the various economic groupings — whether candlestick makers or motor manufacturers, workers, employers or consumers — should be in a position to put their points of view before the decisions on which their future will depend are taken, as indeed they are already doing, on a different level and in a different sense, through the Community’s Economic and Social Committee.

[...]

The diversity of the pressure groups surrounding the Common Market Executive in Brussels is reflected in a directory 500 pages long. [...] And indeed, the list of organisations is impressive: it comprises some 140 bodies that provide European-level representation for every conceivable kind of activity, ranging from sewing-machine manufacture to mineral water production. The guardians of minority tastes in the Community even include a European Tea Committee.

In practice, the Executive itself had an interest in granting to these organisations the semi-official recognition that they currently enjoy: they constitute a rich mine of technical information. For example, the drafting of the Community list of exceptions to the linear reduction formula proposed for the Kennedy Round negotiations was greatly facilitated by one of the largest pressure groups in Brussels. Since governments showed little enthusiasm for direct contacts between the Commission and national industries, the Commission negotiated with the Union of Industrial and Employers’ Confederations of Europe (UNICE), which represents the industrial confederations of the six States at European level.

A tribute to the ‘reality’ of the Common Market

A further point is that the lobbies gathered in Brussels bear witness to the authority of the Executive and the efficacy of the Common Market.

The fact that these groups are so numerous and so active provides the clearest possible evidence that economic circles have become fully aware of the new reality which the Common Market represents to them.

Among the 140 organisations named in the list drawn up by the Executive, three are particularly important and bear particular responsibility. UNICE, mentioned earlier, is the central organisation representing the Community’s six national industrial federations; [...] COPA (the Committee of Agricultural Organisations in the ‘Six’), which in practice brings together the representatives of every sector of agriculture with the Community; [...] and the Common Market secretariat of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and [...] Christian Trade Unions.

Importance and standing may be one thing, but influence is quite another. How effective are these lobbies in practice? There is no simple answer.

Avoidance of any direct conflict

These various bodies have no interest in claiming spectacular victories, although some of them may be ready to see themselves as the victors in occasional minor skirmishes. On the agricultural front, for example, COPA believes that its intervention played a critical part in persuading the Executive to exempt agricultural joint ventures from some of the provisions of its competition policy — a decision, however, that was subsequently repealed by the Council of Ministers.

UNICE, though relatively more discreet about its activities than many other organisations in Brussels, was clearly pleased by the Executive's decision to introduce block exemptions from its policy for applying the rules relating to industry agreements.

As for the trade unions, they may be adopting a more realistic line in saying that there has been no case in which their intervention has played a critical part: there have simply been some problems where their standpoint has coincided with that of the Executive and others where it has not.

These cautious responses from the major organisations are hardly surprising. The process used by the Commission as an Executive to prepare its decisions is inevitably complex: even when it does consult parties whose rights it recognises, those consultations cannot be anything more than one stage of the procedure. This situation is acknowledged by both sides, and, for a variety of reasons, the organisations concerned do not seek direct confrontation with the Executive.

It is the unofficial contacts that are most appreciated by the pressure groups. Last year, for example, officers of UNICE attended at least 65 meetings with the Commission's services, an average of more than one a week; the same was true of COPA and the free trade unions. But as those meetings were unofficial in nature, their influence on the Common Market Executive is unclear and cannot be mathematically demonstrated.

There is also some evidence to suggest that the system works in the opposite direction as well and that the Commission values the way in which it is able to use these organisations as intermediaries in its relations with industrial and trade union circles at national level.

No influence on major political issues

Although the Brussels pressure groups benefit from their close contacts with Commission officials on specialist technical problems, they are, unsurprisingly, much less influential when it comes to the major political problems. The broader the issues that enter into play, the less influence their specialist arguments exert; some of the Executive's most important political decisions have also marked the pressure groups' greatest failures. COPA, for example, was highly critical of the Executive's policy on cereals, but to no significant effect.

Similarly, the trade unions have, to date, been unsuccessful in their attempts to gain recognition for the special role which they believe they should play in the formulation of the Community's economic policy, and they have been unable to gain acceptance for their own ideas on economic planning. As the spokesmen for 12 million workers within the Community, the trade union representatives in Brussels may, of course, claim a greater entitlement to be heard than the other pressure groups; they have become more active recently, threatening to withdraw their support for the economic integration of the Community unless more account was taken of workers' interests.

The failures of UNICE are less easy to establish. This may be because many aspects of the Treaty of Rome that are of the closest concern to the members of this organisation — foreign trade, agreements between undertakings, transport — have not yet been fully implemented. The representatives of UNICE, however, seem to be uncomfortable with the slow progress of the Community's anti-trust policy; despite their wait-and-see attitude, they would really prefer to see the work done on this part of the Treaty advancing at the same pace as the foreign trade measures.

As the Community body that rules on major political issues, the Council of Ministers is, of course, a very important institution in the eyes of the various pressure groups. But for various reasons, and especially because Ministers are more often to be found in their national capitals than in Brussels, the organisations concerned generally prefer to approach them on their home ground.

Problems for the national pressure groups

At the present stage of the Community's development, bringing pressure to bear on national governments is certainly still the most effective way of influencing any important issue. Although this attitude makes the organisation of interests at Community level more complex, virtually all the pressure groups in Brussels are confronted by the need to reconcile conflicting national interests when they try to reach a common position on a major problem. Such problems pose serious difficulties for groupings such as COPA and UNICE. Their executive bodies are made up of the heads of the national organisations that they represent, so that the scope of their formal decisions is often diluted by compromises.

Indeed, it would not be too much of a generalisation to say that their position statements often seem to be more of a record of their failures: sometimes amounting to little more than protests against decisions that have already been taken, as in the case of the COPA document on cereals policy, and sometimes being relatively minor contributions to debates whose ramifications extend far beyond their respective mandates, such as the UNICE documents on the Kennedy Round and transport policy

It would be reasonable to conclude, then, that the pressure groups in Brussels are powerful when a problem may be resolved by unofficial means but that there is little prospect of their becoming more influential until such time as the process of economic integration has smoothed over national rivalries and made it easier for each sector of the economy to adopt a genuine Community viewpoint.

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