

Interest groups and pressure groups

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Interest groups and pressure groups

When drawing up a proposal, the Commission gathers together information and secures the opinion of the various interest groups involved in *lobbying*.

The term *lobbying* describes the action of influencing public authorities. Interest groups set out to inform and to influence, to determine the direction taken on certain issues, to contribute to decision-making, or to stop decision-making, depending on their interests.

Lobbying has increased significantly within the Community sphere of activities since the Single European Act was adopted in 1986. As the aim of completing the internal market was restated, many economic operators turned to lobbying in order to inform the Community institutions of their interests.

It is said that the European institutions welcome the activities of interest groups. The Commission has no qualms about consulting them when it is drafting its proposals, conferring upon them quasi-institutional status. The influence of interest groups lies behind most of the Institution's proposals.

There are a large number of full-time lobbyists in Brussels. These are professionals who belong, for example, to national or regional interest groups, to units representing undertakings, regional units and offices of national professional unions, to European coalitions of professionals, to European associations representing the interests of society (the environment, animal welfare, health, family, citizenship, etc.), and to consultancy firms. Since the summer of 2001, the Commission has created a single directory setting out the information on those active in civil society at the European Union level: the CONECCS Directory (*Consultation, the European Commission and Civil Society*).

In Brussels, the traditional method of representing interests is through a European federation of national associations, such as the CES (European Trade Union Confederation) and COPA (Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations). These organisations serve on consultative committees that assist the Commission. However, the federations lost their dominant position with the professionalisation of Community lobbying, and many associations and undertakings decided to exercise their own influence in different ways.

It should be remembered that two European institutions have a representative role that entails expressing national interests within the European Union: the Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. However, many groups prefer to establish a direct and informal dialogue with the Community institutions.

Strategies

Effective lobbying starts with an awareness of the decision that the European institution (Commission, Council or Parliament) is due to adopt. The decision is monitored and influenced by groups which seek to make it work in their favour.

The power of the interest groups based in Brussels can be seen in many areas, such as: the influence of certain groups seeking a ban on tobacco advertising; the blocking in the Council of the proposal on the use of the term 'chocolate' for products containing CBEs (cocoa butter equivalents); the reaction of European aircraft constructors to the draft McDonnell Douglas/Boeing merger which was ratified by the Commission; and the activities of the *European Coalition to End Cosmetics Tests on Animals* during the adoption of the Directive on cosmetic products.

Interest groups intervene during the various phases of the process for the adoption of Community acts. A crucial moment arrives when the texts are being drafted by the Commission departments. The interest groups present their views in the form of technical information on the subject in question. At a later stage, when the text is submitted for the approval of the Commission Members, lobbying takes on a political complexion. The influence of these groups is also evident while the texts are being revised. Given that the

European Parliament may possibly introduce changes and amendments, it is just as important to target the parliamentary committees. However, most changes to Commission proposals are introduced during Council meetings. The lobbies also seek to influence the working parties operating within the Council and the Permanent Representations of the Member States.

Code of conduct

There has been much debate in the European institutions about putting lobbying on a regular footing. The activities of interest groups are not subject to specific rules, such as registration and transparency. There is a legal vacuum concerning respect for professional ethics.

Lobbies have easy access to the European Commission, and this is in the Commission's interests, as it wants to maintain the most open debate possible, with the largest possible number of groups. As a result, it does not plan to lay down rules governing interest groups. Its course of action was set out in its Communication of 2 December 1992 entitled 'An open and structured dialogue between the Commission and special interest groups'. Whilst observing the minimum criteria set by the Commission, interest groups are invited to draw up their own codes of conduct.

The European Parliament has taken a more restrictive stance. Its Rules of Procedure state that persons who wish to enter Parliament's premises frequently with a view to supplying MEPs with information must respect a code of conduct and sign a register kept by the Quaestors (Rule 9(2) and Annex IX). The European Parliament requires all representatives of different interests to be honest, loyal, and not seek to deceive the institution. The growing importance of interest groups within Community institutions requires their activities to be transparent.