

Lobbying: A word in your ear

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Place du Luxembourg's exterior conceals influential relationships between lobbyists and MEPs

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Brussels is not simply an international city; it is also a political arena and, while many expats work for political groups, MEPs, or for an EU institution, the work of lobbyists, whose job it is to affect legislation, is also essential to the city's role on the world stage.

It is estimated that there are around 15,000 accredited lobbyists and 2,500 lobby organisations in Brussels, which regularly meet with decision-makers in the Commission and Parliament to persuade those in power to listen to the arguments of the particular interest group that they represent, in the hope of bringing about a favourable outcome in any future legislation.

Since March 2005, the EU has been grappling with how to deal with the influx of lobbyists in Brussels, with calls by Parliament to have a mandatory public register of lobbyists common to all institutions, an enforceable code of conduct, and the introduction of a "legislative footprint" on all reports; that is, a list of all lobbyists who provided significant input.

A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE

So what is a lobbyist, exactly? MEPs suggest it is anyone "influencing





Capitol Hill, Washington DC: The symbol of 'Made in America' lobbying

the policy formation and decision-making processes of the European institutions". As well as public- and private-interest groups, NGOs, think-tanks, trade unions, employer associations and lawyers can be thus defined. As former MEP Alexander Subb puts it: "Anyone who comes into my office and tries to influence a piece of legislation is a lobbyist in my eyes."

"Lobbying is about education," says Jeffrey Seisler, CEO of Clean Fuels Consulting and experienced Brussels and Washington lobbyist. "That is, the education of policymakers.

'LOBBYING IS EDUCATION. THAT IS, EDUCATION OF POLICYMAKERS. INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE BECOME A FORM OF LEADERSHIP'

Information and knowledge become a form of leadership. My approach is not to use financial resources, but to help policymakers and elected officials to do a better job for those who elect them."

A successful lobbyist, he continues, is one who works with legislators to affect not only the way that law is written, but also implemented. Ultimately, a good lobbyist can be a vital component in the development of better policy.

SAME YET DIFFERENT

As two political centres, Brussels and Washington have much in common, not least the political lobby groups, but there are also vital differences in the way the systems operate, says Seisler, who acknowledges that the "grey area between lobbying and bribing" still exists in the US capital, with lobbyists regularly offering cash or other gifts in order to see the emergence of a 'satisfactory' new law. Brussels lobbyists, Seisler maintains, do not suffer from the same "negative tinge that lobbyists in the US are often accused of".

This somewhat aggressive strategy may have something to do with the legislative timeframe, which is much shorter in



Aaron Eckhart plays a spokesman for a large US tobacco manufacturer who's also trying to be a role model for his young son in Thank You For Smoking – a recent satire on the tobacco industry's powerful lobbying machine

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the US, where it can take as little as two years for a law to travel from concept to Presidential Signature, than in Europe. In Brussels, it takes a minimum of three years to create a Directive. In the US, Congress has a two-year cycle, whereas the Commission is appointed for five years. This, believes Seisler, leads to "more stability" in the EU.

There are further differences, explains Seisler, who is also vice president for government relations at the International Association for Natural Gas Vehicles. "In the US, a legislator has a relatively narrow

constituency to whom they directly report, which allows for more direct contact. With the European Parliament, the direct visible effect is much

'YOU WORK IN THE SAME TOWN AND DEAL WITH THE SAME ISSUES. THIS IS SIMILAR IN BRUSSELS AND WASHINGTON'

less clear than it would be for a legislator in the US."

CONCENSUS BUILDING

"The European Parliament has a supernational aura, which makes MEPs seem one step removed from the people that elect them. Europe is more amorphous than the US, which means, for an MEP, that building the kind of US-style relationships is more difficult."

And it is precisely this kind of personal relationship that underpins a successful lobbyist. Often, says Seisler, the lobbyist and the lobby end up as social friends. "It's somewhat inevitable; you work in the same town and deal with the same issues. This is similar in Brussels and Washington, and lobbying is about access, also, so you can't replace those personal aspects of the job."

Finally, Seisler believes that the history of both Europe and the US contributes much to the political attitudes that govern both lobbying and



The US firearms lobby is one of most powerful in the world

the political process. "The US has a relatively short history compared to Europe. Because you have short terms of office, legislation can be created quickly, and because the President can change every four years, often laws get changed according to personal preference."

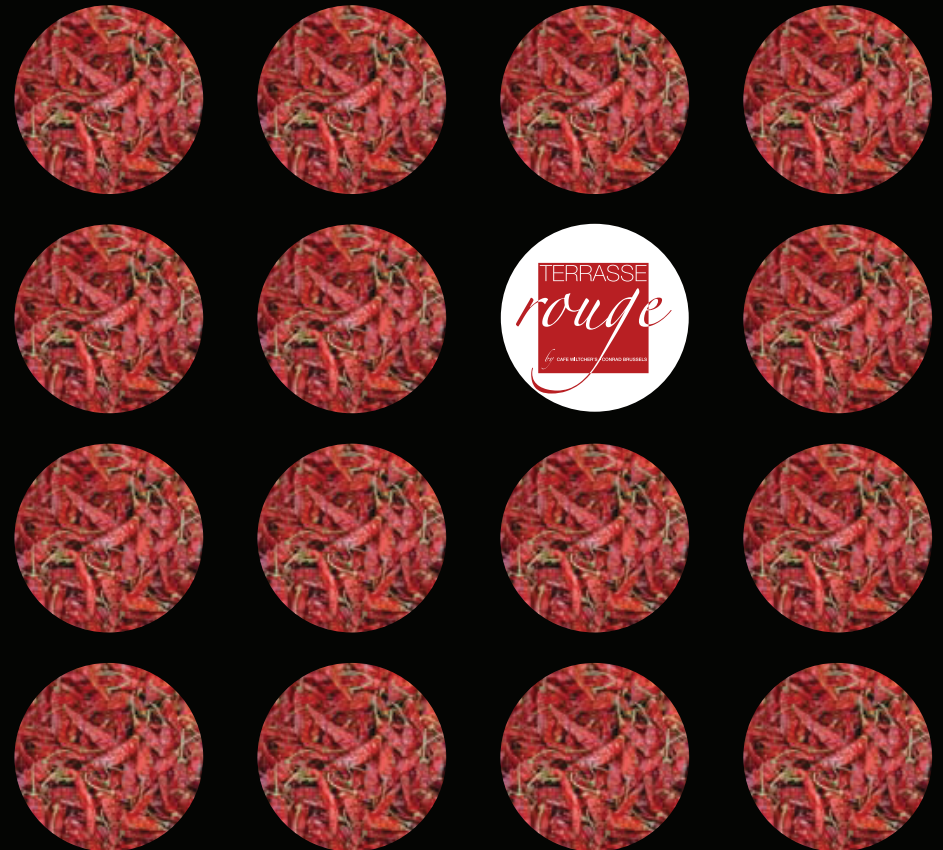
"Europe is built on consensus-building. It is the foundation of European governance. Of course, it takes much longer to create alliances

here than in Washington, so people are careful about changing laws in a hurry. Here, they take the longer view. I think this is consistent with the historical view of Europe."

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