

**NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
AS A LOBBYING FORCE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION:
MYTHS AND REALITIES**

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Nongovernmental Organizations as a Lobbying Force in the European Union: Myths and Realities

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the changing role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs or public interest groups as they are known in North America) in EU policy making since the mid-1980s. The study provides the first extensive insights into the development, the extent, the strategy and tactics and the influence (or lack thereof) of NGOs as a lobbying force in the EU and places these aspects of NGO activity in context within EU lobbying in general.

The impetus for the study came from members of the European Committee for Public Affairs (who represent the major companies lobbying in the EU) of the Conference Board Europe. It was the perception of several members of this group that, in recent years, NGOs have gained a special status in EU policy making circles and have increased in political power at the expense of business. This perception prompted the Committee to embark upon a study of the role of NGOs in European public affairs. It is on the findings from this extensive study and a related study that the bulk of this paper is based.

The paper begins by reviewing background studies, defining key terms, and explaining the methodology and data sources. It then identifies the major research questions and how these were formulated. The next four sections provide the results of the research from the three groups of respondents targeted plus a summary section. Based on these findings, the conclusion places NGO lobbying activity in the context of EU lobbying in general for the insights it can provide for adding to an understanding of the EU lobbying scene and interest group activity in general.

The study reveals several things about NGO public affairs activity, the role of business in lobbying the EU, and EU lobbying in general. Specifically, it demonstrates as false both the perception that NGOs have gained in numbers over business and that NGO influence within the EU has increased and that this gain is at the expense of business. It does show, however, that recent changes in the EU policy making process brought about by increased EU competency and the resultant increase in lobbying activity, has changed the nature of lobbying by both business and NGOs. In particular, it has made lobbying more fluid and increased professionalism. At the same time, the study demonstrates that the basic, time-honored, constant elements of lobbying and lobby power—resources and building up personal relationships, among others—remain the keys to success.

“NGOs have become much more prominent in the public eye, in the press and in EU public affairs in recent years and the loser is business in terms of public image and political influence in the EU.”

Public Affairs Director, Major European Chemical Company.

The concerns expressed in this quote reflect a wide-spread belief that has developed within certain sections of the business community in recent years that NGOs (non-governmental organizations) such as environmental, animal welfare, poverty, human rights, and consumer groups among others, have grown significantly in prominence in Europe and particularly in their political impact within EU public affairs decision-making. This is accompanied by the belief, among many business people, that the rise in NGO political power has been at the expense of business effectiveness in EU policy making and that NGOs have secured an “insider” status with EU public officials, particularly in the Commission, that will further erode the political effectiveness of business in the years to come.

This concern about the apparent increased political power of NGOs, and what the future might hold for the political activity and particularly the political effectiveness of business, provided the impetus for the European Committee for Public Affairs of the Conference Board Europe to embark on a study of the role of NGOs in European public affairs. It is on the findings from this study that the bulk of this paper is based.⁽¹⁾ The findings provide the first extensive insights into the development, the extent, the strategy and tactics and the influence (or lack thereof) of the NGO sector as a lobbying force in the EU.

The paper begins by reviewing background literature, defining key terms, and explaining the methodology and data sources. It then identifies the major research questions and how these were formulated. The core of the paper, laid out in the next four sections, provide the results of the research from the three groups of respondents targeted in the study concluding with a summary section. Based on these findings, the concluding section places NGO lobbying activity in the context of lobbying in general and EU lobbying in particular for the insights and lessons it can provide.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE, DEFINITIONS, METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Background Literature

Although this study focused on business-NGO relations in the EU, the project methodology and analysis required knowledge of business-government and government-public interest group relations in general and an understanding of interest group activity in the EU plus group theory, particularly interest group power theory.

A search of both academic and popular sources revealed no research directly conducted on NGO-business relations within the EU or in any country. Certainly, much has been written on the role of NGOs as lobbying organizations particularly environmental groups and human rights organizations. Some of this research has been conducted in Europe (for example, Cullen, 1997; Harvey, 1993; Greenwood, 1997, esp. Chap. 8; Jordan, 1997; McCormick, 1996, 1997) but most has been produced in the United States (for example, Kraft, 1996; McFarland 1976, 1984; Rosenbaum, 1998; Willetts, 1982). Several studies and syntheses on business-government relations both in the EU and in the US. were also useful. Among these were: Greenwood (1997, Chap. 5), Mitchell (1997), Mucciaroni (1995), Perry (1995), Stacey and Sturdivant (1994), and Vogel (1989).

The major sources consulted on EU policy making and lobbying were: for the policy process in general, Nugent (1994), Donnelly (1993) and Fligstein and McNichol (1997); for lobbying EU institutions in general Greenwood (1997, esp. Chaps. 2 and 10) and Gardner (1991); and for lobbying the European Parliament Timmermans (1996) and Kohler-Koch and Schaber (1996). The work drawn on in regard to interest group power and the problems of assessing it were studies by Stone, Whelan and Murin (1986), Thomas (1997), Hrebenar and Thomas (1994, 1996), Mitchell (1997), Mucciaroni (1995) and Vogel (1989).

However, as will be evident below, the nature of this project was such that this literature (plus many other sources) was useful only as background material in helping to develop the project survey instruments and in synthesizing the survey results. As the project had no forerunner, the task of the primary researcher was to bring to bear knowledge of the various elements of the literature and methodologies involved in assessing group power to provide an understanding of the changing nature of NGO activity in the EU and particularly the changing influence of NGOs and its consequences for business.

NGO and Business: Diverse Sectors

The terms NGO and business are generic terms that need specification and a short review of the problems associated with using them in a general survey such as the one used here.

The term non-governmental organization or NGO has come to be applied in Western Europe, including the EU, to a wide-range of groups that focus on what can loosely be defined as issues of "broad public concern" such as the environment, human rights, child welfare and so on, as opposed to the specific interests of particular businesses, groups or sectors of society such as motor manufactures, school teachers or university students. While many, particularly in the business community, question the "public regarding" orientation of many NGOs, according to the results of our survey and other surveys, these organizations are perceived as more public oriented than most interest groups. In fact, in North America, particularly in the United States, the term public interest group is used to denote what Europeans often refer to as an NGO. The explanation of an NGO used in this study was as follows:

They include many groups and institutions that are entirely or largely independent of government and that have primarily humanitarian or cooperative rather than commercial objectives; they are private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interest of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development; they also include citizens groups that raise awareness and influence policies. (World Bank, 1989)

Some examples of NGOs active in EU public affairs are:

- Amnesty International -- EU Association
- Birdlife International
- Care International
- Climate Network Europe
- European Consumers' Organization
- Europe Citizen Action Service
- EUROGROUP -- Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- Friends of the Earth Europe
- Greenpeace International -- European Unit
- International Federation of Human Rights Leagues
- International Save the Children Alliance -- European Union
- Union of European Federalists
- World Wide Fund of Nature (WWF) -- Europe

All the above NGOs are political advocacy groups: they attempt to influence government by lobbying in some way. Not all NGOs are advocacy group; some, though a decreasing number, simply provide services. This investigation focuses only on advocacy NGOs.

However, like all NGOs, advocacy NGOs are far from a monolithic bloc of organizations with like-minded attitudes and similar approaches to public affairs. What characterizes NGOs more than anything is their wide diversity of structures, attitudes and modes of operation and not their similarities. NGOs are as diverse as all interest groups within a sector and in many ways as diverse as the business community itself. Some NGOs are small, some medium sized, some very large, some have one or two staff, some ten or twelve, some are large bureaucracies, some take government money, some do not. We really cannot generalize about NGOs.

Similarly, business is no monolith either, even though it is often referred as such, united in every attitude, in political purpose and in its reactions to challenges to its place in society. Beyond the general desire for an economic and political environment conducive to business operations, business has few things that unite it (Mitchell, 1997, Chap. 1). The business community is one of the most diverse in society. This is even true of the big business community. It ranges from multi-national chemical and energy companies to media and communication concerns and everything in between. Often there is conflict in attitude and political purpose and differences in reactions to challenges to its position. One need only recall that the media giants of the world, especially in Britain, gained much from the Brent Spar episode while Shell certainly did not gain and may have lost much. The point is that

we cannot talk of business reactions to situations such as NGOs in some general way that include all or even the majority of businesses; just as there is no general business attitude or reaction to unions or environmental protection or regulation of industry.

A diversity of attitudes within the business community on NGOs certainly came through in our investigation as did a diversity of attitudes among NGOs toward business. The sections below setting out the findings take account of this diversity.

Methodology and Data

The research method for this project combined three elements: (1) a survey component; (2) the survey was followed up with a series of interviews; and (3) existing research and writing was examined. We have already detailed the literature element so here we briefly explain the first two components and the data sources that resulted from them.

The Survey Questionnaires. Two surveys questionnaires were development to poll as wide a range of views as possible on the role of NGOs and their relations with business in EU public affairs. One of the questionnaires, containing 30 questions of both the "circle one of the following" and open-ended type, was developed and distributed to senior management business people of a broad range of businesses. This questionnaire was divided into four sections to obtain perspectives on (1) The Types and Extent of NGO Activity; (2) Strategies and Tactics used by NGOs and the General Political Effects of their Activity on EU Policy Making and Power Relationships; (3) The Political Effects of NGO Activity on Members' Public Affairs Operations; and (4) Methods used to Monitor NGO Activity and Strategies Used/Suggested to Counter their Operations. The second questionnaire, containing 20 questions, was distributed to various political practitioners and political observers including Commission staff, MEPs, Members of the Economic and Social Committee, interest group leaders, consultants, journalists and academics. With some slight variations this questionnaire was divided into similar sections and employed similar questions.

About 700 surveys were sent out with a return rate of about 20 percent. A follow-up survey on the subject of U.S. groups lobbying in the EU, and based upon 300 of the original target groups, also included questions on the role of NGOs and resulted in a 40 percent return rate.(2)

The Interviews. After the first survey was returned, a series of interviews were conducted amounting to 35 in all. Fifteen of these were conducted with survey respondents who had expressed an interest on their survey in following up with an interview so that we could obtain more detailed information as well as confidential information that was not appropriate to be committed to paper. Another 20 interviews were held with NGO leaders and public affairs personnel. NGO officials had not been sent a survey; but we wanted to gain their reactions to our major findings from the surveys and to get their general impressions of the NGO-business

relationship. Among the NGOs who agreed to talk to us were Amnesty International, Care, EUROGROUP--Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and several environmental groups including the World Wildlife Fund, the European Environmental Bureau and Greenpeace. The survey on U.S. groups lobbying in the EU was also followed up by 52 interviews and questions on NGOs asked on those interviewed.

In total approximately 35 percent of the original target group of 700 returned survey or were interviewed on the role of NGOs in the EU. It is upon these surveys and interviews that this paper is based.⁽³⁾ The duration of the data gathering portion of the project was from May 1997 until March 1998. Three additional comments should be made about the data.

First, it is very difficult in a written survey response for business people, for other people, and for an investigation like ours to distinguish between NGO activity in the sphere of public affairs and that in the broader context of everyday life. In answering our questionnaire, for example, it was clear that most respondents gave their general perceptions and often did not distinguish between the two spheres of NGO activity which often are closely interrelated. Thus, often we had to extrapolate information on NGO activity in public affairs from general comments as well as those made specifically on their public affairs activity. We were, of course, able to address this distinction directly in our interviews. Even so, what this means for the information in this paper is that comments and perceptions and the analysis of these often may or may not include elements of both spheres of NGO activity.

Second, other than the academics who can be assumed to be objective, it might be argued that EU officials and political observers may have some biases and the NGO officials certainly will, to the extent that neither of these groups are an accurate judge of the realities of recent NGO operations in the EU. No doubt there is some truth in this. But we believe that the range of officials and NGO leaders we heard from or interviewed was broad enough to allow us to account for such bias. The repetition of certain attitudes in survey responses and in interviews is evidence that we did elicit an accurate picture of the role of NGOs in EU public affairs. And, the promise of non-attribution of statements in interviews produced some frank statements that lead us to believe in the authenticity of our results.

Third, and regarding this guarantee of non-attribution, as with many, perhaps most, surveys and investigations involving the sensitivities of politics and opinions about political friends and foes, we could only ensure the frankness and information we needed by guaranteeing anonymity to many of our survey respondents and those we interviewed. Non-attribution of sources, while not preferable, is often necessary in this type of political research especially in the highly sensitive area of interest group strategies and tactics.

THE MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEIR FORMULATION

As explained in the introduction to the paper, the impetus for this study came from the European Committee for Public Affairs of the Conference Board Europe. The Committee is composed of about fifty public affairs directors and deputy directors from large and medium-sized European firms and foreign businesses with European affiliates that engage in lobbying EU institutions. The member firms range from Dow Chemical, Akzo Nobel and Phillips Industries to British Telecom, Nestlé and Waste Management International and many lesser known companies. Thus, the Committee comprises the most concentrated grouping of big and medium-sized business public affairs and lobbying personnel in the EU. The Committee meets twice a year for a two day session for educational purposes and to discuss matters of mutual concern. From time to time the Committee commissions research projects

The increased press coverage of NGOs, events like Brent Spar and the increased visibility of NGOs in EU public affairs raised many concerns among Committee members during the mid-1990s about the increased role of NGOs and their influence in EU policy making. In early 1997 this concern led the Committee to commission a study on the role of NGOs and what was perceived to be "their new role and influence in EU public affairs." A discussion at the 1996-97 winter meeting of the Committee identified four major points of concern about the role of NGOs as they related to the role of business in EU public affairs. There were:

1. NGO political influence has increased in the past five to ten years and this has been at the expense of business influence.
2. NGOs have obtained a sort of "insider status" with EU officials, most notably in the Commission and particularly through the so-called "consultative process"(4) and this has been to the detriment of business.
3. This insider status enables NGOs to set the policy agenda in several areas of EU policy.
4. For a variety of reasons, NGO leaders have been given special status by EU officials in recent years and this partly explains the success of NGOs in EU public affairs.

In addition, two other points came through in the discussion that were not identified as problems but were underlying perceptions among many of the Committee members that also warranted investigation in an attempt to understand the role of NGOs in the EU policy process and how this related to business. There two were:

5. NGOs were spoken of and seen as a monolithic bloc of organizations with similar outlooks toward business.
6. That conflict and not cooperation is often the relationship between NGOs and business.

The survey instruments and interview format were constructed to illicit answers to the four main concerns (points 1-4) and to throw light on the two additional perceptions (5 and 6). In addition, other questions were added on the original survey and the U.S.-EU lobbying survey to obtain more general information about the role of NGOs in EU policy making.

In the next four sections we examine the results of the survey by three categories of respondents—business, NGO officials, and political practitioners and political observers—and then summarize the results.

BUSINESS PERCEPTION OF NGOs IN THE EU POLICY-MAKING PROCESS

The project results revealed that the perceptions of the members of the European Committee for Public Affairs were only partially the general feeling of business toward NGOs and their changing role in EU policy making.

In fact, we found a gamut of attitudes toward NGOs in the business community. One business would have a negative attitude to some NGOs and not to others; some businesses have a negative attitude to one or more NGOs and another business has a positive attitude toward the same NGO or NGOs; and so on. Differences in business attitudes to NGOs, as to any organization or situation, results from several factors. These include: whether the respondent follows NGOs in general, a little or not at all; their sources of information on NGOs; the amount of contact they have with NGOs in their business or public affairs activity; and if they have contact with NGOs, their view will likely be shaped by these organizations and their experiences with them and particularly with the leadership. It is this last point which appears to be the most significant, as we might expect, in determining business peoples' attitude to NGOs or at least certain NGOs. In other words, the type of business a person works for is a major determinant in their attitude to NGOs.

Despite this gamut of perspectives, we did discern three broad ranges of attitudes toward NGOs. These were as follows:

Group 1: The Slightly Negatives

About one third of our business respondents expressed some negative attitudes toward NGOs from a business perspective. Some expressed very negative attitudes. All of Group I were most likely to see NGOs as having gained a special place in the consciousness of the public in EU countries, gained privileges in the public affairs sphere, as setting policy agendas, having increased their power at the expense of business in recent years, and they generally had a pessimistic view of future developments in the business-NGO relationship.

Looking more closely at this group, they tended to be, as we might suspect, those from companies (energy, chemicals, etc.) that have had negative experiences with some but certainly not all NGOs.

Even among this group, however, there was a distinction made between certain NGOs and others. Most have good relations with and a positive attitude to some NGOs. They use them as a sounding board on proposed policies, etc. Virtually all this group reserved their most negative comments for Greenpeace which they saw as obstructionist and publicity-seeking and as a form of "business" rather than an NGO.

Group 2: The Neutrals

A second group, also about a third of total business respondents, were more or less neutral. These for the most part also saw NGOs as having gained a special place in the consciousness of the public in EU countries and gained some privileges in the public affairs sphere. But they were less likely to see NGOs as setting policy agendas, as having increased their power at the expense of business, and they generally had a neutral view or no view at all of future developments in the business-NGO relationship.

Looking more closely at this group, they tended to be from companies that had had very little contact with NGOs or had had positive experiences with them such as automobile, transportation and information technology companies.

Again, among this group there was a distinction made between certain NGOs and others. Most who have relations with NGOs have good relations and a positive attitude to most NGOs. Cooperation and not conflict was the dominant mode of their relationship with NGOs. But again, virtually all this group reserved their most negative comments for Greenpeace. Though in this case it was less a result of personal experiences than information obtained through the media.

Group 3: The Positives

The final group of business respondents and interviewees held a basically positive attitude toward NGOs. These, for the most part, also saw NGOs as having gained a special place in the consciousness of the public in EU countries but had mixed views on whether or not NGOs had gained privileges in the public affairs sphere. They were less likely to see NGOs as setting policy agendas; and some of them saw business power as having increased in the EU more than NGO power in recent years. More often than not these respondents had no view on future developments in the business-NGO relationship.

This group also tended to be those from companies that had had very little contact with NGOs or had had positive experiences with them, such as media, shipping and service companies. Virtually all in this group who have relations with NGOs have a cooperative and not a conflictual relationship with them. Again, however, when this group mentioned negative comments on an NGO it was usually Greenpeace. Though, as with the Neutral group, this was less a result of personal experiences than information obtained through the media.

The Extent of the Interest of Business in NGO Activity

Two pieces of information that we were interested in acquiring in our investigation was the extent to which businesses monitored NGO activity and the strategies and tactics they used to counter negative actions by NGOs in the public affairs arena.

The results here were surprising. We had thought that incidents like Brent Spar and other well-publicized incidents involving human rights, third world labor, etc., would have galvanized many companies into actively monitoring and strategizing to counter negative NGO activity that affected their business. This was generally not the case.

Whether they may begin to do so in the future is a moot point; but currently most businesses do not monitor NGOs much. Our consideration of the three groups of business respondents to our survey above reveals part of the reason: most businesses do not have much contact with NGOs and what they do have is basically positive and cooperative. So they feel little need to make special provisions for monitoring NGO activity.

In short, NGOs are of much less concern to most businesses than we had anticipated. Most public affairs people who monitor NGO activity do it, not as part of a formal process in their organization but as a sideline in their job or through the media. Consequently, as few businesses formally monitor NGO activity or are affected negatively by them, we got very little information on how they counteract NGO activity in public affairs. The best advice was: "Don't let it get to a conflict level with NGOs" and if it does "Don't try to fight them in the press."

NGO LEADERS' ATTITUDES TO BUSINESS AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ORGANIZATIONS IN THE EU POLICY-MAKING PROCESS

Having examined the attitudes and perceptions of business toward NGOs, we now turn to the attitudes of NGO leaders toward business and business activity in the public affairs sphere, and their perceptions to the role of NGOs in general and their own organization's role in the EU policy making process.

Again, however, we must caution that there are various levels at which NGOs interact with business in the general society and in the public affairs sphere. This varies based on many factors: type of business product, the origin and goals of a particular NGO, the issues at hand, the point in time, etc. With this caveat in mind, we can make comments about the attitudes of NGOs and their leaders in three areas: (1) Attitudes to Business in General; (2) Business in Public Affairs Compared with that of NGOs; and (3) The NGO Official--Business Leader Relationship.

Attitudes to Business in General

Overall, we can say that NGO leaders have a very positive attitudes toward business. They are all fully aware of the importance of business to society and the reality of a capitalist/free enterprise system. Particular leaders have a skepticism, as we might expect, of some of the motives of business and the problems endemic in the profit motive, but generally the attitude is positive.

Cooperation and the existence of good relations marks the mode of conduct of most NGO leaders with business and the business people they deal with. Again, there are variations; but the more professional the leadership of NGOs, the more likely that there is a cooperative, give and take relationship. Our investigation revealed that even Greenpeace needs and works with businesses in a cooperative mode, much more than in the highly publicized conflict mode that is common perception among the public. Overall, no NGO leader suggested that conflict should be the mode of NGO-business relations. Some commented that conflict was inevitable in many circumstances but that good relations can deal with these. It should also be borne in mind that business is a major funding source for many NGOs such as the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) and this obviously leads to a more cooperative attitude to business than might be the case with NGOs not funded by business.

Several NGO leaders told us how they were sought out by business for various reasons. These include: to act as a sounding board on issues and proposed actions; to cooperate in humanitarian or other initiatives that the business had; or just to keep abreast of developments in the NGO fields that affected them. All NGO leaders appreciated this and saw these dialogues as very productive.

Attitudes to Business in Public Affairs and in Relations to NGO Lobbying Activity

Perhaps with the exception of Greenpeace, no NGO leader or public affairs person we talked to saw their organization as a match for business in the public affairs sphere. The reason for this is that NGO officials see their resources as minimal compared to those that business can amass and that they are no match for business on this score. But the more professional and moderate NGOs do not see this as a real problem; while the more radical and, often less professional NGOs do.

Regarding NGO officials' reactions to the specific concerns of business, we can summarize these as follows:

NGOs represent a sort of public consciousness.

Most NGO officials say this is true in many ways. The people we interviewed at Greenpeace went so far as to say that "Greenpeace is seen as the environmental conscience of Europeans."

NGOs activity has expanded greatly in EU public affairs in recent years.
NGO officials say “yes” it has expanded but far less than business activity.

NGOs have gained a kind of privileged status (an “insider status”) with EU officials in recent years.

All say “no”. In fact, they argue quite the reverse. Here’s what they say:

Up until the mid-1980s, many NGOs could set agendas because they were the only people interested in an issue and the amount of lobbying was minimal. In particular, as there was usually no legislation on a subject—say animal welfare, or clean water—they could propose it and officials would invite them to help write the legislation and regulations. It was relatively easy to get such things enacted. But now more and more groups are involved with every issue, business has woken-up and brings major resources to bear; there is dissension within various NGOs such as the environmental community. Now NGOs are mostly reacting to policies already developed and this is more difficult to do given the number of players involved. As one environmental NGO leader told us: “It is much more difficult to change things incrementally than to get an entire law passed.”

The consultative forum gives NGOs a special insider status.

Definitely not say NGO officials. The amplification was as follows:

In strict confidence, and without exception, the officials we interviewed saw the consultative forum as largely a waste of time. It was good for getting some general information and for expressing “general views.” But there is no substitute, they told us, for one-on-one contact with EU officials. The personal contact, trust and credibility weapons were the most important ones that they had in their arsenal when it came to attempting to get their point over to EU officials.

NGOs have come to set political agenda in the EU.

Again, most NGO officials disagree for the reasons just explained.

NGOs have gained political power in the EU in recent years.

Most NGO officials disagree. Here is what they say:

Most NGOs see themselves as victims of an increasing bureaucracy at the EU level, with more complexity, and this undermines their influence. Some NGO officials comment on a pro-professionalism, pro-business, pro-increased efficiency in some D-Gs toward NGOs, for example D-G XI. This, they say, puts them at a disadvantage with business.

Furthermore, some NGO leaders see their power within their organization being diluted by an old EU problem--EU interest versus the national interests of member states. This comes through time and time again: the national desire to get their share of moneys in the NGO field, e.g. through the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and other organizations. Germans do not want to pay 40% of a budget and only get 20% back, etc. especially if they see another country paying less and getting more of its share. Again, this is not true of the situation with all NGOs, but it is with some.

NGOs are on the ascendancy and will gain over time in political power in the EU at the expense of business.

Not really, say most NGO officials. Those interest groups and lobbies with resources will be most prominent in the future as in the past and this means business most of the time. Though some did mention, especially the Greenpeace people, that social changes and attitudes may affect this in terms of more pressure on business by NGOs to comply with many of the public demands of NGOs in the environmental, human rights, animal welfare fields, etc.

The NGO Official--Business Leader Relationship

What clearly came through from talking to many—but by no means all—NGO officials is that the more professional ones view business leaders and public affairs personnel not so much in “us” and “them” terms but as professionals. Often NGO leaders have more in common with their business counterparts than with many of their members or board personnel.

So here personality and professionalism appear to be becoming increasingly important. “Good relations” are the key as one NGO leader put it to us. “And this often surpasses issues and problem—you’ve got to have good relations to get things done.” Again, the time-honored factors of personal relationships, trust and credibility come through in lobbying and in the public affairs arena in general.

POLITICAL PRACTITIONER AND POLITICAL OBSERVERS PERCEPTIONS OF NGOs IN THE EU POLICY-MAKING PROCESS

Of our three categories of respondents, political practitioners and political observers was the one that enabled us to assess most objectively the perceptions of business about NGO activity in the EU and to give us a broad view of NGO activity in general. This category accounted for 39 percent of our survey returns and interviews and was composed of two groups: (1) Political practitioners—EU officials from the Commission, other executive agencies and the Parliament. group leaders (other than from NGOs), and political consultants; and (2) Political Observers—mainly academics, journalists, former EU officials, former public affairs personnel, and non-member government officials based in Brussels. Here we summarize the findings from both groups in this category.

Political Practitioners

NGOs represent a sort of public consciousness.
Most political practitioners agree. Many EU officials certainly see these groups as representing a sort of “public pulse.”

NGOs activity has expanded greatly in EU public affairs in recent years.
They say it has expanded but far less than business activity in terms of numbers and lobbying activity.

NGOs have gained a kind of privileged status (an "insider status") with EU officials in recent years.

EU officials say "no" as one might expect. But they do admit that they have more contact with NGOs than before.

The consultative forum gives NGOs a special insider status.

A resounding "no" from EU officials as one might also expect. Other political practitioners generally had no opinion on this question.

NGOs have come to set political agenda in the EU.

Again, EU officials disagree strongly. But in the case of the relief NGOs dealing with crises in Africa and elsewhere, such as CARE International, this is the case. Our interview at ECHO revealed this.

NGOs have gained political power in the EU in recent years and this has been at the expense of business.

Here opinions are mixed on whether NGOs have gained power. No real clear opinion. But where opinions are expressed, most practitioners disagree that this has been at the expense of business. They see business power as still dominant and increasing. They also point out that it depends on the business and its relationship to NGOs and to specific NGOs in particular.

Cooperation and not conflict is the major mode of business-NGO relations.

Those familiar with internal business-NGO relations say this appears to be the mode. EU officials see their job in relation to the NGO-business relationship as promoting cooperation to deal with the many and interrelated issues currently facing the EU

NGOs are on the ascendancy and will gain over time in political power in the EU at the expense of business.

No real opinions here. One EU official did point out that as the role of government changes in the years to come, NGOs may well be one sector that will pick up some of the things that government sheds. This will obviously give NGOs an increased status with government including EU institutions.

Political Observers

NGOs represent a sort of public consciousness.

Most see some truth in this.

NGO activity has expanded greatly in EU public affairs in recent years.

It has expanded but far less than business activity in terms of number of groups and organizations.

NGOs have gained a kind of privileged status (an “insider status”) with EU officials in recent years.

Most disagree.

NGOs have come to set political agenda in the EU.

Again, most disagree.

NGOs have gained political power in the EU in recent years and this had been at the expense of business.

Here opinions are mixed. Some academics caution not to confuse visibility—which has definitely increased—with power. Others point out that the increased pluralism robs most groups of long-term effective influence.

The consultative forum gives NGOs a special insider status.

Not a subject on which this group had knowledge.

Cooperation and not conflict is the major mode of business-NGO relations.

Again, this group has no knowledge of internal NGO-business relationships

NGOs are on the ascendancy and will gain over time in political power in the EU at the expense of business.

No real opinion from academics. But other political observers saw an increasing public consciousness favoring NGOs and increased resources going their way from both the public and government. This may alter the NGO-business relationship to increase cooperation between the two entities.

INTEGRATING THE FINDINGS AND EXPLAINING THE MISCONCEPTIONS

When we integrate the finding from the three groups we surveyed—business, NGOs and political practitioners and observers—it is clear that the beliefs underlying the impetus for the study are largely misconceptions and myths. They are at best misunderstandings of the role of NGOs in EU public affairs and NGO relations with business and at worst they are erroneous beliefs. The reality is more as follows.

The Question of NGO Power

It is far from clear that the political power of NGOs has increased in the past five to ten years. Some may be confusing increased visibility of NGOs with increased power—but visibility does not necessarily mean increased political influence. Moreover, several of our surveys and interviews indicate that business has, for the most part, not lost power in the EU public affairs arena to NGOs or any other organizations during the past five to ten years.

“Insider Status” and the Consultative Forum

Neither EU officials nor NGO leaders see NGOs as having any “insider status.” Furthermore, most NGO officials see the consultative process promoted by the Commission as largely at best a chance to voice an opinion and at worst a waste of time and certainly not a means to give them special status or an advantage over business.

Have NGO Leaders Been Given Special Status by EU Officials?

Specific to NGO leaders as opposed to NGOs in general, there is no evidence that these leaders have been given special status by EU public officials. What is evident, however, is that NGO officials have become increasingly professional over the last ten years or so in their approach to EU public affairs and this makes them more valuable to EU officials as information sources, sounding boards, and so on. But increased professionalism does not necessarily mean increased influence especially when increased professionalism is taking place among all major players in EU public affairs.

Do NGOs set the Policy Agenda?

Similarly, neither EU officials, NGO leaders nor other political observers see NGOs as setting the policy agenda in their respective policy areas in the late 1990s. In fact, the reality is that due to the increase in the number of groups and organizations lobbying in the EU in recent years, NGOs have less control over agendas today than the little control they had in the past. Evidence from our survey clearly shows this.

NGOs Are No Monolithic Bloc

We have clearly shown this throughout the paper. The business community, political practitioners and political observers plus NGO officials all attest to this.

Cooperation and Not Conflict is the Usual Business-NGO Relationship

The general mode of NGO-business relations is not conflict but cooperation. This comes through time and time again in our survey. NGOs can be a real ally and reality check for businesses when they are considering certain policies. Thus, NGOs can often be a friend and for this reason are often sought out by businesses. Furthermore, many NGOs receive funding, sometimes the bulk of their funding, from business and this very much encourages a cooperative relationship between them and business.

NGOs Will be in the Ascendancy in the Future at the Expense of Business

This was the concern on which we received the least substantive comments. The general impression, however, was that while NGOs are gaining increasing public awareness and some increased attention from EU officials, the importance and resources of business, plus the resilience of the business community, will at least

enable business to maintain its political power and likely not change the business-NGO power relationship that much.

Finally, regarding our findings overall, one indicator of their accuracy can be found in the business community itself. If we take the Neutral and Positive groups of our business respondents and interviewees (listed earlier), this is how they assessed these major concerns. As these two groups were not generally involved with NGOs or had positive relations with them, we can see these return as more or less accurate.

Explaining the Misperceptions of Business in Regard to NGOs

Given these myths and the actual realities, we can ask why have many business people and others come to hold these misconceptions? There are many reasons but six, interrelated factors appear to be particularly important.

1. Increased Press Coverage of NGOs

Press coverage of NGOs, from which most people—including business people—get their knowledge of NGO activity, focuses on the spectacular and, most often, the conflict aspects of NGO-business relations. These include incidents like Brent Spar, conflicts between the chemical industry and NGOs fighting toxic chemicals and the use of prison labor in China. And some NGOs are getting more adept at distributing information through their press offices and some of this may affect business people negatively. This, of course, is particularly true of Greenpeace.

2. The Greenpeace Factor

One particular NGO, Greenpeace in Europe, because of its style of operation of gaining front page publicity for many of its actions and its often confrontational style, has had a great impact among many business people as to the success of NGOs, their public support and their mode of operation. Thus, many view NGOs through the Greenpeace prism and get a distorted, oversimplified and often unfairly negative view of NGOs as a whole.

3. NGOs as Scapegoats

With the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty, major changes began to take place in the EC/EU. In short, as the result of the increase in EU policy responsibility a major expansion occurred in the EU bureaucracy, the role of Parliament, the number of consultative and policy committees and, in particular, the number of groups and organizations, both from member and non-member states, that lobby EU institutions. With this increased pluralism in the Union there is less exclusiveness of contact with public officials as these are now obliged to listen to many voices; there is less certainty of policy outcomes; and there is thus concern on the part of all groups and organizations that they have less political control and impact than they once had. Certain sectors of the business community feel this very acutely. Consequently, many business people look around and, seeing the increased

prominence of NGOs, often see them as the culprits of the perceived lost status and political impact of business in EU public affairs activity.

4. The Composition of the European Committee on Public Affairs

Many of the members of the European Committee on Public Affairs who expressed the concern about NGOs tend to be from large businesses with several from energy and chemical companies which come into contact and often conflict with certain NGOs. This likely biased the Committee's concerns and formulation of the research questions. As designated above, many members of the Committee would fall into the "Slightly Negatives" or "Neutral" categories of business attitudes to NGOs.

5. Erroneously Equating Increased Visibility and Activity with Influence

We have mentioned this phenomenon several times before. Evidence from an on-going extensive survey on interest group power in the United States (Thomas and Hrebener, 1994, 1996) indicates that often lobbyists involved in a particular policy area assume that because their opponents are visible or increase their lobbying effort that this also means that their power has increased. Often, too, survey respondents confuse visibility and increased lobbying with power. This may, in part, account for some of the feelings among the members of the European Committee for Public Affairs that NGOs had increased in power. They accurately saw more activity on the part of NGOs, closer ties with their leaders and public officials, NGOs being invited to sit on consultative forums, and the increased professionalism of NGO leaders, and assumed that this all added up to more influence at the expense of business.

6. The Tendency of Powerful Lobbyists and Interests to Underestimate their Power and Overestimate that of their Opponents

Also based on the American study, cited above, plus others conducted in the United States, powerful interests regularly underestimate their influence and overestimate that of their opponents. That they do so is verified by surveys and interviews of public officials and other observers within that political system which counter the views of these lobbyists and interest group leaders. Added to this, there is a general reluctance on the part of business lobbyists and those representing professional groups to assess power relationships in which they are involved. This is understandable given the delicate nature of politics.

There is no direct evidence to demonstrate that these intentional or subliminal factors were at work when the members of the European Committee for Public Affairs of the Conference Board Europe formulated their perceptions of the role of NGOs in EU public affairs. However, findings from the survey plus the four factors listed above, do strongly suggest that this mind-set was at work in developing their perceptions.

CONCLUSIONS: THREE LEVELS OF INSIGHTS

The results of this study provide insights on interest group activity and lobbying at three levels: (1) the activity of lobbying in general; (2) the changing nature of lobbying in the EU; and (3) the specific role of NGOs as a lobbying force and, to a lesser extent, the role of business in EU lobbying.

The study demonstrates some common denominators in lobbying across western democracies, and likely all political systems. Despite major developments and the use of new techniques, including the professionalization of the process, resources—particularly money, labor and time—and building up long-term personal relationships are key. This should not surprise us, but the confirmation is enlightening.

The insights that the study provides on changes in EU lobbying over the last decade brings to mind the adage, “the more things change the more they remain the same.” This is in regard to the fact that, while new realities of policy making and demands by public officials have affected the professionalism and spawned new techniques of lobbying, the fundamental, time-honored elements of lobbying, as related in the last paragraph, remain as important, and in some cases, more important than ever. A more accurate way to view this apparent contradiction, however, is that lobbying in the EU has moved to a new level of development from which there is no turning back. Like developments at the federal and state level in the United States, where similar transitions have taken place since the late 1960s, this can be seen as a new layer of operating techniques necessitated by major political changes laid upon and gradually fused with the fundamentals of the perennial human contact and resource elements of lobbying.

As to the specific level of NGOs and business lobbying activity, the study reveals that both sectors have been caught in the midst of these recent developments of EU political and policy change and increased sophistication of lobbying activity. In this regard, they provide two fairly typical case studies of these changes and their implications. Both sectors have increased their activity, developed new techniques to adjust to new policy demands and generally have more professional public affairs personnel than ten to fifteen years ago.

On the other hand, both sectors find themselves in a reactive mode to the increasing pluralism in the EU policy making arena. The stability of the 1960s to mid-1980s has gone and this change is causing some soul searching within both sectors. But despite the fears of some sectors of the business community, that these changes have enabled NGOs to gain power and undermined business effectiveness, this appears not to be the case. This is because, while recent changes have been extensive, they have not altered the general symbiotic relationship between business and government and the resources that business can bring to bear in the political arena. With very few exceptions, NGOs have not matched this symbiotic relationship with government nor can they amass similar resources for political purposes. And although there is an increasing public awareness that NGOs can draw upon as a political resource, it is unlikely that this will be enough, even if well

exploited, to enable NGOs to match the effectiveness of business in EU policy making circles in the near future.

NOTES

1. The author would like to thank the European Committee for Public Affairs of the Conference Board Europe for the opportunity to be the major researcher on this project and for their permission to add several questions to the written survey instruments and the structured interview format to enable him to gather comprehensive data on the role of NGOs as a lobbying force in the EU beyond that desired by the Committee.
2. This second survey was conducted as part of the authors Fulbright funded project on U.S. interests lobbying in the European Union. It was carried out between September 1997 and March 1998 with follow-up questionnaires and interviews in the United States in the summer of 1998.
3. The author would like to thank Mr. Symon Visser, Special Assistant to the Committee for his help in the survey research and the interviews for this project.
4. The consultative process was developed by many D-Gs and other EU agencies to deal with the increased demand on them resulting from the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty. These forums include representatives from various groups and sectors to provide Commission officials with policy input ideas and to enable them to disseminate information as efficiently as possible. For example, rather than meeting separately with all seven of the major environmental groups lobbying in Brussels, the so-called G-7, D-G XI has set up a consultative forum that involves them, though Greenpeace rarely attends.

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