

European Industry Beyond the Single Market: How can we Understand European-Level Collective Action?

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Research into European level interest representation has mushroomed in recent years. Much of this effort has been directed at case studies of business sectors (Gardner, 1991; Greenwood, Grote and Ronit, 1992; van Schendelen, 1993; Mazey and Richardson, 1993; Pedler and van Schendelen, 1994; Greenwood, 1995), identifying patterns of private interest involvement in sectoral governance and collective action. This case study based research has provided the foundations for development to further, more theoretical, stages in the research process. In particular there is now a good empirical basis for theoretical development in sectoral governance involving private interests, and the dynamics of collective action at the European level. In these notes we draw upon insights from case study research of business sectors to present tentative ideas, and suggestions for further research, for the study of European level collective action. More precisely, the focus of our interest is the conditions under which competition and collaboration occur between intra sectoral groups and fora operating at the European level.

Recent research has confirmed some of the more obvious influences upon European level collective action to include industrial concentration, multinationalisation, fragmentation, sectoral definition, and the degree of promotion and regulation of business activity at the European level (Pedler and van Schendelen, 1994; Greenwood, 1995). Hence, fragmented domains characterised by a large number of SMEs, and where there is a lack of Euro competencies, tend to have low levels of European organisation. Unsurprisingly, the reverse is also true; concentrated, well defined sectors enjoying a high degree of activities from the European Commission have generally well developed representative organs in Brussels. Yet beyond these factors little is certain about collective action at the transnational (European Union) level of organisation, and theories of collective action (such as Olson's classic theory (1965)) tend to have been addressed at the national level of organisation. There is thus a theoretical void in the study of transnational collective action.

The issue of competition and collaboration has been at the centre of much of the recent debate about European level interest representation. In a seminal contribution, Streeck and Schmitter (1991) foresaw Washington like competition between groups operating in Brussels because of the failure of a European super state to foster Euro corporatism; instead, 'pluralism at the EU' was predicted, along with the disruption to national level corporatisms caused by the development of Euro competencies. It is hard to disagree with Streeck and Schmitter's analysis in one sense, because the agenda they had in mind was that of macro corporatism, where the conditions for its existence are unquestionably not present at the European level.

Despite Streeck and Schmitter having little to say about the meso, or sectoral, level, 'pluralism at the EU' has stuck in the minds of a number of authors (Lewin, 1992; 1994; Hix, 1994), reinforced by a parallel (but in our view quite separate) debate about the posited weakness of European associations, and the continued importance of dialogue between national groups and the Commission. The result has been a lasting impression among some authors of 'competition' between interest groups operating in the European Union context. In fact, as we illustrate later, even where multi representative agencies are present within the same domain there can be a high degree of collaboration, and of complementarity in relating to the European institutions. We argue that 'competition' and 'collaboration' are not mutually exclusive terms, and from there suggest a number of hypotheses to investigate the conditions under which competition and collaboration occur between intra sectoral business groups operating at the European level.

Collective Action at the European Level: the Euro-Fed

Until recently, the most common collective form of organisation for business interests was the European federation of national associations. Without doubt, this highly federated structure proved cumbersome in a number of cases, and platform building was often difficult or impossible, resulting in the collapse of some 'super federations'. McLaughlin and Jordan (1992) have wondered 'why are Euro groups so numerous and so weak'; while McLaughlin has entitled a conference paper 'Underfed Euro Feds'. Grant (1990; 1993) has, meanwhile, suggested that the difficulties of Euro federations results in a restriction of their value. The generalisability of the 'weak Euro federations' thesis has elsewhere been challenged (Greenwood, Grote and Ronit, 1992; Greenwood and Ronit, 1994; Jordan & Wadsworth, 1995). A number of successful federated Euro-groups clearly exist, facilitated by particular sectoral, policy and organisational conditions (see for example Greenwood (1995) on the conditions prevailing in the pharmaceutical sector where a strong Euro-federation operates; and case studies on retailing (Jordan and Wadsworth, 1995) and cement (Molins, 1995)). Nevertheless, such structures do have an in built difficulty in trying to reach meaningful positions, because of the high degree of compromise which arises from compositing the views of national associations, whose positions are themselves the result of compromises between member firms. Yet, although an increasingly wide range of collective fora have begun to emerge at the European level, the 'super federation' is still a common organisational structure for business sectoral representation in Europe.

What then is the incentive for collective action via the Euro-federation and to what extent is this type of organisation under threat from new forms of collective action amongst firms? Contrary to Olson's predictions, collective fora have continued to grow (Dunleavy, 1991) and to grow quickly at the European level. These include formal associations, including both federations of national federations and direct firm membership associations, and informal fora and ad hoc alliances between individual firms. One of the most startling developments in the area of business involvement at the European level has been the rapid growth of collective fora for allowing the direct participation of firms. Firms are often members of both industry-wide organisations and of more sectorally or issue specific collective fora. Few, if any, of these organisations offer material selective incentives (as traditionally understood) for membership, defying Olson's (1965) classic formulation of the logic of collective action.

Olson's work is very difficult to apply at the transnational level of organisation. A first reason for this is that the highly federated nature of some Euro groups makes it difficult to conceive of constituent members contributing rational choices. Rather, choice of membership may be made by national representative organisations of firms, whose reasons to associate at the European level may differ from those of their members, such as the need for credibility among members (a point we develop below), or, for example, the opportunity to develop careers among members of the secretariat. Second, Olson's conceptualisation of firm behaviour was based upon a model which anticipated that companies seeking maximum profits would act with a 'pure' rationality, which more sophisticated theories of firm behaviour have challenged. Jordan and McLaughlin (1992), applying the work of Cyert and March (1955) and Simon (1958) to the European context, have argued that a more useful conceptualisation of firms operating in the European business environment is that of actors behaving within the constraints of "bounded rationality" in an uncertain and unpredictable environment. Thus the "logic of collective action" is not solely dictated by the desire to receive traditional, material, "selective incentives". The selective benefits of group membership come to be recognised as those factors which reduce uncertainty in the business environment and which maximise the ability of any individual firm to influence developments within this rapidly changing environment. How then might these insights contribute to our understanding of the variety of collective fora emerging at the European level and to our understanding of the complex web of relationships between these organisations and between them and their constituent members?

The Rationality of Collective Action at the European Level; Information needs and the costs of non membership.

Jordan and McLaughlin (1992) have sought to explain the rationality of collective action at the European level by reference to the costs of non membership, and in particular to the inability of firms not represented in associations to influence collective sectoral positions. Thus, following a case study of the automobiles sector, they reflect that 'the free rider cannot expect to steer the vehicle' (p.18). The perceived costs of non membership is clearly a key factor in driving collective action at the European level, as is the need to influence group policies. Jordan and McLaughlin (1992) also emphasise the important role which Euro-groups play in the 'bulk-buying of information' not normally accessible to individual companies at an acceptable price. The importance of information in providing an 'early warning' (Jordan and McLaughlin (1992)) system for firms has been further developed by Vipond (1995) who argues that a crucial concern for firms is the collection of information about conditions in the single market, which is perhaps the greatest influence upon membership of certain types of collective fora.

Firms seeking to take advantage of the single market by moving into new (and perhaps previously protected), unfamiliar market territories need to network to gather intelligence about market conditions. This need for information has driven firm strategies in the run up to 1992, and a series of mergers, acquisitions, strategic alliances and temporary locations in new market areas (Jacquemin and Wright, 1994) has been evident. Similarly, taking advantage of opportunities for public procurement bidding in new territories requires information about standards of service cultures, employment practices and price traditions. Access to this type of information is clearly crucial for firms acting within the constraints of 'bounded rationality' and seeking to minimise the uncertainty of the environment in which they operate. In order to ensure the availability of consistent, reliable sources of information, firms need to network: both with representatives from other firms, and with the European institutions.

It therefore follows that firms need to enjoy membership, either directly or through their national associations, of relevant European associations, almost irrespective of the ability of the associations to platform build and represent interests. To not belong would risk deprivation of information which could be crucial to business prosperity. However, while the costs of non-membership (i.e.: the loss of influence and the loss of information) may help to explain the survival of many "underfed Euro-feds", questions arise as to the capacity of these organisations to continue to sustain their membership as new collective fora emerge. Among the comparative advantages some of these latter organisations enjoy

might be included greater access to channels of power; a more streamlined organisational structure, capable of reaching more meaningful decisions more quickly, and of taking more effective action; and the potential to access information before it reaches the Euro-fed. To what extent will the Euro-feds be forced into competition with the newly emerging collective fora and to what extent will a type of collaboration be forged between these bodies? The various factors which will influence this outcome require investigation.

The Rise of Alternative Collective Fora

Whilst the need to network for information purposes might sustain otherwise weak and incoherent sectoral associations, firms which have a direct interest in influencing policy development have begun to build more effective fora themselves. Thus a number of sectors now display more than one representative format in Europe. There is clearly a need to examine the range of collective fora which is emerging as well as how and why firms choose to act collectively through these fora. Likewise, there is a clear need to examine the circumstances under which collaboration and competition between the resultant variety of organisations occur.

A number of studies have found direct firm associations to be extremely effective sectoral representatives (see, for instance, the collection of different cases in Greenwood, 1995). Yet, there has been little attempt to examine the impact of this development on the emergence of collective fora more generally, or on the relationship between these collective fora. Direct firm membership associations, for example, typically exclude smaller firms on grounds of cost and profile, and sometimes by design. The presence of exclusive 'rich firm clubs' may therefore encourage the development of alternative organisation structures dedicated to the representation of small and medium sized enterprises. Likewise, as many 'invitation only' fora exclude representatives from, for example, Japanese-owned firms, there appears to be increasing evidence of the emergence of parallel organisations which do include these firms. What then are the implications of this proliferation of collective fora for the existence of collaboration and competition between the various organisations?

The role of national associations has long been at the forefront of the debate about European interest representation. In particular it is asked whether these remain the most effective medium for dialogue between private interests and the Commission (Grant, 1990; 1993). Whatever perspective is taken on this issue, national associations need to serve their members' information needs, and therefore few risk not belonging to the European federation in case their own role would be open to question among firms in membership. A national association needs to be consistently among the first in providing its members with information about European developments. If firms are regularly obtaining their information beforehand from other sources, the legitimacy of the national association is called into question. However, as has become clear, the information role of the Euro-fed may increasingly be under challenge from the emergence of new, often high-level, collective fora with access to key decision-makers not often enjoyed by the Euro-fed. The potential for competition between these fora is clear but is it inevitable?

A number of factors may, in fact, push relations between the various fora in the direction of collaboration rather than competition. First, for the Euro-feds, collaboration may be a means of organisational survival. Put quite simply, these organisations, which depend ultimately on the support of industry through their contributions to their national sectoral association, cannot afford to do battle with what are, in effect, their members operating via other collective fora. These organisations have little choice but to respond to a changing environment at the European level. Just as, for example, employer organisations in the UK have been forced to re-invent their role (increasingly presenting themselves as lobbying and information bodies because the decline in collective bargaining has changed the environment in which they operate), so too have Euro-feds had to redefine their role as they share their information function with other fora, and hence their special status at the European level. To collaborate with the newly emerging fora, and to offer a complementary rather than a conflictual service, may be a strategy for survival.

It is possible that the need for collaboration between Euro-feds and the newly emerging fora may also be dictated by the special status bestowed upon Euro-feds by the EU institutions. While the institutions continue to support the development of Euro-feds and to include them in the various advisory fora attached to the EU institutions, the Euro-feds may continue to be useful to their member firms who have started to create other collective fora. With their breadth of constituency, Euro-feds may be seen as an important source of information on issues arising across the policy sector: information not always available in narrow, invitation only, direct membership organisations.

Cooperation between the Euro-fed and the new collective fora may also, of course, be encouraged by firms able to manipulate the position of the Euro-fed via their multiple access points at the national level. In bioindustry, for instance, large firms with a foot in the two rival Euro associations have driven these two previously competing organisations into collaboration talks. A further example is provided by Cawson (1992), who, examining the structure of the European Association of Consumer Electronics Manufacturers (EACEM), has argued that Philips and Thomson have been able to play a dominant role in the organisation as a result of their heavy presence in the various national member associations. Clearly, if a complementary position can be achieved via the Euro-fed, in support of a firm's position in another collective fora, this can only strengthen the firm's influence on the final policy position of both organisations. Thus, while recent years have witnessed the growth of direct firm membership association in a number of sectors, this may not necessarily imply the demise of the Euro-fed.

Alongside the increasing importance of formal, direct membership fora, a sharp increase in the informal and ad hoc arrangements between firms has also emerged. There is clearly a need to identify the presence of semi permanent (as opposed to ad hoc, issue based) firm alliances, and to research the circumstances under which these emerge and are sustained. It appears that, to a certain extent at least, firms remain keen to maximise the degree of certainty within their initially ad hoc arrangements. Thus, in August 1993, Bull, Olivetti and Siemens, for example, signed a memorandum of agreement (commonly known as the BOS Alliance) which formalises their hitherto ad hoc cooperation in a number of areas). This would once again be consistent with the image of firms as seeking out collective arrangements to minimise the limitations on rational decision-taking caused by their 'bounded rationality'. This raises the issue, of course, of the range of factors which influence how and why firms choose to act collectively in particular fora at the transnational level.

The Choice of Collective Fora at the International Level: A Research Agenda

There seems little doubt that a key driving force in any firm's decision to become involved in collective action is the need to minimise uncertainty in the business environment. Information needs and the costs of non-membership are key factors in this analysis, particularly at the European level where the business environment is more complex, and, in respect of some of the national markets, even unfamiliar. Importantly, however, other factors may also be influential on the decision to pursue collective action. A little researched issue, for example, concerns the impact of the product cycle upon associability. Rival new technologies which involve choice of standards by public agencies are likely to involve different clusters of interests, and, no doubt, competitive interest representation; such a pattern is evident in the case of digital broadcasting (Cawson, 1995). On the other hand, mature European industries whose decline arises from competition with the newly developing economies of south east Asia may attract more collaborative forms of politics in the quest for supportive policies from the European Union; such a pattern is evident in the case of Steel (Grunert, 1987). There is however a need for more systematic research to be addressed to the impact of the product cycle upon patterns of collective action.

A broader research question still concerns the role of marketplaces in encouraging businesses to see risks and opportunities in the same way. For instance, a number of cement manufacturers have recently (December 1994) been fined by the Commission for cartel like behaviour. The reason for such cartel like behaviour is the presence of low cost, subsidised competition from Eastern and south eastern Europe, which encourages firms in western Europe to work together closely as a means to react

to the threat. Something similar has occurred with steel producers, and with shipping firms (Aspinwall, 1995). It would be difficult to devise research methods to investigate this phenomenon because of the obvious problems of secrecy which would be encountered. Nevertheless, the difficulty of obtaining this type of information does not negate the point about the extent to which marketplaces drive collective perceptions; such a hypotheses may therefore remain a constructivist type argument, rather than one which can be demonstrated to exist with the use of empirical evidence.

A number of influences upon collective action appear to be self evident from different types of methods, but lack systematic investigation even where information collection strategies would be relatively easy to devise. One of these concerns the point that interests who work in broadly similar national regulatory environments across member states may find it easier to collaborate at the European level. Such a pattern is evident in the case of pharmaceuticals. Here, governmental concerns to promote a successful and profitable European industry, balanced with worries about medicine prices, selling and safety, tends to produce similarity in national regulatory styles. Such a similarity fosters collective action at the European level between the national associations concerned in the Euro federation, EFPIA. Another issue worthy of confirmation through further research is the idea that industries experienced in transnational collective action at levels other than the EU may find it easier to work together at the European level. Thus, the pharmaceutical industry's experience in confronting a regulatory threat from the World Health Organisation by building an international organisation in Geneva assisted European level transnational action. Indeed, some of the same strategies used in Geneva, such as the creation of transnational self regulatory codes, were repeated in Brussels in response to a similar threat to regulate the activities of medical representatives.

Competition and Collaboration

The presence of alternative collective fora has generally been regarded as evidence of 'classical' pluralist type competition, and disabling to the ability of neo corporatist type structures to emerge (Schmitter's classic (1974) definition of neo corporatism, for instance, insists upon a singular representative organisation). But the presence of multi representatives within the same domain does not imply competition. We have come to the view that a more relaxed approach should be taken to the presence of 'competition', and that a starting point would be to think of competition and collaboration not as polar opposites but more as a continuum. Alternative organisational formats are capable of 'competing' and 'collaborating' at the same time. Equally, it is not always possible to label behaviour (either in intent, output or outcome) as assuredly 'competitive' and 'collaborative'.

We have come across instances in our own research of what could be termed as 'competition', and of 'collaboration', between intra sectoral business groups. In Biotechnology, the Senior Advisory Group Biotechnology (SAGB) has traditionally represented large firms, while the European Secretariat of National Biotechnology Associations (ESNBA) has a profile more of representing smaller producer concerns in the domain. Historically, the relationship between them has been highly 'competitive', to the extent that one has refused to attend meetings at the Commission to which the other has been invited, and one (SAGB) has created an umbrella forum for other interests in biotechnology (such as scientists and trade associations of user sectors) without inviting the other into membership. Each has developed different relationships with the Commission; SAGB enjoys excellent links, for instance, with DGs III, VI and XII, but poor links with DG XI; ESNBA, on the other hand, enjoys excellent links with DG XI. There are now signs that SAGB and ESNBA will bury their differences, and that a much closer working relationship will emerge. In this case, each of the groups can use their different strengths in relating to the Commission for the benefit of the sector as a whole by just a small degree of 'collaboration'. Thus, the presence of two associations can be equally as effective as arrangements in sectors where there is one encompassing organisation, and alternative patterns of associability are either absent or weak.

It is even possible that multi representative formats could be more effective than singular ones. Overlapping membership of organisations is, for example, a persistent feature of business organisation

in the IT sector. However, as Schneider (1992:65) observed with regard to the organisation of industrial interests in the telecommunications sector, "the relationship between these associations is essentially non-competitive". Indeed, in the IT sector, close consultation between the organisations will frequently lead to mutually supportive policy positions. These organisations, faced with severe time and resource constraints, are often happy to avoid covering the same ground. Indeed, as a representative from ORGALIME (Liaison Organisation for the European Mechanical, Electrical and Electronic Engineering and Metalworking Industries, established in 1954) said, "ORGALIME is very pleased when a strong sectoral body exists, such as ECTEL or EUROBIT, and tends to let them get on with it." As well as cooperating with their European counterparts, these organisations are often in close contact with their equivalent international organisations, particularly in Japan and the US.

The affairs of most business domains are governed by a variety of units and Directorates within the Commission. The relationship between these units can often be competitive; indeed, McLaughlin (1995) quotes the response of one Commission official in interview: "quite simply, it's war". Competition between the various Directorates can encourage fragmentation in the interest representation landscape through the development of different forms of symbiosis with different groups. In the example of biotechnology already quoted, such competition has nourished and sustained competition between the two groups concerned. DG XI, for instance, has been so closely associated with ESNBA that they always attend the group's board meetings. Both parties have benefited from this relationship; for DG XI, it is a strategy to manage their isolation within the four DG Biotechnology Coordinating Committee (BCC), while for ESNBA the relationship has legitimised their existence to the extent that some firms have sought dual track representation through SAGB and ESNBA.

Collaboration between the relevant Directorates or other institutions may, conversely, encourage the development of common representative formats; while common representative formats can encourage agency collaboration. For example, within the context of the standards setting process, collaboration within the CEN/CENELEC framework, for example, facilitated the creation of the European Workshop for Open Systems (EWOS) in December 1987. Allowing for the direct participation of firms in the standard setting process, EWOS was created by a number of the most representative European federations of IT producer and user organisations¹ to aid progress on the drafting of standards in the area of open systems interconnection (OSI). In this case, a new collective forum emerged at the European level, facilitated by the collaboration of two existing standards bodies and by the collaboration of a number of existing collective fora. While the standards bodies are clearly not lobbying organisations, they are an important collective forum for IT firms - providing early warnings on the priorities for standardisation being identified by the European Commission and, of course, by competitor companies.

The close involvement of IT firms with their counterparts with the EU institutions and with the standards bodies has clearly emerged, not only as a result of the establishment of lobbying alliances, but also as a result of their participation in a myriad of collective fora attached to the EU institutions and standards bodies. Many of the critical contacts which IT firms have established with each other have been formed as a result of their participation in a whole range of EU research programmes or in the committees of standards bodies. Each Directorate within the Commission has a range of advisory committees and the IT industry is heavily represented in all the relevant committees. The most recent example of IT industrial participation at the very highest levels of EU policy formulation has been the participation of the IT industry in the so-called Bangemann Group - the high level group, charged with the task of formulating the series of recommendations to the European Council on 'Europe and the Global Information Society', which prepared the ground for the Commission's action plan - "Europe's way to the Information Society: An Action Plan" (July 20 1994). Clearly, this type of close contact has important implications for the ability of firms to make informed choices as to their future alliance strategies and concerning the most effective fora through which to pursue their policy goals.

One of the major factors responsible for 'competitive' type behaviour in European interest group politics has been the relationship between national, and European, representative organisations within the same domain. There have been cases where national associations have undermined the collective

agreement of the European federation by going direct to the Commission with their own viewpoint, or indeed where the Commission has had to collate views from the national capitals because of the inability of the Euro group to settle differences. However, as we have argued, it is not inevitable that this competitive relationship must or will prevail. One possibility, for example, is that the enhanced competence of the European Union will ease initial competitive difficulties between fora by encouraging sectors to invest further organisational resources at the European level - and in doing so will remove cleavages based on differences between national, and European, levels of organisation.

Conclusion

The pattern of collective action at the European level is clearly in a state of flux. Many questions arise as to the direction which cooperative action by firms in the European context is likely to take in the future, and as to how current collaborative efforts are likely to impact upon the future propensity of firms to pursue collective activities. In this article we have tried to suggest a number of possible routes of inquiry which future research might fruitfully pursue.

In particular, there are clearly several levels at which the question of collective action at the European level needs to be addressed. First, the questions of when, why and how individual firms choose to work cooperatively at the European level still require further analysis. Clearly, information needs in the single market and the loss of influence on the sectoral position (i.e. the costs of non-membership) have been critical factors, motivating firms to participate in existing collective fora. However, many more factors may be at play. We have suggested, for example, that the impact of product cycles, the role of the marketplace, the impact of national regulatory environments and, not least, the activities and structures of the relevant public institutions may affect both the propensity of firms to act collectively as well as influencing their choice of the forum through which to pursue their cause.

Second, as an increasing range of sectors are characterised by the emergence of a variety of different collective fora, questions arise about the relationships between these organisations. How do they interact with one another? Which factors are most influential in dictating the extent to which these bodies are willing, or able, to collaborate with one another and when competitive relations are most likely to prevail? So far, most large firms appear not to view membership of one or more of these collective fora as mutually exclusive. Is this reflected in how these bodies view themselves and their role vis à vis the other collective fora, or are the traditional Euro-feds and their national members conscious of a threat to their position from the newly emerging, firm-led, collective fora?

Finally, the focus on corporatism versus pluralism at the European level has, almost inevitably, resulted in a tendency to focus on the form which collective action between firms has taken and the relationships between collective bodies and the European institutions. Far less attention has been paid to the impact on the firms themselves of involvement in the various collective fora. Yet, this may be a crucial element in explaining the propensity of firms to act collectively, their choice of collective fora at the European level, and the relationship between these collective fora. Is it the case that collaboration breeds further collaboration or will iterated contact between firms in the newly emerging collective fora challenge the role of traditional fora such as the Euro fed? and ultimately reshape it? The key question to be asked is; which factors will ultimately determine the balance between collaboration and competition at the transnational level?

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