

# PR, politics and democracy



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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the relationship between politics and public relations, based on recent developments in Sweden and Norway. It has become increasingly common for PR firms to offer well-paid job opportunities for former politicians. Then, after some years as advisors in public affairs, including lobbying activity, some of them return to politics as members of the government, press officers or advisors. The article discusses the background for this development, and poses some questions concerning integrity and the possible consequences for democracy.

**KEYWORDS:** public relations, lobbying, politics, integrity, democracy



## INTRODUCTION

Public relations consultants cover many areas of communication and perform a range of roles. One type of modern PR much in demand concerns public affairs: stakeholders who want to influence political decisions and legislation buy advice and services concerning media initiatives and lobbying. In this marketplace, former politicians have found opportunities for new careers as well-paid PR consultants. They can then render their services to clients for a fee without being accused of corruption, as would be the case if they still were members of the government or parliament. One of the most spectacular events in Scandinavia in this context was when Sweden's former Prime Minister Göran Persson<sup>1</sup> joined the PR firm JKL after the Social Democratic Party lost the national elections in 2006. In Norway, two of the country's best-known and most experienced politicians, one of them a cabinet minister, announced their transition to PR consultant companies just after the 2009 national elections.<sup>2</sup> All these cases gave rise to public debates about

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<sup>1</sup> Göran Persson served as Prime Minister of Sweden from 1996 to 2006 and was the leader of the Sweden's Social Democratic Party from 2006 to 2007. Since August 2007 he has worked as a part-time consultant and corporate lobbyist for the JKL Group, a PR consultancy with offices in four Nordic countries — and in Brussels.

<sup>2</sup> Norway's Bjarne Håkon Hanssen, Minister of Health and former Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion in Jens Stoltenberg's "red-green" coalition government, left the government after the national

the professional identities and public roles of politicians — and about the borderlines between PR and politics.

Drawing on Swedish and Norwegian experiences, this article discusses this development and its possible consequences for democracy. The author focuses on three questions:

- What type of professional *competence* do former politicians represent as PR consultants?
- What kinds of challenges and opportunities do former politicians see in PR consultant jobs?
- What kinds of integrity conflicts may appear when former politicians are asked to use their “political capital” in the service of commercial clients?

## PR — AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSUASION

*Public relations* is a concept with several meanings and many, often negative, connotations — like spin, stonewalling, distortion, and manipulation. When political journalists or media analysts label a political advisor or a PR consultant a “spin doctor” it is not meant as a compliment. A vital aspect of presidential power, writes Maltese (1994):

... is the ability to spin a story — to manipulate not only what administration officials are saying but also what the media are saying about them. Spinning a story involves twisting it to one's advantage, using surrogates, press releases, radio actualities, and other friendly sources to deliver the line from an angle that puts the story in the best possible light. (Maltese, 1994, p. 215)

The phrase “it's just PR” is typical of this critical attitude: it indicates that public relations is superficial and marketing-oriented, sending out messages that should not be taken too seriously or trusted. Two US experts on corporate communication, W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay (2007), even chose *It's Not Just PR: Public Relations in Society* as their book title to reflect the frustration experienced by both scholars and practitioners in the field. In their opinion, the term PR is misused by the media and misunderstood by the general population. Their own aim was to “help readers understand why society benefits from the practice” (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 1).

This is sometimes a difficult task, as even these authors' examples and defence of public relations clearly show. The basic, positive and elementary argument for the positive effects of public relations is of course that all organizations and institutions need to communicate with their audiences and stakeholders. Some elements of public relations are as old as the knowledge of rhetoric. The ability to convince or persuade is necessary for all types of leadership, not least in the political life of dem-

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elections in 2009 and began working as a consultant for the PR firm First House. Carl I. Hagen, former leader of the Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*, an influential right-wing populist party), was recruited as a part-time consultant by the Oslo office of the international PR firm Burson-Marsteller.

ocratic countries. In that respect, public relations is a necessary tool for any organizations that want to influence the development of society — be they corporations, governmental bodies or NGOs, or minority and interest groups without large financial resources to back them up.

The basic problem and counter-argument are equally well known. “Votes count, but resources decide,” the Norwegian social scientist Stein Rokkan (1966) wrote, in describing the power of organized interest groups in society. Basically, his analysis concerned the corporative channel, but the resource argument is also relevant when large corporations and organizations lobby independently to influence policy decisions. Another point in this debate is that communication skills and persuasion — or *perception management*, as the PR firm Burson-Marsteller terms their type of expertise — may be used as an instrument for corporations (like Enron) to cover up their misdeeds, or for governments to polish their tarnished image and close all doors for investigative journalism.

In his *Propaganda* (1928), the pioneer and father figure of modern public relations in the USA, Edward Bernays, defined his trade as the “engineering of consent.”<sup>3</sup> He formulated the task of PR consultants in words that today would create an image crisis for any firm unwise enough to quote them:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in a democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government, which is the true ruling power of our country. (Bernays, 1928, p. 9)

In fact, even in the 1930s, the negative connotations of the propaganda concept were evident, as Harold Lasswell observed in an article on the topic: “Hence it is common for modern promoters of attitudes to borrow the prestige of words like *education*, *public relations* and *publicity*” (Lasswell, 1935, p. 3).

In their well-known textbook definition, Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 6) characterize public relations as “the management of communication between an organization and its publics.” They distinguish between four communication models for PR, with propaganda and publicity as the oldest, most primitive version, while symmetrical two-way communication represents their ideal for modern, systems-oriented PR. However, this normative approach is debated and criticized, not least because it ignores the fact that *persuasion* and *public relations* are “two Ps in a Pod” (Miller, 1989). Any organization will want to control its symbolic environment and influence people’s attitudes towards the organization. Coombs and Holladay (2007, p. 2) therefore define public relations as “the management of mutually influential relationships within a web of stakeholder and organizational relationships,” intended to reflect how PR does have a strong persuasive component. Simon Cottle makes the importance of persuasion and power even clearer when he defines public rela-

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<sup>3</sup> The term was inspired by Walter Lippman’s (1922) definition of opinion formation as the “manufacturing of consent.”

tions as “the deliberate management of public image and information in pursuit of organisational interests” (Cottle 2003, p. 3). As a former CEO in one of the world’s best-known PR corporations, Hill & Knowlton, once stated: “Power comes from remembering and using the lineage of communication, recognition and influence” (Dilenschneider, 1990, p. 8).

One important task in public relations is the production of messages and source material in a journalistic format, given free for use in media organizations. As Gandy (1992, p. 143) underlines, policy actors provide such information subsidies through a variety of means, “most of which have to do with using a credible source to deliver a persuasive message.” The main aim is to influence decisions based on such information.

The high number of communications advisors in today’s private corporations, governmental organizations and political parties in Sweden and Norway, as well as the growth of international public relations consultancies, reflect that this insight is of importance both in business and politics (Larsson, 2005a; 2005b; Allern, 2004; 1997; Cottle, 2003).

## **PR, LOBBYING AND THE POLITICAL FIELD**

Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) have, based on the UK and US experiences, distinguished between three eras or “ages” of political communication, distinctions that also make sense in a Scandinavian context. “Age 1” was the first two decades after the Second World War, the period prior to the television age, characterized by strong political parties and interest groups. Many voters related to politics through relatively long-term party identification, and voted according to class-based loyalties. Politicians and parties had direct and easy access to the press. This was particularly true in Sweden and Norway since many newspapers were variously affiliated with the political parties (Bastiansen, 2009; Høyer, 2005; Allern, 2001; Kronvall, 1971). In addition, this was a period when the leading political parties in Scandinavia had a strong standing among their voters in terms of party membership.

“Age 2” dawned with the rise of national television as the central platform for political communication. Television also penetrated a sector of the electorate that had been more difficult to reach, enlarging the audience for political communication. To cope with the demands of the new medium, the parties had to work harder and learn the tricks of the trade. The professionalization of journalism resulted in the professionalization of politics through media training, image consultants and the crafting of sound bites and photo opportunities. In Scandinavia, especially after 1980, the political parties began to lose members and activists, a development that made media-conveyed messages increasingly important.

“Age 3,” which was still in an emerging phase at the end of the 20th century, represents an era where neither the political parties nor the leading national media will play the main role. Large national audiences are more difficult to reach. Televi-

sion, once a concentrated communication outlet with only a few channels, now has numerous digital alternatives and 24-hour news services. In an age of media abundance, political communication is re-shaped by trends like intensified professionalizing imperatives, greater competitive pressures, anti-elitist populism, a process of “centrifugal diversification,” and changes in how people receive politics (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 209).

Three concepts that have been used to describe and analyze the role of modern media for such changes are *mediation*, *mediatization* and *media logic*. Mediation of politics is, as Strömbäck (2008) notes, a well-known phenomenon, one of the features of the press since the 19th century. Even in the “first age” of political communication, most people were informed about politics through mediated messages from political parties and other political institutions. The concept of *mediatization* describes a late era in the development of mediated politics: a process where both political parties and other societal institutions start to *adapt* their communication more directly to the formats and news values of the media, gradually also internalizing and adopting them (Strömbäck, 2008; Hjarvard, 2007; Asp, 1986). Gradually the logic of media formats is taken for granted. Over time the media logic influences both politics and journalism:

First, journalistic practices, techniques, and approaches are now geared to media formats rather than merely directing their craft at topics; second, the topics, organizations and issues that journalists report are themselves products of media-journalistic format and criteria. (Altheide & Snow, 1991, p. x)

In the Scandinavian countries, as elsewhere in the world, this development from the 1970s onwards resulted in a growing demand for professional media training in corporations and political parties — a demand that paved the way for the expansion of new PR consultancies with mediation of messages, opinion polls and other types of information subsidies as an important areas of expertise (Larsson, 2005a; 2005b; Allern, 2004; 1997). In the “third age” of communication, this also involves the ability to use and exploit new social media. Journalists — as well as politicians with long media experience and analytical competence — discovered that they were becoming sought-after to work for the expanding PR industry.

The expansion of the PR sector is also related to another social change in Scandinavia: the weakening of democratic forms of corporatism. Organized cooperation between the state and interest organizations had long been important in several policy areas. But the times were changing. An important and symbolic event in Sweden was the decision by the Swedish Employers’ Organization (SAF) in 1991 to withdraw their representatives from all government boards (Naurin, 2001, p. 26). From the 1990s onwards a liberal, pluralistic model has become increasingly important, and *lobbying* plays a more central role in political decision-making than before (Möller, 2009; Rommetvedt, 2005; Naurin, 2001; Hermansson et al., 1999; Nordby, 1999; 1994; Lewin, 1992). Nordby (1999, p. 15) characterizes this process in Norway as a development towards a more “slim” corporatism, but without any

dramatic change. Rommetvedt (2005) concludes that corporatist representation has partly been replaced and supplemented by less institutionalized forms of lobbyism. Corporations and advocacy groups actively try to influence decisions by legislators and officials. One result of this change is the growing demand for communication advisors inside corporations and organizations, and the increased importance of *public affairs* as an area for PR consultancies (Tyllström, 2009; Ericsson & Käberg, 2006).

## **POLITICS AS A BASIS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS**

A few PR agencies were established in Sweden and Norway in the first decades after the Second World War, but the real expansion came from 1980 onwards. Today around 30 companies in each country, some of them affiliated with large international PR and marketing corporations, dominate the PR industry (Larsson, 2005b; Allern, 2004). Major business areas are marketing communications, corporate communications, investor relations and public affairs. Advice and initiatives concerning media relations — and the production of information subsidies — are an integral and important part of PR services in most of these areas.

A special feature of the Swedish PR industry is the strong linkage between leading PR consultants and the political sphere. Entrepreneurs with a background in politics founded some of the largest agencies, and around 20 per cent of the consultants have been active in the political parties or their youth organizations, elected representatives or engaged as political advisors (Larsson, 2005a). Politicians with a conservative or liberal background have been the most active in this field; however, there are also some PR firms founded by social democratic politicians and even by activists from the political left. Anders Lindberg (CEO, JKL Stockholm), one of the young founders of JKL in 1985, gave this explanation when asked about the presence of so many conservative politicians in the PR industry:

I think it was connected with an early-developed understanding for changes in modern business; in our time leadership cannot be maintained without communication. In this area the political field had a lead. The political parties had well-developed communication competence, and many listening posts. At the Stockholm School of Economics early in the 1980s *communication* was barely a part of the education. In our opinion there was fertile ground for developing corporate governance through field analysis, motivation and messaging. The political field has inspired us in our advice to businesses.<sup>4</sup>

Kreab, the leading PR company in the Nordic region, merged recently (2009) with a London-based firm, and became Kreab & Gavin Anderson — Worldwide. Kreab was founded as early as in 1970, and one of the founders, Peje Emilsson, was from 1970 to 1972 the chairman of *Fria Moderata Studentförbundet*, the national student association of Sweden's conservative party, the Moderates. He and

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<sup>4</sup> Personal interview, 24 August, 2010.

Kreab also played a leading role in several of the Moderates' election campaigns.<sup>5</sup> The tight relation between Kreab and the conservatives has also been otherwise proven. Carl Bildt, former leader of the Moderates and Prime Minister of Sweden from 1991 to 1994, became the chairman of Kreab in 2004, but had to step down when he became Foreign Minister in Fredrik Reinfeldt's four-party government in 2006. Another leading Swedish politician, Sven Otto Littorin, party secretary for the Moderates 2003–2006 and Minister of Labour 2006–2010,<sup>6</sup> was an employee of Kreab in the 1990s and senior vice-president at Kreab's New York office in 1995–1997.

There are other examples. Three young economists, all with political experience from the Moderates' youth organization, founded the JKL Group, another one of the leading PR companies in Sweden, in 1985. One of the owners of the PR firm Springtime, Göran Thorstenson, was a chairman of the Moderates' student association in 1985–1986. The founder of Gullers PR, Mats Gullers, was active in the Liberal Party (*Folkpartiet*), and was a press secretary for the Swedish government in 1978–1979.

Only a few PR firms were initiated by consultants with a leftist background. Ullman PR was founded in 2005 by Harald Ullman, who for a long period (1985–1994) was a CEO of the company in charge of advertising in the election campaigns of Sweden's Social Democratic Party. One of the founders and owners of the PR firm Westander<sup>7</sup> was in 1998 named "Lobbyist of the year" by the media journal *Resymé* for his work for the Swedish Peace Movement against Sweden's arms exports.

In Norway, politicians have played a minor role as founding fathers of the PR industry, but in the last decade advisors with a political background have been actively recruited as consultants, mainly in the area of public affairs (Allern, 2004). A review of lists of employees in 15 of the largest consultancies shows that all seven political parties represented in the *Storting*, the Norwegian parliament, are "represented" on these consultants lists, even the Socialist Left Party.

However, Sweden seems to have the most open road between politics and PR. And the transitions go both ways. Four of the members of Fredrik Reinfeldt's new coalition government in 2006 had a background as advisors and affiliates in the PR industry: Minister of Foreign Affairs, Carl Bildt (Kreab); Minister of Culture, Cecilie Stegö Chilò<sup>8</sup> (Springtime); Minister of Labour, Sven Otto Littorin (Kreab) and Minister for Integration and Equality, Nyamko Sabuni (Geelmuyden Kiese). When Prime Minister Reinfeldt's state secretary and chief press officer, Ulrica Schenström,

<sup>5</sup> Source: DN.se, 12 February, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> In July 2010, Littorin resigned from the government for "private reasons." Shortly afterwards, one of the tabloids printed accusations concerning his moral character.

<sup>7</sup> Patric Westander.

<sup>8</sup> Stegö Chilò had a very short political career in the government. The press published information documenting that she had not paid the public service license fee for some decades, and she was forced to withdraw from the government. She then returned to the PR firm Springtime.

was scandalized by the tabloid press<sup>9</sup> and had to leave her position in 2007, the PR firm Halvarsson & Halvarsson engaged her as a senior consultant. After the national elections in 2006 it became clear that the step from a social democratic political career to the PR industry was very short. Around 20 former politicians, political advisors and information officers from the former government party got new jobs in the PR firms.<sup>10</sup> A leading member of Fredrik Reinfeldt's Cabinet, Lars Leijonborg, left the coalition government in 2009.<sup>11</sup> In 2010 he started a new career as a senior advisor in the PR firm Diplomat Communications.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of this development both in Sweden and Norway is that PR firms that specialize in public affairs and lobbying now may offer analysis and advice from a group of consultants with *different* political backgrounds and ideological leanings — advisors with social networks both inside the government and opposition parties. The JKL Group in Sweden have on their payroll not only a former Social Democratic Prime Minister, Göran Persson, but also a former Minister of Defence<sup>13</sup> from the Moderates. In Norway, leading PR firms in public affairs like Geelmuyden-Kiese, Burson-Marsteller, Gambit Hill & Knowlton and First House have the same ability to offer analytical competence based on experience from a range of political environments. “However, we do not have political debates in an ordinary sense, it's more like a *brainstorming* à la a think-tank, a contract research group — or the foreign department,” says JKL's Anders Lindberg.<sup>14</sup>

## THE COMPETENCE OF FORMER POLITICIANS AS ADVISORS

What type of professional *competence* do former politicians represent as PR consultants? Why is political experience rated as an important asset for the PR industry? Answering these questions, Anders Lindberg (CEO, JKL, Stockholm) emphasizes five keywords: access (“the power of the returned phone call”), system knowledge, experience in political analysis, the ability to think strategically and knowledge of framing.<sup>15</sup> Per Høiby, the CEO of First House (Oslo, Norway), besides these tasks also mentions politicians' knowledge of political risks and opportunities concerning investments. This is especially important in countries like Norway, with a large state sector and where political decisions about rules, regulations, taxes and subsidies play an important role for most industries.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ulrika Schernström visited a restaurant with a well-known TV journalist, and was accused of being influenced by too much alcohol during an evening when she was “on duty” as a state secretary.

<sup>10</sup> Source: [www.resyme.se/nyheter/2007/05/08/goran-persson-i-gott-prsal/index.xml](http://www.resyme.se/nyheter/2007/05/08/goran-persson-i-gott-prsal/index.xml).

<sup>11</sup> Leijonborg was a chairman of the Liberal Party (*Folkpartiet*) in 1997–2007, and served as a Minister for Education (2006–2007) and Minister for Higher Education and Research (2007–2009).

<sup>12</sup> Source: [http://www.svd.se/nyheter/inrikes/lars-leijonborg-blir-pr-konsult\\_4708767.svd](http://www.svd.se/nyheter/inrikes/lars-leijonborg-blir-pr-konsult_4708767.svd).

<sup>13</sup> Anders Björk, Minister of Defence in Carl Bildt's conservative government, 1991–1994.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview, 24 August, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Personal interview, 24 August, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview, 27 August, 2010.

Ewelina Tokarczyk,<sup>17</sup> Prime PR, Stockholm, underlines that PR firms have customers who need knowledge of how to act in political environments they know little about. “To give such advice you need to know these environments and the system from the inside. Political experience increases the ability to understand the logic and listen to what is happening by using one’s own networks, to put your ear to the ground.”<sup>18</sup>

Politicians’ general and personal knowledge of political processes and political decision systems are therefore of special importance when they change their role to be lobbying consultants. They know the political and bureaucratic procedures, they know the importance of timing: when a proposal or a contribution may be favourable, or when it will be too late. “They can evaluate and give advice about the most relevant parliamentary committees and which politicians to contact — and the best timing of such requests,” says Per Høiby, the CEO of First House (Oslo).<sup>19</sup>

Another factor, especially important for former top politicians, is their personal experience with public criticism, the spotlight of the media and their practical insight into the necessity of crisis communication. Most top leaders in business fear dramatized, critical news stories. Negative public awareness is a horror scenario. They are afraid of the consequences and need the advice of somebody who knows the tricks of the media trade. Politicians often have such experience, especially those who have been in the frontline. As Birger Östberg, senior consultant in Westander (Stockholm) sums up: “Politicians have communication competence, media competence and knowledge of society. They have learned to argue, convince and persuade. They understand news values and experienced media training in practice.”<sup>20</sup>

Concerning recruitment to the PR industry, we may distinguish between two types of politicians in terms of roles and experience. The “classical” politician has been a representative for his party in a leading position, is well-known to the public and has experience as a member of parliament or a municipal assembly. Some top figures from the political field have even been government ministers. Another, modern type of politician is the *political advisor*, less known by the public but with experience from the backrooms of the parties, parliamentary groups and ministries. They may have less direct experience from public debates and battles, and hence less personal authority, but their strength as PR consultants will be their analytical training — and the long experience in *advising* those in the front line.

In most cases, politicians cease to be active in their political parties when they start to work in PR firms, at least in leading positions. The main argument is the ne-

<sup>17</sup> Tokarczyk is a former member of the local government in Gothenburg for the Social Democratic Party.

<sup>18</sup> Personal interview, 23 August, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Personal interview, 27 October, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview, 25 August, 2010.

cessity of avoiding direct role conflicts. Party membership and local activities, however, are normal — and sometimes even encouraged. A special case is Prime PR (Sweden), where a group of consultants, all members of the Social Democratic Party, have organized a local section of the party organization in the capital, *Stockholm's Arbetarkommun*. “To leave your former political job is not the same as to say goodbye to a political engagement,” says one of them, Ewelina Tokarczyk.<sup>21</sup> Birger Östberg, a consultant at Westander (Stockholm), was earlier a press officer for the Left Party in the Swedish parliament, the *Riksdag*. He says that Westander, like some of the other PR firms, have chosen not to accept election jobs for any of the political parties. But personally he is still politically engaged, now as a member and parliamentary candidate for the small feminist party, *Feministiskt Initiativ*, led by the former Left Party leader, Gudrun Schyman.

For some PR consultants with a political background, especially the younger ones, it may also be a strategic investment to maintain a minimum of engagement in party politics and maintain their old networks. If their party or government coalition wins an election, there will be potential new career opportunities as advisors in the ministries and parliamentary groups. An open bridge back is an alluring option.

## WHAT'S IN IT FOR THE POLITICIANS?

What kinds of challenges and opportunities does a former politician see in a job as a PR consultant? One obvious answer, especially when a politician is not re-elected or an advisor loses his/her job after an election defeat, is that a job as a consultant is an opportunity to keep working with political and social issues. Birger Östberg (Westander, Stockholm) uses as an example a parliamentarian, trained as a teacher, who after 8 years (two terms) lost his seat in the *Riksdag*. It is not easy to go straight back to the old job. At the same time, he may have increased his personal expertise in several new areas relevant for a career as a consultant.

Gunnar Husan (Burson-Marsteller, Norway), who has long experience as a political advisor at the Office of the Prime Minister,<sup>22</sup> underlines that the political craft often includes political consulting. Many with such experience therefore want to continue in this area of work when they leave politics. Their knowledge of media relations is also important.<sup>23</sup>

A vital factor here may be that most politicians and political advisors are generalists. They have often worked in several policy areas, but are not experts in any of them. Their real expertise is their knowledge of the political environment, the de-

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<sup>21</sup> Personal interview, 23 August, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Gunnar Husan was a state secretary and responsible for press relations at the Office of the Prime Minister in the Christian Democrat governments of Kjell Magne Bondevik in 1997–2000 and 2001–2005.

<sup>23</sup> Personal interview, 30 August, 2010.

cision-making processes and how cases should most effectively be presented. PR attracts them because it is a dynamic element in this kind of work that attracts politicians.

Besides, this comes as an obvious personal, economic motive. Consultant jobs in the leading PR firms are normally well-paid, often much better than many political jobs. Some politicians have earlier had none or few jobs outside the political field. Public relations is one of the few areas outside politics where their political communication competence could be exchanged on the market.

## QUESTIONS CONCERNING INTEGRITY AND ETHICS

Most transitions from politics to public relations do not lead to public debates or criticism, especially when former politicians start to work for corporations or industrial organizations. Recruitment to PR consultancy firms is generally looked upon with a more critical eye, the argument being that consultants are “hired guns” for strong lobbying interests. But even then, it is only when leading politicians from parties on the *left* move to PR firms that political and moral criticism seems to appear.

One reason may be that Scandinavian voters *expect* conservative and neo-liberal politicians to be market-oriented and pro-business. From an ideological point of view, neo-liberals also hold that politicians should be free to make use of their expertise for their own purposes. The Social Democratic/Labour Parties of Sweden and Norway — and the parties of the Socialist Left — are of course influenced by the same way of thinking, but on the Left there still exist expectations concerning party loyalty and even contempt for politicians who — as it is said — are “for sale.” When Gothenburg’s most powerful Social Democratic politician in two decades, Göran Johansson, left politics in 2008, he declared to the Swedish media magazine *Resymé* that he would never work as a lobbyist in the PR industry and made a harsh comment about the former prime minister’s new career as a PR advisor: “JKL is a political organization that picks up Social Democrats to get hold of political strategies.”<sup>24</sup>

Especially sensitive is public opinion concerning the role of PR consultants if they are involved in lobbying against their own party. A case of this kind triggered an intense public debate in Norway in 2009–2010. The main figure in this media-tized drama was Bjarne Håkon Hanssen, a leading politician in the Norwegian Labour Party. He had served as Minister of Health in Jens Stoltenberg’s “red–green” coalition government, but shortly after the national elections in 2009 he left his cabinet post. When it was announced that in the future he would work as a consultant in the newly established PR firm First House, his career became a topic of public debate — and a case for the government-appointed Quarantine Committee. This

<sup>24</sup> Interview in the media paper, *Resymé*, 8 July, 2008.

committee decided that the former minister would have to wait six months before he could start working in the PR firm.

Some months after Hanssen's quarantine period ended the news media reported that Espira, a private company who owns and operates a chain of private Kindergartens, had asked the PR firm First House for advice. The background was a proposal from the government to restrict the possibility of private investors to *profit* too much from their investments in this heavily subsidized sector. At one point, the ex-minister phoned one of his former party colleagues in the Norwegian parliament, to ask some questions about the proposal. In a heated public debate, Hanssen was accused of lobbying against "his own" government and was generally condemned. When it became clear that he had broken no formal rules, some politicians and newspaper commentators began arguing for new, stricter quarantine regulations. The arguments concerned what was seen as his lack of political morals. Bjarne Håkon Hanssen had, as the liberal newspaper *Dagbladet* argued in an editorial, placed his knowledge at the disposal of rich corporate clients.<sup>25</sup>

In such debates, the standard answer in the PR industry is that the individual consultant should have the right to use his communication expertise in a new job, and besides this has a right to turn down assignments that he personally finds difficult to accept for ideological or other reasons. "We have an individual *opt-out*, a possibility to say no for reasons of conviction," says Anders Lindberg (JKL, Sweden), "but it has happened only a handful of times in 10–15 years."<sup>26</sup>

In most cases, questions concerning integrity will be a problem that each individual consultant will have to assess.

## THE DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGE

At the Party Congress of Sweden's Social Democratic Party in 1997, one of the speakers posed some questions concerning lobbying and democracy:

How is it really with the hired opinion makers, those who one day sell their services to a business, the other day to a political party? What exactly is lobbying? What does it look like, how does it function? Are legislators manipulated and deceived? These are important questions in a democracy.<sup>27</sup>

The speaker was the then Prime Minister Göran Persson. Twelve years later, his questions were cited in a debate article where two PR consultants demanded that the JKL lobbyist Persson now should explain who he was working for.<sup>28</sup> The background for their critical tone and questions was that in a newspaper article Persson had argued for the interests of a private corporation in the military defence sector.

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<sup>25</sup> Editorial in *Dagbladet*, 31 July, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Personal interview, 24 August, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Prime Minister Göran Persson, quoted by Olle Schubert/Patric Westander in an article in the newspaper *Aftonbladet*, 20 December, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> See footnote 27.

He had signed his article “former Prime Minister,” but had not mentioned that the same company was paying his own PR company (JKL) around 180,000 euros a year for their services.

The debate about public relations, lobbying and democracy has taken an interesting turn in Sweden because a few of the communication consultancies themselves have taken up the importance of *openness* concerning clients and customers. This is also linked to the importance of making communication competence more widely known. In a debate article another PR consultant, a former MP from the Left Party, wrote:

Lobbying is in my opinion a question of democracy — everybody should have an opportunity to let their voice be heard. The basic pillars of democracy will be undermined if not the tools for communication will be accessible to all, even interest organizations with less economic margins.<sup>29</sup>

This was also the argument when some years ago the Socialist Left Party arranged their own, free lobbying courses for interest groups with limited resources.

The question of openness has, in both Sweden and Norway, resulted in demands for a “lobbying register” in the parliament, a register that should include all types of interest groups, organizations and consultants seeking to affect political decisions. Such a register may provide some insight into how active various groups are in conventional forms of lobbying, and — from a democratic perspective — the demand should be supported. However, it will still be at most a minor problem for lobbyists to find new forms of contact outside such formal regulations.

It is also a fact that some *politicians* try to avoid regulations in this area, among other things because they regularly use arguments from lobbying groups in the same way as journalists use information subsidies: they get alternative views, proposals and formulations for free information that without much work can be used in debates and written proposals.

The most important effect of a lobby register would probably be greater opportunities for investigative journalists and other parts of the public to scrutinize the arguments, proposals and pressures from important actors — and their PR advisors — both inside and outside the parliament. PR firms who recruit former politicians as consultants — and insist on not revealing the lobbying interests they advise and work for — may undermine the voters’ confidence in the political system and increase their distrust of parties and politicians. Transparency will serve democracy.

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<sup>29</sup> Hanna Zetterberg Struwe, *Expressen*, 10 May, 2007.

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