As we are about to publish the second issue of the Journal of Public Affairs in 2021, two contrasting examples of public affairs in action have come to the fore. First relates to the role and potential importance of government action in stepping up to address a potential crisis of confidence in the coronavirus vaccine programme, and more specifically, the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine following revelations about a number of incidents and deaths from rare blood clots associated with the vaccine. The second development has been the re-emergence of controversy around what has long been the highly charged issue of the legitimacy of political lobbying. In this case, accusations of inappropriate and unethical behaviour on the part of the UK former Prime Minister, David Cameron, in lobbying on behalf of the now collapsed finance company Greensill.

The first of these two issues – the questions raised about the potentially life-threatening side effects of the AstraZeneca vaccine has placed a “dark cloud” over the otherwise growing optimism in the UK about the prospects of society and business progressing steadily towards escape from the lockdown measures that have hung over the country for over a year. Indeed the government’s “roadmap out of lockdown” was predicated on the widespread compliance with social distancing measures and the steady rollout of the vaccination programme in the UK. As these measures have taken hold, the UK has witnessed a marked decline in infection rates, hospitalisations and death rates. Indeed, the UK has implemented one of the most extensive and successful vaccination programmes in the world, with close to 50% (over 32 million) of the adult population having received at least one dose of vaccine by April 2021 and nearly 9 million (13%) having had two doses. Moreover, over this period, daily UK covid-related hospital admissions have fallen to less than 200 from a high of just over 4000 in January 2021. The positivity surrounding the success of the UK vaccination programme was tempered by some concerns expressed in a number of European countries, notably Germany, France and Italy, where the use of the AZ vaccine was suspended or restricted because of concerns of possible side effects.

Matters came to a head when the European Medicines Agency (EMA) announced the results of its investigation into a number of cases of unusual blood clotting amongst people who had received the AstraZeneca vaccine. The EMA concluded there was a possible link between the AstraZeneca Vaccine and very rare cases of uncommon blood clots with low blood platelets. The potential damage that these revelations could have for public confidence in the vaccination programme was obvious and demanded swift action on the part of the government and the Public Health authorities. First, the UK’s Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) came forward not to challenge the EMA’s findings but recognising the exceptionally low risk of any blood clotting (approx four people in a million) but nevertheless advising healthcare professionals to consider the best vaccine options when dealing with younger adult patients. Allowing the agencies such as MHRA to have their say alongside other key healthcare spokespeople was part of the government overall ongoing public affairs/public communications strategy to maintain public confidence in the government’s Covid 19 prevention strategy. Indeed, the UK government launched a high-profile advertising and public information campaign to address these specific vaccine safety concerns, involving celebrities and other well-known figures endorsing the importance of getting vaccinated, while at the same time engineering opportunities for leading public health spokespeople and scientists to discuss the issue of vaccine efficacy and risk. What this recent covid-19 related example illustrates is that when dealing with such a complex and all-encompassing issues, public affairs may need to adopt as multi-faceted and flexible approach as necessary to engage with the relevant stakeholder groups.

While coronavirus and its impact on our lives and the economy both domestically and worldwide has dominated the news headlines around the world for many months, one very unwelcome issue from a public affairs perspective has raised its head as we compose this editorial namely concern over “backdoor lobbying” and paid for government access. In this case, the controversy has surrounded ex-Prime Minister David Cameron’s, reported attempts to help the now collapsed financial services company, Greensill, secure favourable government contracts. News has emerged that Cameron may have attempted to contact at least four UK ministers, including the current chancellor, Rishi Sunak, and brokering high-level access for Greensill Capital with members of the then German Government. The breaking of this story raised the spectre of yet another scandal involving the inappropriate use of access to power by former Ministers and government officials that plagued the Tory government in the early 1990s. The so-called “cash for questions” scandal at that time had led to the establishment of the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life that went on to produce a Code of Practice for those working in public life.

This gave birth to what became known as the Nolan Principles, which were published in its first report and were enshrined in seven keywords:

- Selflessness,
- Integrity,
To ward off the potential damaging fallout from this accusation of evidence of a further Conservative Government “gravy train”, the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, acted swiftly and announced the setting up of a formal review of the issues under Nigel Boardman, a senior lawyer. However, no sooner had the Boardman Review been announced, than a further damaging revelation emerged surrounding Greensill’s reach into government with the news that Bill Crothers, a former government chief procurement officer, had been allowed to join Greensill while still working as a civil servant. Understandably, this news added further fuel to the fire of accusations, with many Conservative and Opposition MP’s calling for a “root and branch” overhaul of the lobbying rules. There seems little doubt that this current Greensill scandal threatens to be every bit as damaging to the reputation of the Johnson government as was the “Cash for Questions” scandal to the John Major-led Tory government of the 1990s.

Both these examples of public affairs issues and practices serve to illustrate the potential breadth of the public affairs domain and the diversity of practices that it can embrace. Indeed it is this diversity that can make it difficult at times to define or explain what that public affairs professionals actually do. Moreover, it makes the task of determining what should or should not be accepted for publication within the Journal of Public Affairs an interesting and truly international challenge. Your encouragement and support are greatly appreciated and vital.

To ensure we build and develop the Journal of Public Affairs to cover our ever dynamic and evolving subject area, the volume of research and practitioner papers and manage our global reach effectively, we have with the help of our publishers, Wiley, been strengthening our editorial board through the appointment of a number of new Associate Editors to give us a strengthened international team to meet needs. We welcome them to the core team. They are both very internationalist and on their own geographic areas and subject disciplines well and include highly qualified and well respected colleagues from Australia, Brunei, China, Cyprus, France, India, Italy, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UK and US. Thank you for joining us and we are always looking for others to join us.

Looking at the content of this second issue of 2021, we have a very global edition with the bulk of articles coming from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. We cover such issues as capital markets, China’s diplomacy, the shadow economy, corruption, environmentalism, growth of female entrepreneurs in micro finance, health care delivery, peacekeeping and tourism and its impact internationally. We have a good number of quality commentary papers on such areas as Naval Policy in the Pacific and the US and China positions in that Ocean through to Housebuilding in the UK. Our practitioner papers cover a wide range of topics and include developing micro to medium size business, financial literacy through the social and economic impact of Covid.

We feel this a very good collection of articles, which reflect well on the wide ranging interests and expertise of this multi facetted business. We welcome future contributions that focus on regulatory activity and the evolving domain.

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