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BP is getting more political, and that may help weather oil-spill storm

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John Browne, the former chief executive of energy giant BP, used to brag about his company's relative lack of political involvement, saying the London-based conglomerate purposely shied away from spending too much on lobbying and campaign contributions.

But since Tony Hayward took over as CEO in 2007, BP has increased its spending on U.S. politics, a move that may help the firm weather the political storm over its devastating oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

The company has mobilized a massive Washington lobbying campaign over the past week in response to the worsening crisis, dispatching senior executives to meet with Obama administration officials and members of Congress, while Hayward and other executives make frequent media appearances to defend BP's performance.

The onslaught underscores the expanding political role of BP, which has spent nearly \$20 million on Washington lobbying since January 2009 and now ranks second only to ConocoPhillips within the powerful oil and gas industry, according to lobbying disclosure data. Its list of hired lobbyists reads like a Who's Who of the profession,

from Democratic powerhouse Tony Podesta to former Reagan aide Kenneth Duberstein.

The company's political action committee has also stepped up its contributions to lawmakers of both parties, particularly to key representatives of oil-dependent states such as Louisiana and Alaska. Unlike most other oil companies, BP also shifted some of its donations to Democrats as the party gained control of Congress, though it still gives the most to Republicans. (Barack Obama's presidential campaign did not accept corporate donations, but received about \$77,000 from BP employees.)

BP America, the company's U.S. affiliate, has a special "external advisory council" that includes former House majority leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.); two former GOP senators, Warren Rudman (N.H.) and Alan K. Simpson (Wyo.); Christine Todd Whitman, an Environmental Protection Agency administrator under George W. Bush; and Jamie S. Gorelick, a deputy attorney general during Bill Clinton's administration, according to BP records. Leon Panetta, President Obama's CIA director, also served on the council before taking his intelligence post.

A BP spokesman did not respond to a request for comment on the firm's political activities in Washington.

Athan Manuel, director of the Sierra Club's Lands Protection Program, said BP's more aggressive lobbying efforts in recent years have been a disappointment to environmental groups, which were heartened by the company's earlier pledges to move "beyond petroleum" and into alternative forms of energy.

"They seem to have returned to a more traditional oil-company approach," Manuel said. "They've decided to become just as active as Exxon or anyone else."

One major recipient of donations from BP is Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.), who has taken more than \$15,000 in PAC contributions and thousands more from BP employees, according to data from the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics. Landrieu said at a hearing earlier this year that the risks of offshore drilling were "minimal," and since the spill has urged caution in moving to curtail the practice.

Landrieu told MSNBC on Wednesday that she has received donations from environmentalists and oil companies. "I'm very proud to actually receive money from both sides of this debate, because they, I believe, understand that I'm as honest a broker as I can be here," she said. "I am not a handmaiden to the oil industry."